

Mounting US pressure on Europe to line up against China

Peter Symonds
27 July 2020

In a keynote speech last week, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo significantly raised the stakes in the Trump administration's reckless and dangerous confrontation with China. After citing the growing list of unsubstantiated condemnations and lies against China, he declared that the US was not reverting to the Cold War policy of containment, signalling a far more aggressive strategy aimed at eliminating the threat posed by China to American global dominance.

The speech entitled "Communist China and the Free World" was clearly aimed at ramping up the pressure on US allies and strategic partners to align themselves completely with Washington's anti-China campaign. Pompeo called on "every leader of every nation to start by doing what America has done" and condemned those that "simply don't have the ability, the courage to stand with us."

The message was directed in particular at Europe, indicating that Washington will not tolerate any deviation from its policy. In a barely-concealed criticism of Germany, Pompeo declared: "Indeed, we have a NATO ally of ours that hasn't stood up in the way that it needs to with respect to Hong Kong because they fear Beijing will restrict access to China's market. This is the kind of timidity that will lead to historic failure, and we can't repeat it."

Pompeo employed the rhetoric of the Cold War—the "free world" versus "Communist China." That was always a shabby pretext for US aggression but today bears no relation to reality. Pompeo's claims to defend democracy as the Trump administration shreds basic democratic rights and legal norms, sending federal agents to violently suppress protests against police killings. Moreover, after more than four decades of capitalist restoration, to describe China as "communist" is absurd.

The deepening crisis of world capitalism fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating geo-political tensions and compounding the desperation of US foreign policy. The Trump administration is demanding that Europe and countries around the world line up behind the US drive to subordinate China to its imperialist interests. It does so, however, even as it is taking trade war measures against its European "allies" to ensure that they also pose no threat to American global hegemony.

Pompeo's latest speech is part of a US campaign to bully European countries into toeing Washington's line, and, if that fails, to divide and fracture the European Union. It follows his intervention at the annual Munich Security Conference in February that revealed deep divisions between the US and Europe, and two addresses last month to the Copenhagen Democracy Summit on June 19, entitled "Europe and the China Challenge," and to the German Marshall Fund's Brussels Forum on June 25.

Both the latter speeches were aimed at marshalling support in Europe against China and pressing European powers to take a more aggressive stance. Both were chaired by staunchly pro-Washington figures—the first by former Danish prime minister and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, and the second by the German correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, Bojan Pancevski.

Pompeo noted "successes" in stiffening European measures against China. These included a new Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China that features some European leaders, Britain's denunciations of Beijing over the new national security legislation in Hong Kong, and the sidelining of Chinese telecommunications company Huawei by European countries such as the Czech Republic.

Those in European ruling circles who employ the rhetoric of “defending democracy” and upbraiding China over “human rights” in Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang are just as hypocritical as their American counterparts, given the turn in Europe to police-state measures and the fostering of extreme right and openly fascist parties.

At the same time, the US is intent on driving a wedge against any country that resists. The two speeches last month followed the Trump administration’s decision to withdraw 10,000 US troops from Germany over Berlin’s failure to boost its military budget sufficiently and its reliance on Russian oil and gas. Pompeo said the decision was not just a rebuke to Germany, but part of a massive restructuring of the US military toward Asia “to make sure we’re postured appropriately to counter the PLA [China’s military].”

The divisions in Europe, as in countries around the world, flow from a longstanding strategic dependence on the US, on the one hand, and a growing reliance on trade and economic ties with China, on the other. Germany depends heavily on trade with, and investment in, China. On the other hand, like the US, the European powers are concerned that China’s rapid economic growth, which is, above all, the result of its transformation into a huge cheap labour platform for global corporations, is undermining their own economic competitiveness and neo-colonial stakes in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

In an article this month entitled, “Europe changes its mind on China,” Thomas Wright, an analyst with the US think tank, the Brookings Institution, made clear that economic competition, not any concern for democracy, was behind European support for the US anti-China campaign.

After noting that a “primary driver of Europe’s increased skepticism of China was economic,” Wright pinpointed Beijing’s “Made in China 2025” plan as a particular factor. The plan’s aim to transform China into a leading manufacturer of hi-tech goods related to 5G telecommunications, advanced robotics and artificial intelligence represents a direct threat to American and European dominance in these highly profitable areas. At the same time, European corporate ambitions for greater profits in China have been thwarted by the Chinese government’s failure to open up new areas of its economy to foreign investment.

While economics are certainly a factor, it is not the case, as Wright maintained, that relentless pressure from Washington plays little role in compelling European countries to shift their policies. For instance, the recent decision by the British government to eliminate Huawei from the country’s 5G telecommunications network was in no small measure the result of the Trump administration’s ban on the use of American software in Huawei equipment.

Pompeo’s speech last week represents a major escalation of Washington’s anti-China campaign across the board. He declared that the US “can’t face this challenge alone” and ominously called on the “combined economic, diplomatic, and military power” of the UN, NATO, the G7 countries and the G20 to confront China. Confronting a profound crisis at home, the Trump administration is desperate to divert social tensions outward against an external foe and will stop at nothing to ensure the backing of European powers.



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