The US sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and the danger of World War III

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The decision by the US Congress to impose sanctions on companies involved in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline underscores the sharp divisions between the imperialist powers and the acute danger of world war. In the past, the cutting off of energy supplies was considered an act of war.

The US sanctions have brought the almost completed $10 billion project to a standstill, after the withdrawal of the Swiss firm Allseas, which was providing specialised ships to lay the pipeline. Russia plans to complete the pipeline with its own ship. But the vessel is currently docked in a Pacific harbour and must be refitted for the job, meaning that the completion of the pipeline, if it ever takes place, will be delayed by at least a year.

The US sanctions not only target Russia, which relies on the income generated by gas exports, but also Germany, which views the pipeline as a strategic project that is essential for its energy security. Nord Stream 2 directly connects Russia and Germany across the Baltic Sea.

The US has attempted in the past to impose its will on other states through sanctions. But these were directed against weaker states, like Iran or Venezuela, that Washington had declared to be its enemy, not against a NATO partner and the fourth largest economy in the world, after the US, China, and Japan.

The reactions from Berlin, which range from accusations of interference in internal affairs to calls for retaliatory measures, have been predictably furious.

But Germany is not the innocent victim it is claiming to be. Germany has been rearming for years in order to play a role on the world stage that corresponds to its economic might, and to enforce its imperialist interests independently of, and if necessary against, the United States. German arms exports reached a new record high last year.

Following its defeat in World War II, German imperialism was forced to practice military restraint. The German ruling elite twice sought to violently subordinate Europe to its control, spreading death and destruction across the continent in the process and committing historically unprecedented crimes. But the United States secured Germany's survival because it needed it as a bulwark in the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

After around two dozen war criminals were sentenced to death in the Nuremberg Trials, the United States suspended the de-nazification process. Hitler's officials, judges, professors and generals returned to their posts, and his financial backers retained their wealth. Even today, the wealth of some of Germany's richest families, for example the Quandts (BMW), and the Schaefflers, Piechs, and Porsches (VW), is based on the Nazis' crimes.

For the German ruling class, the alliance with Washington was extremely beneficial. They were able to expand globally under the US umbrella, secure new markets, and conclude pacts with reactionary regimes, while the US did the dirty work of waging bloody colonial wars and orchestrating right-wing coups. This ended 30 years ago, when the end of the Cold War eliminated NATO's original raison d'être. Transatlantic tensions have been on the rise ever since.

The military alliance assumed the task of expanding the Western powers' sphere of influence into Eastern Europe and areas of the former Soviet Union, encircling Russia, and preparing and supporting imperialist wars in the Balkans, Middle East, and North Africa.

In response, Berlin sought to pursue a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, it relied on NATO to

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expand its influence in Eastern Europe and push back Russia. Germany thus played a central role in the right-wing coup in Ukraine in 2014 that brought an anti-Russian regime to power, as well as in NATO's military mobilisation in the Baltics and Poland. At the same time, Berlin has attempted to maintain economic ties to Russia, which it heavily relies upon for its energy supplies.

This, together with mounting competition on world markets, has brought Germany into conflict with Washington, where the Democrats in particular are pushing for a more confrontational approach to isolate Russia. Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen, who co-authored the Nord Stream 2 sanctions bill, said it "sends an unmistakable, bipartisan message from Congress to Vladimir Putin that the United States will not sit idly by while the Kremlin seeks to further spread its malign influence." And Republican Senator Ted Cruz said the sanctions "prevented Putin from leveraging billions of dollars that could be used to fuel Russian aggression."

But the conflict over Nord Stream 2 is not the only one between Germany and the US. Germany, together with France and Britain, also rejected US sanctions on Iran and sought to bypass them.

There are also sharp differences over China policy. Despite significant pressure from Washington, Berlin has to date rejected calls to exclude Chinese company Huawei from the building of its 5G network. There are also disagreements over the Chinese automaker BAIC's plan to invest in Daimler. The US is seeking to prevent BAIC from purchasing a 10 percent stake in the German automaker, 10 percent of which is already owned by Chinese automaker Geely.

In the final analysis, the conflicts between Germany, the United States and other major powers confirm what Lenin wrote in his classic work "Imperialism" in 1916: "(T)he only conceivable basis under capitalism for the division of spheres of influence, interests, colonies, etc., is a calculation of the strength of those participating, their general economic, financial, military strength, etc."

Alliances between imperialist powers, according to Lenin, are therefore "inevitably nothing more than a 'truce' in periods between wars. Peaceful alliances prepare the ground for wars, and in their turn grow out of wars; the one conditions the other, producing alternating forms of peaceful and non-peaceful struggle on one and the same basis of imperialist connections and relations within world economics and world politics."

Driven by trade wars and financial crises, the struggle for markets and raw materials, and mounting social tensions, the capitalist system is once again careening rapidly towards a military catastrophe that threatens the very survival of humanity.

And as Lenin analysed, the rising national tensions bring all half-hearted political tendencies into line. Under conditions of mounting conflict between Germany and the United States, the pacifism occasionally invoked in vague terms by the Social Democrats, Greens and Left Party during election rallies is melting away faster than the snow under the impact of climate change. Faced with the US sanctions, they are the loudest in calling for retaliatory measures. Left Party parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch urged the German government not to accede to the blackmail tactics under any circumstances. Green Party co-leader Annalena Baerbock also accused Trump of blackmail tactics and demanded countermeasures.

The only social force capable of preventing another world war is the international working class. It must unite internationally and combine the struggle against war with the fight against its source: the capitalist system. This is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, the Socialist Equality Parties.

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