

The US troop withdrawal and the return of German militarism

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The United States wants to withdraw one-third of its almost 36,000 soldiers stationed in Germany. This was announced by Defense Secretary Mark Esper at a press conference in Washington on Wednesday. The withdrawal was expected since US President Donald Trump had repeatedly threatened to “punish” Germany in this way because it was not spending enough on the military.

The number Esper announced was surprisingly high. While there had been talk of 9,500 soldiers leaving Germany, there are now 11,900 going. Some 5,600 are to be transferred to other locations in Europe and 6,400 are being brought back to the US. The command centres in the Stuttgart area are particularly affected. For example, the European high command of the US forces is to be transferred to NATO headquarters in Belgium and the command for Africa operations to an undisclosed location. A squadron of fighter jets will be transferred from Spangdahlem in the Eifel to Italy and a wheeled tank regiment from Vilseck in Bavaria to the US.

While Trump again justified the withdrawal on Twitter on Thursday by saying that the Germans were behind with their “2 percent contribution to NATO,” Esper cited security policy reasons. The transfer of troops increases deterrence, strengthens the allies, and serves to reassure the allies, he claimed.

The relationship between the US and Germany has reached a low point. Numerous tensions and conflicts separate the former “partners.” They range from the Nordstream 2 gas pipeline, the completion of which the US is obstructing by every means possible, to growing trade conflicts, the nuclear agreement with Iran and international nuclear disarmament agreements, and the attitude towards China—to name but the most important.

German-American tensions are not new; there had already been differences over the Iraq war in 2003 and the Libya war in 2011. But now they have reached a level of severity not seen since World War II. The two powers that fought each other in two imperialist world wars face each other in growing enmity.

Until now, both sides had benefited from the NATO alliance. The US bases in Germany served as a central strategic hub for US wars in the Middle East and in Africa. Troops and weapons were transferred via Germany, operations were directed from there, and deadly drones were controlled. No German government has so far restricted or tried to prevent this.

Germany and the US are also working closely together on NATO moves against Russia. Germany is the most important

staging area for NATO units deployed at the Eastern European border with Russia. Esper claims that the withdrawal of troops from Germany will not change this since the units recalled to the US will continue to be ready for rotating operations in Eastern European countries.

But experts doubt this. In a joint guest article for *Tagesspiegel*, former German foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel (Social Democratic Party, SPD), the director of the Institute of German Economics Michael Hüther and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) foreign policy expert Norbert Röttgen write: “Washington’s decision once again damages the basis of trust built up over decades between the transatlantic partners, the cohesion of the West and its global political effectiveness. Authoritarian regimes and illiberal actors will take note of this with pleasure.”

In the US, too, there is considerable criticism from Democrats and Republicans of the withdrawal plans announced unilaterally by Esper and Trump without a vote in NATO. Republican Senator Mitt Romney, for example, a domestic opponent of Trump, declared that the withdrawal of US troops from Germany would be “a gift for Russia.”

Many German commentators hope that the withdrawal plan—which, due to the high costs, requires congressional approval—will be halted after the US presidential election in November at the latest. However, this would do little to change the growing transatlantic tensions.

In Germany, representatives of the Left Party and some Social Democrats, in particular, have welcomed the announced withdrawal of troops. The founder and long-time leader of the Left Party, Gregor Gysi, commented on Twitter, “US troop withdrawal: I can’t get enough of the punishment. If that’s the only punishment #Trump can give me.”

The tweet emphasizes that Gysi is a ruthless cynic. WikiLeaks had already revealed 10 years ago that Gysi supports militarism. In a diplomatic cable published by the platform, then US ambassador Philip Murphy described a visit by the Left Party politician to the US representative in Berlin. Gysi had assured him, “sociably and in a chatty mood,” that he did not need to worry about the Left Party’s attitude towards NATO, Murphy reported to Washington.

Now Gysi is pretending that the announced American troop withdrawal is a contribution to military disarmament. In reality, it serves the purpose of military escalation—from the American side as well as from the European and German side.

For the US, it is part of a shift of its military clout to the Pacific, which had already begun under Democratic President Barack Obama. US imperialism is not willing to accept the rise of China and is preparing a military strike against the nuclear power. Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, the provocations and war preparations against China have massively increased.

At the same time, with the partial withdrawal, Washington is putting pressure on European NATO members to increase their own contribution to the confrontation with Russia and to stand behind the US in the conflict with China. There are considerable differences on both issues, especially with Germany. These are now so deep that they could lead to the break-up of NATO.

While Berlin plays a leading role in the offensive against Russia and leads the NATO battlegroup in Lithuania, it is holding on to the construction of the Nordstream pipeline, which transports Russian natural gas across the Baltic Sea directly to Germany. From Berlin's point of view, this is essential for securing Germany's energy supply. In addition, €12 billion have already been invested, which would be lost in the event of a stop.

Although China is increasingly referred to in official European and German papers as a "strategic rival," Berlin has so far rejected trade war measures such as those promoted by Washington, because China is also of crucial importance to the German economy as a sales market. The German automotive industry, the country's most important sector, is estimated to make between 35 and 50 percent of its profits there.

The American withdrawal plans serve the ruling class in Europe and Germany as an excuse to accelerate their rearmament plans. German newspapers are full of commentary demanding the NATO commitment should now finally be fulfilled and military spending increased to 2 percent of gross domestic product. Although Germany has recently massively increased its military expenditure and is planning armament projects worth multi-digit billions, it currently stands at only 1.38 percent of GDP.

In reality, it is mainly about becoming militarily independent from the US to push through its imperialist interests without Washington's influence and also against it.

The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), which comments on world political events with cynical openness from the perspective of the Swiss banks, writes, "At first glance, Trump may have punished the country. But in truth, the withdrawal of troops opens up an opportunity: all those *Realpolitikers*, who for years have been speaking out against the partly pacifist, partly anti-American majority opinion in Germany, are now at an advantage for a change."

Germany must decide, demands the NZZ. "Does it want to retain the comforting feeling of being a 'peace nation'? Until now, this has meant that others have ensured peace. Or will the country come out from under the shadow which spreads from its past, and secure peace for itself and its European partners?"

Former SPD chairman and foreign minister Gabriel, who now sits on the supervisory board of Deutsche Bank and heads the think tank Atlantik-Brücke, immediately complied with the call. In a long NZZ interview, he advocated Germany take on the role of the "world policeman." The most pressing question now, said Gabriel, was, "Who will replace the US in Europe's foreign and security

policy environment? Who will assume this strategic role?"

In response to the NZZ's objection that Germany seems neither willing nor able to do so, Gabriel replied that this was "less due to the unwillingness of the population than to the inability or unwillingness of politicians to speak publicly about these crucial strategic questions. He believed Germany "underestimate[s] the willingness and ability of our people to address these issues."

In reality, the overwhelming majority of the German population rejects war and militarism. The horrors of two world wars and the enormous crimes committed in them have not been forgotten. The call for the return of German militarism comes exclusively from the ruling class. Faced with a deep crisis of capitalism, growing international tensions and fierce class antagonisms, it is returning to the means of war and dictatorship to secure its wealth and power.

As a result, for years the crimes of the Nazis have been downplayed, right-wing terrorist networks have been covered up by the state apparatus, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has been promoted and the Bundeswehr (armed forces) have been rearmed. This is supported by all parties represented in the Bundestag (parliament). The Greens, once part of the pacifist peace movement, have become the leading war party. Even the Left Party expresses enthusiasm about the Bundeswehr. Its parliamentary faction leader Dietmar Bartsch had campaigned with the Bundeswehr Association in 2017 for soldiers to vote for his party.

However, the broad opposition against war and militarism needs a perspective and a strategy. It must counterpose to the warmongering of all the imperialist powers the international unity of the working class. It must combine the struggle against war with the struggle against its cause, capitalism. This is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its German section, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party).



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