

In Paris talks with British prime minister May

French President Macron holds out prospect of canceling Brexit

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British Prime Minister Theresa May traveled to Paris Tuesday to meet with newly-elected French President Emmanuel Macron, in the run-up to the opening next week of formal talks between the European Union (EU) and Britain on the terms of Britain's exit from the EU. It was the occasion for top German and French officials to signal that they would allow London to reverse the Brexit vote and resume a close alliance with the remaining EU powers.

The first such comment came from German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble. "The British government has said we will stay with the Brexit," Schäuble told Bloomberg News as Macron prepared to meet May. "We take the decision as a matter of respect. But if they wanted to change the decision, of course, they would find open doors."

At the joint press conference with May, the French president also said that "the decision was taken by the British people to leave the European Union, and I respect that decision." He said however that "the door is also open as long as the Brexit negotiations aren't over ... once the talks have started, we have to be collectively conscious that it's much more difficult to go back."

May, badly weakened by the loss of her Conservative Party's absolute majority in Parliament after last week's snap election, said she had confirmed to Macron that "the timetable for Brexit negotiations remains on course, and will begin next week." She did not take a position however on calls from within the British ruling elite, including from inside the Conservative Party, to adopt a "soft Brexit" strategy to maintain closer relations to the EU.

May and Macron also discussed plans for stepped-up censorship of social media, threatening to fine social media corporations who do not take down posts deemed

radical or terrorist.

These proposals reflect the increasingly desperate maneuvers of the rival European states as they seek to contain growing popular discontent, while a bitter struggle between the EU and Washington unfolds after Trump's first tour of Europe—including over Britain's foreign policy orientation.

Berlin and Paris understand the setback dealt to May in the recent snap election as a sign of growing popular rejection of austerity and nationalism in Britain. They are hoping through a combination of threats and inducements to convince London to abandon its fading hopes of an alliance with Trump, and to side with Europe instead, through some type of soft Brexit or conceivably an abandonment of Brexit altogether. At the same time, they hope to limit growing popular opposition to their own reactionary plans for militarism and austerity across Europe.

Schäuble said he had discussed the British election with his British counterpart, Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond. He said, "we agreed from the first day that Brexit is a decision we have to accept by the British voters. But we will minimize the potential damage and maximize the mutual benefit." After speaking to Hammond, Schäuble said, he concluded "they are thinking" in the UK about the fact that young voters supported Jeremy Corbyn of the Labour Party based on "more distance to Brexit."

Bloomberg added that Schäuble saw certain "parallels" with the situation in France. There, the population elected Macron despite broad opposition to his policies of deep austerity, a militarized alliance with Berlin, and a permanent state of emergency. The vote was primarily due to opposition to neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen and the plans of Le Pen's National Front for a French exit

from the euro. It is widely expected, including inside the ruling elite, that these policies will provoke bitter and explosive social opposition in the working class in France.

Schäuble's remarks came after several leading British conservatives, including former prime ministers David Cameron and John Major, pushed for a "soft Brexit" strategy. Major called plans for a hard Brexit "increasingly unsustainable," while Cameron called on May to consult "more widely with other parties" on her Brexit strategy.

While Schäuble and Macron held out limited prospects for an accommodation with London, other EU figures, including the EU's Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, continued to threaten London with harsh economic consequences for the Brexit vote.

In an interview on his Brexit strategy with a consortium of European newspapers, including *Le Monde*, Barnier said: "We will implement it without aggressiveness, without desire for revenge or punishment, but without naiveté. What will our future relations with London be? We are preparing for every option, including the 'no deal' option that British political leaders regularly mention." Barnier added that the "no deal" option would be particularly harmful to British trade with Europe.

The role of Schäuble and Macron in floating soft Brexit proposals underscores the essentially reactionary character of all the bourgeois factions in the Brexit debate. While the hard Brexit factions were the most overtly nationalistic and determined to slash regulations and attack the workers, those advocating a soft Brexit or remaining inside the EU are also backing an aggressive policy of austerity and militarism, advanced by the EU.

The critical question, as the Socialist Equality Party (Britain) stressed by calling for an active boycott of the Brexit referendum last year, is the rejection of all the bourgeois camps and the formulation of an independent, revolutionary and socialist perspective for the working class. As the coordination of policy between reactionary bourgeois politicians on both sides of the Channel increasingly makes clear, this can only take place through a fight to unify British workers with workers inside the EU in struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.

What is emerging in the capitalist classes of Europe, on the other hand, is a ruthless geopolitical struggle and drive to increase military spending that presages new wars in Europe. The situation is all the more explosive due to the open calls from top German officials, including Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, for an independent European foreign and military

policy formulated in opposition to that of the Trump administration.

Since Macron's election in France, Berlin has an ally in Paris that is siding closely with its drive to establish a German-dominated EU as the world's hegemonic power, replacing the United States.

Some of the calculations underlying Macron's foreign policy were laid out in a recent interview in *Le Point* by Dominique Moisi, the special geopolitical advisor to the Institut Montaigne think tank. He called on Macron to work rapidly and closely with Berlin, as "Trump is his greatest stroke of luck." Moisi laid out a program for a far-reaching EU bid for global hegemony, predicting that if "the United States disengage and the US decline accelerates, everything will change very fast."

Moisi hailed Macron's handling of the summit meeting last month with Russian President Vladimir Putin as "the first time anyone told Vladimir Putin, 'Enough silliness! Now get to work.' We were waiting for that." He added that Macron's nomination of former Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian as foreign minister would reassure "authoritarian governments and certain important partners like General al-Sisi in Egypt and the Saudis."

He also pointed to rapid improvements in Chinese-EU ties at US expense: "Due to Trump, we are seeing counterbalancing alliances whose implications are not yet fully understood. This is not just on climate, where the Chinese are totally aligned on the Europeans. As the United States today is unpredictable, China has no choice but to turn to Europe. China wants stability above all. It will doubtless need to take on its responsibilities and become the policeman of Asia sooner than it had expected."



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