German Foreign Minister Maas sees Europe setting “red lines” for US conduct

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In a guest contribution last week for the financial daily *Handelsblatt*, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (Social Democratic Party, SPD) outlined key points of the German government’s new US strategy. He wants to “recalibrate” the transatlantic alliance and build the EU as a “counterweight” to the US.

For a long time, leading representatives of the German government have been proclaiming that Germany must become more involved in foreign policy and military affairs. The coalition agreement agreed by the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and SPD in the spring, after months of secret negotiations, “reads like a blueprint for a massive expansion of German militarism,” the WSWS commented.

Maas builds on this in his guest contribution for *Handelsblatt*. More clearly than government officials have done so far, he describes the US as a major obstacle to a new German great power policy. Only slightly concealed with diplomatic phrases about a “balanced partnership,” Maas explains that Germany can only become a world power again at the expense of and in conflict with the USA.

Right from the beginning, the foreign minister emphasizes that the growing transatlantic tensions are “by no means just down to Donald Trump” and his “ever new jolts.” He writes, “The US and Europe have been drifting apart for years.” The “overlap of values and interests” is decreasing, and the “binding force of the East-West conflict” is no more.

Although the partnership with the United States has “brought Germany a unique phase of peace and security since the end of the Second World War,” Maas declares that looking back did not lead to the future. It was “high time to re-calibrate our partnership.”

The “balanced partnership” which Maas then proposes is based on the fact that German imperialism is advancing everywhere America is weakened and confronts the US where interests collide. It is a “partnership,” according to Maas, “in which we bring our weight, where America withdraws,” and in which “we are a counterbalance where the US crosses red lines.”

The choice of words alone is remarkable. So far, it was the US that set “red lines” against alleged “rogue states,” now the German foreign minister threatens a supposed ally and partner with the same term.

Maas’s challenge to the US has far-reaching historical, geopolitical and military implications. It shows that none of the problems that led to two world wars and fascism in the past century have been resolved.

In 1897, when Foreign Minister Bernhard von Bülow demanded a “place in the sun” for Germany, speaking before the Reichstag (imperial parliament), this was directed against the old colonial powers Great Britain and France, which rapidly growing German capitalism saw as disadvantaging it. This was followed by 17 years of intensive military expansion. In the First World War, Germany then tried to conquer its “place in the sun” by force, but it lost the war. The real winner from the First World War was the other ascending capitalist great power, the United States.

Fifteen years after the First World War, in an effort to revise its outcome, a conspiracy of industrialists, military and reactionary politicians brought Hitler to power. They needed the Nazis to smash the working-class movement and to place all the resources of the country in the service of a gigantic military campaign. In the Second World War, Hitler first tried to subjugate Europe, and then to conquer the Soviet Union, which, despite its Stalinist degeneration, he saw as a major threat to capitalism, and whose territory he sought and as “Lebensraum” (“living space”) for the German economy.

But the logic of the war inevitably resulted in a confrontation with the strongest imperialist power, the US. The Fourth International warned as early as May 1940, as Hitler’s tanks rolled over Holland, Belgium and France: “The potential victory of Germany over the Allies hangs like a nightmare over Washington. With the European continent, and the resources of its colonies as her base, with all the European munition factories and shipyards at her disposal, Germany—especially in combination with Japan in the Orient—would constitute a mortal danger for American imperialism. The present titanic battles on the fields of Europe are in this sense preparatory episodes in the struggle between Germany and America” (*Manifesto of the Fourth International on the imperialist war and the world proletarian revolution*).

The United States eventually joined forces with the Soviet Union to overthrow German imperialism. But after the war, Washington ensured the survival of the latter. The American imperialists needed Germany as a bulwark in the Cold War and for the expansion of their own economy. That was the basis of that “unique phase of peace and security,” which, while not so peaceful, has now come to an end, as Maas writes.

The US is trying to offset its declining economic weight by using its military superiority. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the US has been at war virtually without interruption. From being an anchor of stability, Washington has become the biggest factor of international instability. Donald Trump is just the present high point of this development. German imperialism is reacting by returning to the traditions of militarism and aggressive great power politics. Not only the language of Maas and other German politicians, but also the content of their policy more and more recalls von Bülow and Hitler’s Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop.

As in those days, German imperialism once again considers it necessary to dominate Europe in order to defy the United States. Maas emphasizes that the confrontation with the US cannot be mastered “by

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Germany alone." For this reason, the "outstanding goal" of German foreign policy was "building a sovereign, strong Europe." It is possible to oppose the US, "only in solidarity with France and other Europeans." The European Union must "become a mainstay of the international order." To Trump's "America first!" he counterposes the slogan "Europe United!"

In Europe, however, centrifugal forces are growing. Not least, Germany's efforts to subordinate the members of the European Union to its financial dictates, its economic interests and its foreign policy objectives have strengthened nationalist tendencies in many countries. Berlin is reacting with increased military spending.

In confronting the US, Maas does not go so far as to place a question mark over NATO. "Nowhere is the transatlantic bond as indispensable to us as in the matter of security," he writes. German imperialism still needs NATO in its confrontation with Russia. There are still 45,000 US soldiers and several US military command centres in Germany.

But Maas is pushing for massive rearmament to increase German influence and push back American dominance. "It is in our very own interest to strengthen the European pillar of the North Atlantic Alliance. Not because Donald Trump is always setting new percentage targets, but because we cannot count on Washington to the same extent as we used to," he writes in *Handelsblatt*. It was now important to build, "step by step," a European Security and Defence Union "as a European project of its own."

Maas's offensive against the US is not limited to military issues. He also wants to break the dominance of the US in the financial markets and tax American Internet companies in Europe more highly. He says it is necessary to set up "US-independent payment channels, create a European Monetary Fund and build an independent SWIFT system." The US-dominated SWIFT network carries news and transaction traffic from more than 10,000 banks worldwide.

In the trade war against the Trump administration, Maas wants to ally with other countries worldwide, which he calls "the alliance for multilateralism." This was "a network of partners who, like us, rely on binding rules and fair competition." In addition to European partners, he had already had very successful talks with the governments in Japan, Canada and South Korea.

Chancellor Angela Merkel is also seeking to expand the international influence of Germany. For example, last week, for the first time since the Crimea crisis, she received Russian President Vladimir Putin for a personal discussion at the government guest house Schloss Meseberg. Among other things, the two agreed the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, despite fierce criticism from Washington. Subsequently, Merkel visited the three Caucasus countries of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, in which both Russia and the US have massive interests. In the coming days, she travels to Africa to visit Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria. And next month, she is expecting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan—currently in the US crosshairs—for an official state visit to Berlin.

Maas's new US strategy is supported not only by the government parties, but also by the so-called opposition. In particular, the Left Party does not miss an opportunity to demand Germany take a "tough stance against the US."

Even in the media, there are no critical voices. However, some commentary is demanding the government openly advocate a massive armaments program. They know that the doubling of military spending agreed in the coalition agreement is far from sufficient to make Maas's great power plans a reality. For example, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* warns that a "policy beyond America" requires "substance," that is, the corresponding military clout.

The new edition of *IP*, the journal of the German Council on Foreign Relations, accuses the grand coalition, "the self-assurance or even redefinition of the security policy claims of the Federal Republic" played "almost no role in the 2017 election campaign." But at the latest, now was the time to "explain to the German public what security and defence policy really means if, as the chancellor says, 'we Europeans really have to take our fate into our own hands'—but the Bundeswehr [armed forces] are already unable to meet the demands made on them."

Maas wants to meet this challenge. "I am not avoiding the debate over higher defence spending," he is quoted saying by *Tagesspiegel*. Although the grand coalition has been campaigning intensely for five years for an end to military restraint, he maintains that until now, society has been caught in this policy field "in a discursive vegetative state." That can only mean that the government is preparing a huge militarization of society. The debates about a return of compulsory military conscription, the introduction of a service obligation for men and women, and the procurement of nuclear weapons are just a taste of what is to come.

The government knows that the return of militarism fiercely rejected in broad sections of the population. That is why it is working out its plans behind their backs. There can be no return to the great power politics of the Kaiser's empire and the Nazi regime without assuming their authoritarian methods of rule. That is why the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is being promoted and the opposition to war and capitalism is being criminalized.

That is why the latest annual report of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, as Germany's secret service is called, does not mention the AfD and its fascist milieu at all. At the same time, the report denounces any criticism of capitalism and its consequences—social inequality, war, racism and environmental disasters—as "left-wing extremism" and "anti-constitutional," especially that of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party), which has warned for years about the return of German militarism.

Some 73 years after the end of the Second World War, German imperialism is returning to the militaristic and foreign policy traditions that culminated in the greatest crimes in history. Everything now depends on building an anti-war movement based on the working class, combining the fight against war with the struggle against its cause, capitalism. This is the goal of the SGP and the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International around the world.

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