

Conflicts intensify between Europe and US

Peter Schwarz
25 May 2018

Following the unilateral termination of the nuclear treaty with Iran by US President Donald Trump, relations between the US and Europe are at a low point. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who was in Washington for an inaugural visit on Wednesday, was rebuffed on every controversial issue.

Maas held talks with his American counterpart Mike Pompeo, security adviser John Bolton and several congressmen, but failed to reach any agreement on the Iranian issue. Before the meeting Maas had coordinated his approach by phone with senior diplomats from France and Britain who, together with Germany, want to maintain the Iran treaty.

“We are going in two completely different directions,” Maas said, after his meeting with Pompeo. The only concession he could get from the US secretary of state was to hold a kind of crisis summit with Berlin, Paris and London in early June.

Maas’s conversation with Bolton, a hardliner on the Iran issue, was even more tense. At the subsequent press conference he referred to Trump’s new security adviser only as “Mr. Bolton” and stressed that the conflict would now be “fought out publicly.” In his conversation with Bolton he had made “the German and European position very clear,” he said.

Maas added, “We wish there be no lasting damage to the transatlantic relationship.” But in view of the irreconcilable viewpoints, this amounts to nothing more than a diplomatic nicety.

In a speech to the right-wing Heritage Foundation on Monday, Pompeo threatened Iran with the “hardest sanctions in history” and with war. He is also intent on forcing European companies to comply with US sanctions, well aware that, unlike America, European businesses conduct extensive trade with Iran. For their part, Germany, France and the United Kingdom want to keep to the Iran agreement so as not to lose a lucrative market. While they have agreed to put more pressure on

Iran, they fear that a premature war would destabilise the entire region, triggering new waves of refugees and increased energy costs.

The fronts also hardened in the second major divisive issue with the US, the imposition of punitive tariffs. President Trump has to decide by June 1 whether US punitive taxes on steel and aluminium will also apply to imports from the European Union. Most political observers expect a decision against the EU. Maas himself commented on the trade dispute, “I made it clear that we in Germany and Europe can by no means accept the path the US seeks to take.”

As soon as he was on his flight back to Germany, the German foreign minister was informed about the next bad news from the White House. Donald Trump officially instructed the Department of Commerce to check the imposition of import duties on autos, trucks and car parts. Import tariffs of up to 25 percent are being considered. Such tariffs would above all hit the big German auto companies for whom the US is their second largest export market after China. Last year, they exported around half a million vehicles to the US.

The growing transatlantic conflicts have been in the making for some time. Trump’s “America first” policy is not the cause of these conflicts, but rather the result of a long, objective process. The global integration of production, the dominance of international corporations and banks have exacerbated the struggle for raw materials, markets and spheres of influence between the imperialist powers, which have unleashed two world wars in the last century.

The US has long sought to defend its world hegemony through the use of military force and has been at war for the past quarter century. The older great powers of Europe have reacted by rearming and pursuing their own great power politics. They have supported numerous US wars in the past, but are now in conflict with their former ally. In Germany, which was

forced to scale down its military because of the crimes of the Nazi regime, the government had already announced four years ago the “end of military restraint” and has since systematically rearmed.

Now the escalation of the conflict with the United States has triggered an imperialist frenzy, drawing all the major political parties and formerly liberal-minded middle-class layers in its wake. The Left Party accuses the current federal government of “cowardice” towards Washington. The formerly pacifist Greens mutated into the chief advocates of German militarism 20 years ago, when they sent German troops to fight in Kosovo.

Even politicians and journalists who were hitherto pro-American are now calling for independent German-European great power politics. Typical in this regard is an article which appeared in *Die Zeit* written by Mark Leonard, director of the European Council on Foreign Relations. Leonard describes himself as a “convinced trans-atlanticist,” but writes that a reluctant Berlin must now decide “whether Europe can hold its own in the new competition of the great powers” and “whether the whole of Europe is capable of undertaking its own policy in the new political contest between the great powers.”

It is necessary to prevent “our continent from becoming the plaything of the powers,” he writes. To this end, “Germany must be willing to actually use real power factors—not just soft power and dialogue.” Europe had to “turn against America” because that was the only way “to be heard in the US.”

Maas’s predecessor in the office of foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel (Social Democratic Party), was even more blunt. In an article for the *Tagesspiegel*, he accuses Trump of “destroying all that the United States once created.” “It’s still unclear how the new world order will look,” Gabriel writes. “Europe and Germany, however, should not look on as others develop, but rather assert their own ideas.”

In order to “exert international influence, ... Germany must increase its foreign policy expenditures” to 20 percent of the federal budget, Gabriel demands. This includes military spending. On its own, Germany was too small for this task: “Germany’s most important contribution to a new world order is therefore the strengthening of Europe as an international power.” In order to avoid “becoming a plaything” of American and other interests, “Europe must join forces:

economically, in terms of development policy and also in terms of security and military policy,” he said.

The most grotesque form of German great power ambitions in the name of anti-Americanism is on show in the latest *Spiegel* online column by Jakob Augstein. Augstein is the wealthy heir of the *Spiegel* empire and a man who faithfully reflects the mood of the affluent “liberal” petty bourgeois. He is outraged that Donald Trump is “pursuing a policy of pure, sheer US imperialism.” It was therefore the “duty of Germans to oppose American imperialism.” He calls upon Chancellor Merkel, who has her roots in former Stalinist East Germany, to “remember her school days—and take up the anti-imperialist struggle.”

In fact, German imperialism is no better than the American variant. This is shown by history. Already in the period of the Weimar Republic, propaganda about the enslavement of Germany by the US and the other victorious powers of the First World War was exploited to mobilise the middle classes in favour of German militarism. The result was Hitler fascism and the bestial crimes of the Wehrmacht.

There is only one way to fight against the growing threat of war: the international unification of the working class based on a socialist program directed against war and its root cause, capitalism. The allies of German workers in the fight against Trump are not Merkel, Macron and the German army, but rather the American and the international working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact