

“Old Europe” comes to Washington

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Fifteen years ago, in the run-up to the US-British invasion of Iraq, the US media was ferociously denouncing Germany and, in particular, France for failing to line up behind the US war drive. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld excoriated “Old Europe,” the French were painted as cowards and back-stabbers, and media pundits called for changing the name of French fries to “freedom fries.”

In an article titled “How to deal with America? The European dilemma,” the *World Socialist Web Site* observed,

Officials in the Bush administration have become increasingly blunt in laying out the consequences of a European refusal to fall into line behind the United States. As one official told the *New York Times* on Thursday, “Our goal is to rub their nose in reality, and then proceed to discuss what we do about it.”

And what is this reality? The Bush administration has indicated not all too subtly that French and German companies will be excluded from participating in the carve-up of Iraq’s oil industry in the aftermath of war. Even more serious, there have been suggestions that the United States, after occupying Iraq, will exert pressure on Iran, which is a critical supplier of oil to Western Europe.

From the standpoint of France and Germany, the behavior of the United States is utterly reckless and raises the danger of a complete breakdown of whatever remains of the entire legal and institutional framework that regulated the affairs of world capitalism. For the Western Europeans to submit to the diktats of the United States would mean to accept their relegation, in the words of the conservative French daily *Le*

Figaro, “into a simple protectorate of the United States.”

Fifteen years later, French President Emmanuel Macron presented himself in Washington as a junior partner in Washington’s renewed offensive in the Middle East. The French president received a full state dinner, the first of Trump’s administration, and was hailed by the American press as a champion of democracy.

Macron’s state dinner served as a victory lap for the joint US-French-British missile strike on Syria on April 14. It underscored the fact that the powers of “Old Europe” have abandoned their pretenses of pacifism and are rushing to rearm and remilitarize. They are either directly participating in or supporting the US intervention in Syria so as to stake their claim in the new imperialist carve-up of the Middle East.

It would appear that much has changed from 15 years ago. But despite outward appearances and Macron’s attempt to employ what was described as Gallic charm on the cantankerous American president, behind the scenes similar tensions prevailed between Paris and Washington as were reflected more openly in the rather grumpy exchange between Merkel and Trump just two days later.

While Macron was treated to a dazzling state dinner featuring a rack of spring lamb, goat cheese gateau, and cipollini soubise, Merkel got a brief working lunch. And if one were to judge from the leaders’ countenances after they emerged, one would conclude that it consisted of soggy tuna fish sandwiches.

No doubt the vast difference between the reception for Merkel and that for Macron expressed the more intense rivalry between the United States and Germany, the European powerhouse, and the attempt to wean France away from European influence.

But for all Macron's genuflections and Merkel's tight-lipped deference to Trump's bullying bluster, the same issues exist today that were in play 15 years ago. There are major divisions between the European powers and the United States over all aspects of trade and foreign policy, from Trump's imminent plan to impose tariffs on German and French steel and aluminum exports to his threat to rip up the Iran nuclear deal, which would cut across the economic interests of the European powers.

With a new round of tariffs on steel and aluminium set to take effect on May 1, Trump made clear at the joint press conference following his meeting with the German chancellor that he was not prepared to grant a delay, let alone withdraw the threat of trade war measures. Merkel frowned as Trump declared the European Union's trade surplus with the United States to be a "great injustice," and in response to a journalist's question on where things stood with the tariffs, the German chancellor grudgingly declared, "The president will decide."

Nor did Trump give any ground at the press conference on his possible decision to abandon the nuclear deal with Iran. Instead, he launched into a vicious tirade against Tehran and threatened it with war.

There can be no doubt that the European powers are immensely fearful of the recklessness of the United States and deeply skeptical of their own ability to restrain it.

Over the past week, European officials repeatedly stressed that the Trump administration's nationalist economic policies threatened to provoke a breakdown of international relations with potentially incalculable consequences. Trade war halting commerce between the world's largest economies and military conflict between nuclear-armed states are real possibilities. French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire warned of Europe being "collateral damage of a possible trade war between the US and China."

A group of top officials of Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the German Green Party warned of war with Russia. "Many Western Europeans are alarmed and fear a war," they wrote in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, "We are watching with enormous concern the rising conflict between Russia and the West."

But despite such concerns, one factor is dominant: French and German imperialism want their share of the spoils to be gained from Washington's new-carve up of the Middle East and the neo-colonial re-division of the world.



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