

Amid ongoing conflicts, Pence extends olive branch to EU

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European politicians and media reacted to US Vice President Mike Pence's tour of Europe as a chance to mend ties with the Trump administration. His remarks at this weekend's Munich Security Conference and at the European Union (EU) in Brussels Monday, just after Trump sacked his pro-Russian National Security Advisor, General Michael Flynn, committed Washington to the NATO alliance with Europe, based on a war drive against Russia.

At the Munich Security Conference, Pence declared that "the United States of America strongly supports NATO and will be unwavering in our commitment to this trans-Atlantic alliance." He said that the US government would "continue to hold Russia accountable." He also echoed calls in the ruling class in Europe for stepped-up rearmament, particularly in Germany, demanding that Europe contribute a "fair share to our common defense."

In Brussels, Pence reaffirmed the "strong commitment of the United States to continued cooperation and partnership with the European Union... Whatever our differences, our two continents share the same heritage, the same values and above all the same purpose: to promote peace and prosperity through freedom, democracy and the rule of law."

After these remarks, EU officials moved to endorse the most right-wing administration in American history, opposed by overwhelming majorities of the population in most European countries. Even as the Trump administration openly prepares a mass roundup of immigrants in the United States and deep attacks on basic social programs, they hastened to accept as good coin Pence's assurances that Trump is committed to freedom and democracy.

"I heard words which are promising for the future, words which explain a lot about the new approach in Washington," EU Commission President Donald Tusk declared in Brussels after his meeting with Pence. "We

are counting, as always in the past, on the United States' wholehearted and unequivocal—let me repeat, unequivocal—support for the idea of a united Europe."

Tusk made clear, however, that Pence's remarks, while a turn away from previous positions, had not fully addressed EU concerns about Trump. Tusk alluded to some of Trump's statements—on the use of nuclear weapons in Europe, dismissing NATO as "obsolete," demanding that Germany buy more American automobiles, and hailing Britain's exit from the EU, which Trump called a "vehicle for Germany"—that are unacceptable to the dominant sections of the European ruling class.

"Too many new and sometimes surprising opinions have been voiced over this time about our relations—and our common security—for us to pretend that everything is as it used to be," he said.

Tusk's concerns were echoed by German officials before Pence spoke in Munich. "Our American friends know well that your tone on Europe and NATO has a direct impact on the cohesion of our continent," German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen said at the Munich conference. She implicitly attacked Trump's statement that Washington is equidistant from Berlin and Moscow, declaring: "There cannot be a policy of equidistance to allies and to those who question our values, our borders and international law."

The reaction of EU officials to Pence's visit underscores that workers and youth seeking to oppose Trump cannot rely in any way on the European capitalist class. Having waged nearly a decade of deep austerity and attacks on immigrants, the EU powers have no principled objection to Trump's antidemocratic policies, such as his unconstitutional Muslim ban and his plans for mass immigrant deportations. Their concern is to work out relations with US imperialism that allow them to continue asserting their own imperialist interests internationally.

None of the historically rooted economic and strategic tensions between US and European capitalism revealed by Trump's statements against NATO have been resolved. Indeed, Washington and the EU are not publicly discussing them. Pence reportedly did not raise the failed TTIP trans-Atlantic free trade talks that German and French officials criticized last year.

Rather, Washington and the EU are recklessly using the war drive launched against Russia under Barack Obama, who allied with Berlin to back a 2014 coup that toppled a pro-Russian regime in Ukraine, to paper over their differences and justify a vast, unpopular increase in EU military spending. This aligns the EU with the Democratic Party in the United States, which is waging a press campaign to attack Trump from the right, as a tool of Russia.

Bloomberg News concluded that "European officials got what they needed from the administration for now," citing Judy Dempsey of the Carnegie Europe think tank in Berlin: "It's quite clear the message Merkel has given to the US: if the violence continues to rage in the east of Ukraine, how are you going to stop it? How are you going to get them to the negotiating table again? Are you going to let Putin set the agenda? And they listened."

"At the Munich Security Conference, US Vice President Mike Pence made clear that his boss stands behind NATO and that the United States will meet its obligations to the alliance. In a time of general uncertainty, this is good news," wrote Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. "Europeans know that they must make more efforts on security policy, but they are also realists: without America, they cannot deal with really major threats."

Thierry de Montbrial, the head of the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI) think-tank, told the *New York Times* that Pence had succeeded in "delivering the gospel that people needed of the importance of the trans-Atlantic alliance." Montbrial also praised Pence's support for European rearmament: "[H]e said clearly that he wants Europe to be stronger, which in a way is a good change from the past, when Washington was skeptical about a stronger European defense."

Such praise of Pence's tour notwithstanding, it is highly unclear how long the current thaw in Trump's relations with the EU will last. Not least among the problems such a thaw would face is the political conflict and instability developing inside Europe itself, amid escalating social anger in the working class, the electoral rise of far-right parties across the continent, and Brexit.

While admitting that "Pence is toning things down with the EU," *Le Monde* wrote: "Still, his comments were often very general, as if his administration wanted to be prudent, or to wait for a deeper dialogue with new leaders who, in a few months, will take office after elections in France, Germany, the Netherlands, possibly Italy."

Significantly, according to a detailed Reuters report denied by the White House, Trump's neo-fascist chief political strategist, Steve Bannon, spoke to German diplomats before Pence's trip to repeat that the EU was "flawed." He reportedly made comments similar to 2014 remarks he delivered to a Vatican conference, that he does not "believe in this kind of pan-European Union" and that Western Europe was founded on "strong nationalist movements."

Reuters' sources said Bannon's remarks confirmed Berlin's concern that Trump has "no appreciation for the EU's role in ensuring peace and prosperity in post-war Europe. 'There appears to be no understanding in the White House that an unravelling of the EU would have grave consequences,' [one] source said."

The EU countries are divided, however, and intense US-EU tensions remain. Yesterday, French President François Hollande announced a four-power summit in Versailles for March 6 between Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. "We are the four most important countries," Hollande bluntly declared, "and it is our task to say what we want to do with the others, together" in Europe.

According to *Le Monde*, this reflects a change of policy in Berlin, which after the Brexit vote insisted on maintaining the unity and formal equality of the 27 remaining EU states. After Trump's election, however, ruling circles in Berlin reportedly changed course. "They concluded that we cannot tie our destiny to obstinate member states, we have to be able to advance without waiting for unanimous agreement."



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