

Despite G7 endorsement of Syria airstrike, US-Europe divisions grow

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The two-day G7 foreign ministers summit that ended yesterday in Lucca, Italy was marked by an obvious contradiction: despite the fact that all of the member states endorsed last week's attack by the United States against the Syrian government, the meeting was characterized by deepening divisions between the US and Europe over foreign policy and trade.

With Lucca under police lockdown, the foreign ministers of what are supposedly the world's seven leading democracies—Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America—collectively applauded Trump's unprovoked act of war against Syria.

They also endorsed the pretext for the strike: unsubstantiated claims that the Syrian government launched a sarin gas attack on the town of Khan Sheikhoun, which served as the pretense for last week's US cruise missile strike against a Syrian government airfield. They ignored the widely reported fact that US-backed Islamist opposition fighters both possess and have previously used chemical weapons, including a 2013 attack in Ghouta for which the US sought to blame the Assad government.

The G7 communiqué declared, "We are shocked and horrified by the reports of use of chemical weapons in an airstrike in the Khan Shaykhun area of southern Idlib on 4 April... The subsequent US military action against Shayrat Airfield was a carefully calibrated, limited in scope response to this war crime and was directed against Syrian military targets directly connected to the 4 April chemical weapons attack in order to prevent and deter the proliferation and use of deadly chemical weapons in Syria."

At the same time, however, the summit failed to agree on a US-backed plan for stepped-up economic sanctions against Syria and Russia, proposed by the British government, amid growing opposition from the

continental European powers. French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayraud said his British counterpart Boris Johnson had raised the proposal, but that it had not been discussed in depth.

"At the moment there is no consensus on new sanctions as an effective instrument," said Italian Foreign Minister Angelino Alfano. He warned against imposing more sanctions, saying it could back Russia "into a corner."

It was left to German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel to warn that further attacks and pressure on Russia could lead to war, and to signal to Washington that the continental European powers for now favor talks with Russia and Iran: "None of the G7 countries want military escalation, but rather a political settlement without a further spiral of violence. We want to persuade Russia to support the political process for a peaceful solution to the Syria conflict... Not everyone may like this, but without Moscow and Tehran, there will be no solution for Syria."

The Italian government made its opposition to the US-led confrontation with Russia crystal clear, sending President Sergio Mattarella to Moscow to discuss Russia-European Union (EU) ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev during the G7 summit. The Italian president said the Russian-Italian friendship is "solid" and "remained strong."

Remarkably, Mattarella stood by Putin at a joint press conference in which the Russian president identified the Khan Sheikhoun attack as a provocation, comparing it to the lies on weapons of mass destruction the Bush administration used to launch the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq. Putin also warned that US-backed militias in Syria might launch another gas attack soon.

"It reminds me of the events when US envoys to the [UN] Security Council were demonstrating what they said were chemical weapons found in Iraq. We have seen it all already," Putin said. He added, "We have information

that a similar provocation is being prepared...in other parts of Syria, including in the southern Damascus suburbs, where they are planning to again plant some substance and accuse the Syrian authorities.”

The conflicts between the G7 diplomats are only a pale and distorted reflection of deep objective conflicts that are developing between the imperialist powers, as well as rising opposition to war in the international working class.

The Trump administration is unpopular both in the United States and in Europe, where Trump’s disapproval ratings after his inauguration were over 80 percent in Germany, France, and Spain. Trump’s turn to war has enormously exacerbated these political and class tensions. In Germany, strikes on Syrian targets have only 26 percent support, while in France, support for presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon is rapidly rising after he criticized Trump’s missile strike.

As the summit took place, moreover, the initial stages of a trade war between European and American capitalism were beginning to unfold. Shortly after Trump threatened German car exports to the United States with steep tariffs, German steelmaker Salzgitter yesterday denounced tariffs the US Department of Commerce imposed on German, French, Italian and Belgian steel exports. “The decision and the level of duties for our products are not comprehensible for us,” said the company in a statement.

The world’s population is confronted with a catastrophic breakdown of the capitalist system. The bitter rivalry between US and European corporations for the division of markets and profits, which twice in the previous century exploded into world wars, threatens to do so again.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) published its lead comment on Tuesday on this issue, under the extraordinary title “Thoughts of war.” The leading German daily all but declared that it had to prepare for a military confrontation with the United States: “Someone threatened by trade war needs a defense strategy... This is the logic of the post-globalization epoch: Germany must defend itself against its most important ally.”

The SZ advised Berlin to look for allies within the EU and, provocatively, by exploiting divisions within the United States itself. It wrote, “The Germans can also find partners among the US states. The governors and senators of South Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama know very well that BMW, Volkswagen and Daimler are among the most important employers in their states.”

European officials all but publicly accused US officials of threatening to leave Europe, which is still militarily

reliant on its relationship with Washington, unaided against Russia. Ayrault told Reuters that US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had asked him why US taxpayers should care about Ukraine—which has been racked by civil war since 2014, when Washington and Berlin toppled a pro-Russian government with a fascist-led putsch.

Ayrault manifestly viewed this question as an indication that US officials are no longer reliably committed to European security. “It is in the interests of US taxpayers to have a Europe that is secure and politically and economically strong,” Ayrault said he replied to Tillerson. “You do not want a Europe that is weak, divided in many small parts, and feeble.”

The powerful inter-imperialist rivalries driving the massive increases in European defense spending, the remilitarization of Germany, and calls for the reintroduction of the draft in France, are coming to the surface. “With 500 million citizens, we Europeans cannot stand on the sidelines and watch international politics unfold. Rather we have to become a confident player on the international stage,” Gabriel wrote in a comment in the German daily *Tagesspiegel* before heading off to Lucca.

When Gabriel and the European powers state their support for Trump’s air strike and press for Assad’s overthrow, they are not doing so as friends of US imperialism. Rather, they are biding their time and trying to advance their interests for the time being through the plunder led by Washington. At the same time, they hope that the decisive trial of strength with Washington will not come until their own remilitarization programs, financed at the expense of working people, allow them to more effectively assert their own imperialist interests.



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