The Libya conference and the new scramble for Africa

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A major international conference on Libya will convene in Berlin on Sunday. At the invitation of Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, heads of state and top officials of the leading imperialist powers in Europe and the US will come together to determine the fate of the resource-rich country and ultimately the entire continent. Also in attendance will be representatives of Russia, China and the most important regional powers, including Egypt, Algeria and Turkey, together with the leaders of the opposing factions in Libya's civil war, Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and Gen. Khalifa Haftar, and representatives of the African Union.

In both its form and venue, the meeting is reminiscent of the infamous Congo Conference, which was also held in Berlin from November 15, 1884 to February 26, 1885 at the invitation of German Chancellor Bismarck. Its outcome was the "General Act of the Berlin Conference," adopted by representatives of the US, the Ottoman Empire, the European powers and Russia. This agreement accelerated the division of Africa into colonies and ultimately intensified the tensions between the imperialist powers, culminating in the mass slaughter of the First World War that began in August 1914.

Even before the Congo Conference, the scramble for Africa was already in full swing. France occupied Tunisia in 1881 and Guinea in 1884. In 1882, British troops invaded Egypt, which at that time was officially part of the Ottoman Empire. Italy subdued parts of Eritrea in 1870 and 1882. In April 1884, the German Reich annexed German Southwest Africa (today Namibia), moving into Togo and Cameroon in July of the same year.

With the Congo Conference, the colonial subjugation of Africa, accompanied by a previously unknown level of imperialist barbarism, gathered pace. Within a few years, the European powers had carved up virtually the entire continent. The Congo fell to Belgium, most of the Sahara and the Sahel to France, Berlin secured German East Africa (today's Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda, as well as part of Mozambique) and Britain conquered Sudan by finally crushing the Mahdist Revolt in 1899. This was followed by the subjugation of South Africa by Britain in the Second Boer War (1899 to 1902), the division of Morocco by France and Spain, and Italy's conquest of Libya in 1912.

As at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the major powers pursued their predatory imperialist interests under the guise of "diplomacy" and "peace." Today, they act even more nakedly to achieve the same objectives.

In a commentary on the Libya conference, the daily *Tagesspiegel* states quite bluntly: "Libya's strategic importance is the reason why so many people want to get involved there—although it is generally not attractive to invest soldiers or mercenaries and billions in a civil war with an uncertain outcome. Libya has oil. Whoever controls Libya controls what is currently the most important migration route to Europe—and thus becomes an indispensable partner of the EU."

The author, Christoph von Marschall, whose aristocratic ancestors were high-ranking foreign policy-makers of the German Reich, openly expresses the traditions to which Berlin is returning. "Germany now needs the cool perspective of Otto von Bismarck on *realpolitik*. And it calls for his diplomatic skills as an 'honest broker.'" But "the role of the honest broker does not mean that he has to be altruistic and cannot represent his own interests. Germany has these: stability in Libya, reducing pressure on Europe through uncontrolled migration."

Then, as now, the "honest broker" is really an imperialist brigand, who is seeking a "place in the sun." While the German government did not participate in the NATO bombing of Libya in 2011, it has been all the more aggressive in its involvement in Africa since its about-face in foreign policy in 2013–2014. Now, Germany is engaged with more than 1,000 soldiers deployed in the French-led occupation of Mali, maintains a military camp in neighbouring Niger and advances its imperialist aims across the continent with increasing aggressiveness.

Last March, Berlin updated its "Africa Policy Guidelines,"

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which were first adopted in May 2014. This revision evokes the “growing relevance of Africa for Germany and Europe,” which is due, among other things, to the continent’s increasingly dynamic economy and “rich natural resources.” The government therefore called for the strengthening of “Germany’s political, security and development policy commitment in Africa in a targeted manner,” to act “early, quickly, decisively and substantially” and to “deploy the entire spectrum of its available resources cross-departmentally.”

The other imperialist powers are pursuing similar objectives and have also increased their military and political intervention on the continent in recent years. France has massively expanded its engagement in the Sahel zone, and the US is also escalating its intervention in Africa, especially to curb Russian and Chinese influence. Nine years after the NATO bombing of Libya—which reduced much of the country’s infrastructure to rubble, left thousands of civilians dead and wounded and led to the lynch-mob murder of Colonel Gaddafi—the country is once again at the centre of imperialist intrigues. But now the stakes are even greater, with all of the belligerents of the previous war arrayed against each other, fighting for control of the booty.

Last year, France, in alliance with Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, supported Haftar, at least unofficially, while Italy and Qatar worked closely with the internationally recognized transitional government (GNA) of al-Sarraj. Turkey began sending soldiers to Tripoli on January 5 of this year to strengthen the GNA against Haftar’s military offensive. The decision was criticized not only by the general’s open allies, but also by Trump and the German government.

Berlin, in particular, is trying to use its contacts with both of the opposing factions in the Libyan civil war to bring the belligerents together and increase its own influence.

There are many indications that, behind the scenes, Berlin and the European Union are preparing a comprehensive military intervention. On Friday, EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Josep Borrell did not rule out a European Union military intervention in Libya. “It is crucial that we assert our interests more strongly and, if necessary, robustly,” he said in an interview with *Der Spiegel*. “If there is a ceasefire in Libya, then the EU must be prepared to help implement and monitor this ceasefire—possibly also with soldiers, for example as part of an EU mission.”

Borrell left no doubt that such a military operation could be quickly extended to large parts of North Africa to more aggressively enforce European interests against Russia, China and the US. “The situation in the Sahel is no better—on the contrary," he said. "Last year, 1,500 soldiers were killed in the fight against terrorists in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger alone.” The entire region is “a powder keg,” he added.

But Europe has “many opportunities to exercise power," he insisted. He declared: "We just have to want it. I’m not talking about military power, at least not only. The New Year has hardly begun, and it almost seems as if there are only crises everywhere. So, we should know what our goals are. And we must be ready, if necessary, to defend these goals even if they run counter to those of our allies.”

This situation of growing conflict, paired with threatening gestures on the eve of the conference, confirms the analysis Lenin made in his classic work *Imperialism*: “… the 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. And the strength of these participants in the division does not change to an equal degree, for the *even* development of different undertakings, trusts, branches of industry, or countries is impossible under capitalism.”

Therefore, alliances between imperialist powers, according to Lenin, “no matter what form they may assume, whether of one imperialist coalition against another, or of a general alliance embracing *all* the imperialist powers, are *inevitably nothing* more than a ‘truce’ in periods between wars." He continued: "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.”

As with the murder of Tehran’s Gen. Qassem Suleimani, in violation of international law, and US war preparations against Iran, workers and young people must understand that the Libya conference constitutes a warning. The profound crisis of the capitalist system is driving the great powers ever deeper into the abyss of imperialist war and barbarism. The preparation of new neocolonial wars of aggression in Africa and the Middle East, which pose the danger of a Third World War, can be prevented only through the mobilization of the international working class on the basis of a socialist and revolutionary program.

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