

The 2018 Munich Security Conference and the emerging conflict between the US and Europe

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The Munich Security Conference (MSC) held last weekend was dominated by rising, potentially violent conflicts between the imperialist powers and Russia and China. How close the world is to a possible war between nuclear-armed powers was epitomized by the MSC's main report, which featured an introduction by Chairman Wolfgang Ischinger that warned, "The world has gotten closer—much too close!—to the brink of a significant conflict," and which backed up this assessment by listing US war threats against North Korea, China's rapid economic growth, conflict with Russia in Eastern Europe, and the US confrontation with Iran.

Yet amid all the talk of a common "external threat" in the form of Russia, China and Iran, the MSC was characterized by a widening rift between the US and the European Union centred on plans to create an independent European military capability. This was initiated last year by the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) treaty and detailed in a second MSC document, "More European, More Connected and More Capable, Building the European Armed Forces of the Future."

It was impossible to hide the accelerating, historic collapse of the institutions of world capitalism that Washington created after emerging from World War II as the imperialist world hegemon.

Just nine months ago, in response to US President Donald Trump declaring his belief that NATO was an outmoded institution, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that Berlin would now pursue an independent foreign policy from Washington. In the future, she said, "we will have to fight for ourselves."

At the 2018 MSC, the EU, led by Berlin and Paris, declared that it would no longer be constrained in its own actions by NATO structures dominated by the US and would undertake to become an independent world power,

spending hundreds of billions of euros per year on its own war machine. In the run-up to the MSC, plans were announced in both Berlin and Madrid for a doubling of military spending, and Paris announced a €300 billion military budget for 2018-2024. This 35 percent increase included tens of billions to be spent on nuclear weapons.

Taking advantage of US demands for increased military spending and for Europe to assume its share of the burden of policing the world, the EU powers declared that they would now take their rightful place in a new multi-polar world. The MSC document stated: "America first' and Brexit may have the welcome effect that other stakeholders in the liberal order try to make up for less internationalist Anglo-Saxons... The European Union as a whole could play a stabilizing role for the liberal international order—as could other groupings of liberal democracies, such as the renewed 'Quad' [US, Japan, India, Australia] in the Asia-Pacific."

The MSC report's proposals for the EU to become a world power finds its echo in the agreement on which the Christian Democrats and the Social Democratic Party intend to form a new grand coalition government, working in alliance with President Emmanuel Macron of France. This pact lays out a staggering area in which to establish EU influence: the Balkans, Russia, Turkey, Afghanistan, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and North Africa. That is, the EU aims to build a sphere of influence larger even than that of the Third Reich at the height of Hitler's conquests. Macron's call for a return of the military draft in France and threats to bomb Syria are signals that the EU plans to pursue these aims through a large-scale resort to arms.

These plans elicited a warning from a spokesman for US Defense Secretary James Mattis. He said Washington had concerns that some proposed initiatives risked

“pulling resources or capabilities away from NATO.” Mattis himself asked the European powers for written assurances that EU military cooperation would not compete with the NATO alliance—which the EU refused to do.

Since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, US policy has been to use its unchallenged military position to maintain its dominance over world affairs. In a 1992 document, Pentagon planners asserted that Washington had to convince “potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture,” and to “discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order.”

This has failed. Based on a Berlin-Paris axis, powerful factions of the European imperialist bourgeoisie are now openly challenging Washington's role as undisputed world hegemon.

Accompanying these military tensions is a dramatic deterioration in political and economic relations. The European powers all reject the US ultimatum to accept its modifications to the Iranian nuclear deal or face renewed sanctions that could hit European corporations doing billions of dollars worth of business in Iran. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel delivered a blunt statement at the MSC on the Iran nuclear deal, declaring: “We negotiated this deal together. We refuse to give it up and we will not do so. On the contrary, we advise our American friends not to let this deal fail.”

The European Commission has also denounced threats of a 24 percent US tariff on steel and a 7.7 percent tax on aluminum and threatened action in kind against a range of US exports. Two days after the conclusion of the MSC summit, EU finance ministers met to discuss their collective response to this threat and Trump's moves to slash corporate taxes to encourage a repatriation of tech industry investment to the US.

Germany's leading business paper *Handelsblatt* commented: “Wars sometimes start by mistake. Historians, for example, have often compared the prelude to World War I with the stumbling of sleepwalkers. It is no different with trade wars. The verbal rearmament that is currently taking place between the US, Europe and China also runs the risk of escalating the conflicts over cheap steel and aluminum imports into an open trade war.”

Trade and military war are inextricably linked. A ruthless struggle for markets and strategic influence is unfolding between the wealthiest capitalist powers. To

think that this struggle can long continue without leading to war is to place heavy bets against history. The working class in Europe and internationally is faced with the emergence of a ruthless inter-imperialist struggle to redivide the world, similar to that which, a century ago, led to World War I and the October 1917 revolution.

The force emerging as the alternative to the bankrupt capitalist system is the international working class.

The imperialist drive to war goes hand-in-hand with an escalating social and economic crisis that confronts billions of workers worldwide and increasingly discredits the capitalist system in their eyes. Last year, polls found that American youth prefer communism or socialism to capitalism, and that over half of European youth would join a mass uprising against the existing social order if they had the chance.

These events vindicate the International Committee of the Fourth International's insistence that the dissolution of the Soviet Union did not signify the final triumph of capitalism. It has not overcome the basic conflicts identified by the great Marxists of the 20th century—between world economy and the nation-state system, and between socialized production and private profit—which led to war and social revolution. Rather, the ruling elites are spending hundreds of billions of euros drawn from economies devastated by a decade of crisis in a new global drive to war.

Workers cannot allow themselves to be divided from their class brothers and sisters in other countries. As the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote in 1934, a year after Hitler came to power, the task is “to follow not the war map but the map of the class struggle.” Already, there is massive opposition to war in the American and European working class and to the social austerity policies pursued to fund the rival war machines. The necessary response to the escalating capitalist crisis is the unification of the working class in a socialist anti-war movement.



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