

US sanctions against Russia intensify conflict with Europe

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8 August 2017

Following the unilateral imposition of new sanctions by the United States against Russia, tensions between America and Europe have sharpened dramatically. The sanctions, adopted by a large majority in the US Congress, are being interpreted in Germany as a trade war measure against Europe.

The sanctions take aim at energy exports from Russia, which is the largest gas exporter and second-largest oil supplier in the world. Not only will the conclusion of new deals and the building of pipelines be affected, but also the maintenance, modernisation and repair of existing pipelines, which are extremely significant for energy supplies to Germany and other European countries.

Leading politicians, media outlets and business representatives are accusing the US of attempting to damage Europe economically by restricting energy imports and forcing up prices. Since Qatar, another major gas exporter, is being blockaded by the US ally Saudi Arabia, a global shortage of gas is threatened. Another charge being leveled against the US is that it is using the sanctions to bolster exports by its domestic shale gas and oil industries.

German firms doing business with Russia are fearful of problems emanating from the United States. The predominant feeling is “one of great uncertainty,” said Martin Wansleben, chief operating officer of the German Chamber of Industry and Trade (DIHK). If the activities of German companies in the US are restricted due to the Russia sanctions, this would prove to be an “Achilles’ heel” due to the significance of US trade for Germany.

The US is also being denounced for intentionally working to divide the European Union. Poland and the Baltic states are firmly opposed to the building of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, against which the sanctions are aimed. Since the pipeline would directly connect Russia with Germany and bypass their territories, these states fear a Russo-German alliance at their expense. As a result, the concern circulating in Brussels and Berlin is that in a conflict with the US, Poland and the Baltic states would side with Washington and break the EU apart.

EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker once again threatened the US with tough counter-measures after US President Donald Trump signed the sanctions into law last Wednesday. If the US sanctions concretely disadvantage

European firms doing business with Russia in the energy sector, the EU is prepared to respond appropriately within days, Juncker said. “We are prepared. We also have to defend our economic interests against the US, and that is what we will do,” he declared.

The conflict over the Russia sanctions is the highest point thus far of a confrontation that has been developing for some time. The economic and political interests of the US and Europe, and Germany in particular, are colliding with increased frequency.

One example is the sharp differences over the measures the US intends to adopt against steel imports from China. Although the EU also accuses China of dumping steel at low prices, it fears that Washington’s punitive tariffs will also hit European producers. Rumours are circulating that the EU Commission has already developed plans to respond to US tariffs within days by imposing restrictions on agricultural imports.

A study by the German government-aligned Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) published at the end of July and entitled “Trade policy: Continuing confrontation with the US” called for an escalation of trade war measures. It proposed restricting US imports “where this would noticeably reduce the profits of US firms” and “affect a large number of jobs in the US.” One example it identified was “services, including the financial sector,” in which the EU, unlike in the trade in goods, has a surplus.

The confrontation is therefore being pursued not only by the United States. Germany’s ruling class has been attempting for years to become the leading power in Europe so as to be able once again to play an independent role as a world power. It is engaged to this end in a major military buildup. This is bringing Berlin into conflict with US imperialism, which is defending its position as the dominant world power with brutal military force.

If one follows the discussions in policy-making circles in Germany, it becomes clear that they view a confrontation with the US as inevitable and are systematically preparing for it—and not just since the election of Trump and the adoption of his “America First” policy. It is significant that the Russia sanctions, which Trump initially opposed, were based on majority support from both Democrats and Republicans in

Congress.

The German Society for Foreign Affairs (DGAP), which together with the SWP is Germany's leading think tank, published a 40-page dossier on "foreign policy challenges for the next federal government." It reads like an instruction manual for a German militarist great power policy. Significantly, it identifies as the first of a dozen "foreign policy challenges" the "political and economic risk factor of the US."

The other chapters, which deal with German interests in Russia, Asia, the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) and Europe, repeatedly identify the US as an opponent and rival. "In dealing with Russia, the US is also a significant element of uncertainty," it states, and adds, "similar risks are emerging in the Asian area due to the growing competition between the US and China."

The dossier begins by documenting what the German government has already accomplished in strengthening "Germany's international and European role," and assuming "more responsibility" in the world: "German engagement in the European Union, the role of a leader against Russia, German army interventions in the Middle East and as part of UN missions in Africa, the stationing of German troops on the territory of NATO allies."

It describes the EU as "the most important multi-lateral trading area for Berlin" and sees France as a strategic partner in this. The authors obviously take the view that Emmanuel Macron's version of "Make France Great Again," notwithstanding the tensions it will produce, is at least temporarily compatible with the German desire for more independence from the US, especially on the issues of a military buildup, the creation of a European army, and joint military interventions in Africa.

The dossier draws two conclusions from its analysis. First: "Foreign policy is being made in Germany." For this, German foreign and security policy, i.e., the military, requires more resources. In addition, "using power politics" requires "changes in the mental coordinates of German foreign policy-makers," who must be prepared as a "last resort" to choose "the option of national power."

Second: "Foreign policy is being made for Germany." The authors understand by this the necessity of mobilising a social base for German militarism—or, as they do, writing in a restrained manner about the tasks of foreign policy. "It must represent Germany's interests," they write, "and therefore convince the public about the integrity of the operation."

Another author, journalist Jörg Lau of *Die Zeit*, has already called on the DGAP website for the federal election to be turned into a campaign for rearmament and militarism. He sharply criticised opposition to the plan of raising the military budget to 2 percent of GDP, writing, "Instead of making the federal election a referendum on an allegedly dangerous military buildup, we should clarify the German population on the new logic of German security policy: We have to spend

much more on defence, not because of, but in spite of Trump, not because he commands it, but because we want to counterpose something to his aimless policy."

In this, all of the established parties support Lau. Then-Social Democratic Party (SPD) Chairman Sigmar Gabriel declared immediately after Trump's assumption of power that his trade war measures towards Asia and Latin America also opened up "chances for us." If "US protectionism results in new opportunities emerging for Europe throughout Asia, we should take action," he said. Shortly afterwards, Gabriel moved from the Economy Ministry to the Foreign Ministry and adopted a much tougher line towards the United States.

He is being outdone in this only by the Left Party. Sahra Wagenknecht recently called in *Handelsblatt* for "countermeasures" from Berlin against the US, which she described as a "rogue state" that is "acting to gain a cheap advantage for its own gas industry." Now "a clear line towards Washington [is] required," the Left Party's lead candidate said.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) is the only party standing in the September federal election against war and militarism, placing this at the centre of its programme. Together with our comrades in Britain, France, the United States and around the world, we struggle for the international unification of the working class on the basis of a socialist programme. The SGP opposes the European Union, a tool of capital and militarism, and fights for the United Socialist States of Europe.

In the face of the rapid growth of militarism and the war danger, the SGP's election campaign takes on tremendous significance. It is politically preparing the working class and youth, which will bear the brunt of militarism, for the coming class battles that will inevitably arise out of the mounting social tensions.



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