In meeting with Putin, Macron distances France from Washington's anti-Russia policy

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Yesterday afternoon, newly-elected French President Emmanuel Macron greeted Russian President Vladimir Putin at the former royal palace of Versailles. Amid explosive conflicts that have led the European powers and Washington to the brink of a direct military conflict with Russia in Syria and then in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, Macron signaled a broad shift in France's foreign policy.

The Versailles conference took place just after an extraordinary press conference by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Munich, where she said that Europe could no longer rely on either Washington or London. "We Europeans must really take our destiny into our own hands," she said. "Of course, we need to have friendly relations with the US and with the UK and with our other neighbors, including Russia," she added, explaining that now "we have to fight for our own future ourselves."

Merkel's statements provoked from Richard Haass, the president of the influential US Council on Foreign Relations, the dismayed comment that the events of the past week represented a "watershed" that "the US has sought to avoid" since World War II. Yesterday's conference in Versailles confirmed that, in its broadest outline, French foreign policy under Macron is following the path laid out by Germany, the hegemonic power inside the European Union (EU)—a path that, while highly bellicose, is increasingly independent and opposed to that of Washington.

While advancing an aggressive imperialist policy in the Syrian and Ukrainian crises, Macron distanced himself from US policy towards Russia. While Washington has repeatedly risked an all-out military clash with Russia, a major nuclear power, in both Ukraine and Syria, Macron said that his goal was to "reinforce our partnership with Russia."

On Syria, Macron insisted on the need for an aggressive intervention for regime change, which he euphemistically referred to as "a democratic transition in Syria."

He listed circumstances under which France could participate in the type of naked military aggression perpetrated by US President Donald Trump on April 7, when Washington fired dozens of cruise missiles at a Syrian air base hosting Russian and Syrian troops. "Two very clear red lines exist on our side: the use of chemical weapons will provoke immediate retaliation by the French, as well as the need to preserve humanitarian corridors," Macron said.

Macron was recycling the political lies that he has used to justify the proxy war through which the NATO powers have tried to destroy the last pro-Russian Arab regime, which happens to also be a former French colony. NATO used Islamist terror networks to send fighters and volunteers into Syria, some of whom have subsequently carried out terror attacks in Europe itself, including in Paris and most recently in Manchester.

As for the chemical attacks, most infamously in Houla in 2012 and Ghouta in 2013, these were in fact carried out by NATO-backed "rebels" in an attempt to provoke a direct military intervention by the NATO countries in Syria.

As for the "humanitarian corridors" praised by Macron, these have served above all to trap over 10 million Syrian refugees made homeless by the war in Middle East refugee camps, to prevent them from fleeing to Europe. To carry out this cold-blooded policy, the EU also cut back on patrols and rescue operations in the Mediterranean, allowing thousands of refugees to drown in the hope that this would terrorize refugees still in the Middle East into staying where they were.

At the same time, Macron signaled that France might reopen its embassy in Damascus—a policy that would break with that of Washington and of Macron's predecessor, French President François Hollande, who recognized the Islamist opposition as Syria's legitimate government. Macron also proposed to intensify

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cooperation with Russian intelligence services against Islamist networks.

On Ukraine, Macron said that he and Putin intended to organize “with the briefest possible delay” a meeting with Berlin and Kiev to arrange a “de-escalation of the conflict.” They thus supported the so-called “Normandy” diplomatic format of talks on Ukraine involving Germany, Russia, France, and Ukraine. This format, which excludes Washington, emerged in 2015 after Washington and Berlin organized a coup in Kiev led by far right militias to topple a pro-Russian government.

In 2015, Washington threatened to arm these militias to wage war in Russian-speaking areas of eastern Ukraine. This provoked a sudden policy shift in Germany and France, who rapidly negotiated the Minsk accords with Moscow and Kiev in order to prevent a military escalation that could have triggered large-scale ground warfare between Russian and Ukrainian troops and the eruption of war across Europe.

Hollande briefly addressed a hastily-convened press conference at the Elysée presidential palace and told a stunned group of journalists that “total” war with Russia was a possibility, before flying off to Minsk to negotiate with Merkel, Putin, and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

Now, Macron is clearly building on EU attempts to keep anti-Russian factions in the US ruling elite, particularly in the Democratic Party, from trapping Europe in a conflict with Russia for which it is not prepared. Without provoking any opposition from Macron, Putin issued a call for an ending of EU sanctions against Russia—a policy which Washington and also Berlin have supported, but which Putin said contributed “nothing at all” to solving the Ukrainian conflict.

Macron made clear that he had discussed a broad range of global issues with Putin, including both nuclear weapons and the crisis in North Korea. Ominously, he added that he would not discuss all of the points that he had made in discussion with Putin in the press conference, as this would not make for good diplomacy.

Were he to have spoken somewhat more frankly, Macron would have admitted that the reckless policies of the NATO powers have created a crisis for which the ruling class in France and across Europe has no solution whatsoever. The increasingly obvious tensions between the major European capitals and Washington, as Trump threatens Germany and France with trade war, is itself a warning that tensions inside the NATO alliance are taking on explosive dimensions.

In over a quarter century since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, imperialist wars launched by the NATO powers have spread across the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and the Middle East and Africa. Taken collectively, these wars—in Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and beyond—have claimed millions of lives and created the greatest refugee crisis since World War II. Now, the growing international contradictions of world capitalism confront workers and youth internationally with the danger of a new world war.

Indeed, the fact that the press conference unfolded in the gilded halls of Versailles, the palace built by a historically doomed absolute monarchy in the final century before the French Revolution, seemed oddly fitting. None of the assembled journalists or politicians offered any proposal for how to deal with the increasingly dangerous consequences of their own policies.

No one asked Putin or Macron what they had discussed on nuclear weapons, or what the impact of strategic nuclear war between the NATO powers and Russia would be on the survival of the European or world population.

Macron’s policy is not to prevent a major war, but to prepare for it. Despite polls showing overwhelming opposition by two-thirds of French youth to the re-imposition of the draft, Macron proposed to return to universal military service, now extended to young women, as well as multi-billion-euro increases in French military spending.

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