

While Biden proclaims “America is back,” imperialist conflicts dominate Munich conference

Bill Van Auken
19 February 2021

US President Joe Biden used a live video broadcast Friday held in lieu of the annual Munich Security Conference to deliver his long-expected “America is Back” speech, waving the false banner of “democracy” to assert US global leadership in the “great power” confrontation with both Russia and China.

Speaking at the video forum—made necessary by the still uncontrolled spread of the coronavirus in the advanced capitalist countries—Biden received a decidedly chilly reception from his fellow virtual panelists, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron. Both stressed the independent interests of the European imperialist powers.

The title given to the livestreamed forum was “Beyond Westlessness.” In an opinion column written on the eve of the forum, Wolfgang Ischinger, the former German ambassador to the US and chairman of the Munich Security Conference, described a Europe “surrounded by a ‘ring of fire’—by bloody conflicts in the East, in Ukraine, and in the Caucasian region, but also in the South, around the eastern Mediterranean, and in our African neighborhood.”

He continued: “Great power competition has made a comeback. The rule-based international order and its institutional framework have been weakened. And we are faced with the massive impact of climate change and a global pandemic with potentially crippling effects on stability, prosperity, and human rights.”

As Biden’s remarks made clear, “America is back”—a phrase he repeated three times in his 20 minute speech—was less a promise than a threat. Behind it lies an even more aggressive and militaristic policy than that pursued by the administration of Donald Trump. His speech represented a thinly disguised demand that the European powers tie themselves unconditionally to Washington’s war wagon.

The US president insisted that the world confronted an “inflection point” in a supposed global struggle between “democracy” and “autocracy.”

Biden made a fleeting and oblique reference to the fascist coup attempt at the US Capitol on January 6, in which Trump attempted to overthrow not only the results of the presidential election, but the US constitutional order, and install himself as

a presidential dictator.

Proclaiming that “shared democratic values” were the glue uniting Europe and America, Biden acknowledged that “none of us has fully succeeded in this vision.” He continued: “We continue to work toward it. And in so many places, including in Europe and the United States, democratic progress is under assault.”

That the events of January 6 leave Washington in no position to lecture anyone on democracy did not deter the US president from pivoting to an attack on China and Russia, portraying the two countries and their governments as an existential challenge to the Western world’s “shared democratic values.”

Biden suggested that the blame for the challenges facing democracy in the West lies entirely with nefarious Russian meddling. This, as both the US and Europe have seen the rise of ultra-right and fascistic movements, as well as the introduction of authoritarian and police state measures amid unprecedented levels of social inequality and the homicidal imposition of herd immunity policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The Kremlin attacks our democracies and weaponizes corruption to try to undermine our system of governance,” Biden said, adding that “Putin seeks to weaken European—the European project and our NATO Alliance. He wants to undermine the transatlantic unity and our resolve.”

One of Washington’s main charges in terms of Russia undermining “transatlantic unity” has centered on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which is nearly completed and will pipe Russian gas under the Baltic Sea directly to Germany and other European customers.

On the eve of the Munich forum, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared that Washington is determined to stop the pipeline’s completion, claiming it will “enable the Putin regime to further weaponize Russia’s energy resources to exert political pressure throughout Europe.” The Biden administration is preparing fresh sanctions against companies involved in the project.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded pointedly to Washington’s threats, stating that “It would make sense for

our American partners to be less interested in Nord Stream 2 and more interested in Texas' heat and energy supply."

Biden went on to demand that Europe align itself with US imperialism in order to "prepare together for a long-term strategic competition with China." He called upon the NATO powers to jointly "push back against the Chinese government's economic abuses and coercion that undercut the foundations of the international economic system."

Under Biden, the US is escalating its military threats against China. In recent weeks, it has deployed two aircraft carrier strike groups in the South China Sea and sent warships on provocative "freedom of navigation" exercises in the Taiwan Strait and near the Chinese-controlled Paracel Islands.

At the same time, China has supplanted the US as the European Union's number one trading partner, and, at the end of last year, the EU and Beijing concluded a major investment treaty over Washington's strenuous objections.

In a clear reference to the Trump administration's "America First" policy and Trump's crudely transactional attitude toward NATO, Biden said, "I know the past few years have strained and tested our transatlantic relationship," adding that Washington was determined "to earn back our position of trusted leadership."

The response of Washington's NATO "partners," however, left no doubt that Trump was far more a symptom of deep fissures in the transatlantic alliance than their cause, and that European imperialism is no more anxious to subordinate itself to Washington's diktats under Biden than it was under Trump.

Both Germany's Chancellor Merkel and French President Macron referred repeatedly to their support for "multilateralism," by which they clearly meant their opposition to making an unconditional bloc with US imperialism against Moscow and Beijing.

Merkel began by citing the growing scope of the German military's foreign interventions, including its role in Afghanistan, Iraq and in Africa.

She stressed the importance of an independent European defense policy, declaring that developments in Europe's "neighborhood" are "more important to us," including in Africa and Syria. Germany's "relation with Africa has great strategic significance," she added.

Macron was even more blunt. He began by expressing his own contempt for democracy, cynically stating that the most important thing was "protecting free speech" by regulating internet platforms to suppress "online hate." This, as his government rams through an "anti-separatist" law that eviscerates democratic rights in the name of combatting Islamist "extremism."

The French president stressed the need for a "new security architecture" and the necessity of "dialogue with Russia." He repeatedly advocated "strategic autonomy" for the European Union, while suggesting that the US, with its escalating confrontation with China, was more interested in becoming a

"Pacific power."

Like Merkel, Macron insisted that Europe had to deal "with our neighborhood" and that its "agenda is not the same" as that of the US in terms of the "level of priorities." He pointedly stated that this was something "we experienced in Syria in 2013," when the Obama administration backed down from a regime-change intervention backed by Paris on the pretext of a poison gas attack that proved to have been staged by the Western-backed "rebels."

The appearance of the three heads of state followed a virtual meeting of the Group of 7 that centered on the international response to the COVID-19 pandemic that has killed nearly two-and-a-half-million people. While leaders of the major powers mouthed phrases about equality in combating the virus and providing vaccines to the most oppressed countries, none of them stated how many doses they would make available, or when.

At the Munich forum, Macron stressed the importance of sending at least enough doses to vaccinate health care workers in Africa, because of the increasing role being played on the continent by cheaper Russian and Chinese vaccines.

Biden's first foray into international politics, cast by the corporate media as a radical departure from the policies pursued by Trump, has only demonstrated that the fissures dividing Washington and its nominal European allies are wider than ever. They cannot be contained within the structure of a NATO alliance formed when US imperialism still exercised global economic hegemony.

The working class all over the world is confronted with preparations for "great power conflict" and a new scramble by all the imperialist powers to recolonize the world, which threaten to plunge humanity into a new world war and nuclear annihilation. The virtual discussion between Biden, Merkel and Macron expresses both the immense dangers confronting the world population and the urgency of building a new mass antiwar movement based upon the international working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact