Merkel's farewell visit to Washington

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Angela Merkel paid what is expected to be her last official visit to Washington as German chancellor on Thursday. She has visited the US more than twenty times during her sixteen years in office, working with four different presidents: George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

The visit was marked by an effort to smooth over the severe fault lines of the Trump era. Merkel, the first European head of government invited to visit the Biden White House, was heaped with praise and honours. She had breakfast with Vice President Kamala Harris, received an honorary doctorate from Johns Hopkins University (her 18th such title) and met with President Biden for talks. Afterwards, Biden and his wife Jill hosted a dinner in her honour.

At the joint press conference, Biden showered Merkel with compliments. He attested to her chancellorship as "historic in character" and praised her "ground-breaking services" to Germany and the world. She had always stood up for what was right and defended human dignity, Biden declared. On the foundation built by Merkel, the partnership between Germany and the United States would become even stronger, he said.

Merkel thanked the US for its "outstanding contribution" to German reunification thirty years ago and asserted, "No two regions in the world are united by such depth and breadth of common interests and values as Europe and North America."

There are numerous retrospectives in the media highlighting Merkel's personal relationship with Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden. Personal relationships do play a role in politics, but a secondary one. Ultimately, the relationship between heads of government is determined by objective factors and interests, especially when they are at the head of such powerful imperialist states as the US and Germany, the largest and fourth-largest economies in the world.

During Merkel's 16-year chancellorship, the conflicts between the US and Germany have intensified, despite inevitable fluctuations. Even behind the showcased harmony of the recent summit lie fierce tensions, which were only barely concealed on Thursday and—like the conflict over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline—kept showing through.

The "common values and interests" invoked by Merkel have found their realisation in murderous wars, growing social inequality and the rise of fascist forces on both sides of the Atlantic. The turn towards militarism, class war and authoritarian forms of rule has, in turn, exacerbated the conflicts between the major imperialist powers. This is also true of German and US imperialism, which faced each other as enemies in two world wars and pursue irreconcilable economic and strategic interests.

Two years before Merkel became Chancellor in November 2005, relations between Berlin and Washington had reached a low point. The German and French governments opposed the Iraq war in 2003 because it threatened their own interests in the Middle East. The US administration of George W. Bush responded by trying to divide Europe. It pitted the "new Europe" (Eastern Europe) against the "old Europe" (Germany and France).

David North commented at the time on the *World Socialist Web Site* that the close alliance of the US with Western Europe after World War II was "in fact, a departure from the historical norm. The more basic tendency of American capitalism, rooted in its somewhat belated emergence as a major imperialist power, had been to augment its world position *at the expense* of Europe."

The behaviour of the US poses a dilemma for Western Europeans, North concluded: "to submit to the diktats of the United States would mean to accept their relegation, in the words of the conservative French daily *Le Figaro*, 'into a simple protectorate of the United States.' But to openly resist would raise the risk of a potentially catastrophic military confrontation with the United States."

Angela Merkel, as leader of the opposition in the Bundestag (federal parliament) at the time, took the unusual step of attacking her own government's foreign policy in a foreign newspaper. In the article "Schröder does not speak for all Germans," which appeared in the *Washington Post*, she backed the Iraq war, which was illegal under international law.

As Chancellor, Merkel then cultivated a friendly

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relationship with President Bush, who had attacked Iraq based on lies. A joint barbecue in a Mecklenburg village, a visit to Bush's Texas ranch and other appearances demonstrated their friendship to the media. Later, Merkel also sent German soldiers to Iraq, but only to the Kurdish-dominated north.

But even Merkel could not escape the Europeans' dilemma. When Bush wanted to pave the way for Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO in 2008, she refused. She did not want the relationship with Russia, on which the German economy depends as an energy supplier, to be dictated by the US.

Merkel's relationship with Barack Obama was initially strained. In 2008, she prevented him from giving a campaign speech as a presidential candidate in front of the symbolic Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. In 2011, she then went even further than Schröder had in 2003. In the vote on the Libyan war, Germany joined China in opposing the US, France, and Britain in the UN Security Council. Again, this was not about peace, but about the economic and strategic interests of German imperialism in North Africa.

In 2013, the revelation that Merkel's mobile phone had been tapped by the US intelligence agency NSA triggered another diplomatic crisis.

Over the course of the Obama administration, relations improved. Washington shifted the focus of its foreign policy to confronting China and gave Berlin more leeway in dealing with Russia, with which relations had cooled considerably in the meantime.

In the spring of 2014, the Merkel government, now in its third term, announced that Germany would once again play a role in world politics that was commensurate with its economic weight, including militarily—and immediately put this into practice. Together with the US, it organised the coup in Ukraine, which, supported by fascist gangs, brought a pro-Western regime to power and dramatically intensified the conflict with Russia. Since then, Berlin has played a leading military role in NATO's deployment against Russia.

Donald Trump's arrival in the White House brought German-American relations to a new low. Trump was the first US president to question NATO, supported Brexit and the division of the European Union, and deliberately intensified the trade war against Europe. Trump's confrontational behaviour gave new impetus to old plans to develop the EU, under Franco-German leadership, into a world power on a par with the US and China. Such plans had thus far repeatedly failed because of the rivalry between Germany and France.

Biden's charm offensive towards Merkel serves not least to undermine these plans. The Biden administration—like the Obama and Trump administrations—regards China as its most important geostrategic rival. It wants to get the Europeans on its side in the conflict with China and at the same time prevent them from becoming too independent.

In Europe, there are considerable reservations about the confrontational course with China. Although the European Union now also regards the country as a strategic rival, it does not want to subordinate itself to American interests in the dispute with China. German business circles are alarmed. China is Germany's most important trading partner, ahead of the Netherlands. Volkswagen, the largest German car company, makes 41 percent of its total turnover there. Other German companies, such as Bosch, also cooperate with Chinese firms in the development of new drive technologies.

Shortly before Biden's inauguration, the EU had passed an investment agreement with China, on Germany's initiative, which the German government celebrated as a "trade policy milestone." In Washington, on the other hand, it was seen as an affront, and in the meantime, it is again coming under increasing pressure within the EU.

China was a central topic in the talks between Biden and Merkel, but both remained emphatically vague at the press conference. "We also talked about the many facets of cooperation or even competition with China—in the economic area, in the area of climate protection, in the military area, in questions of security—and of course many challenges arise here," Merkel said.

The conflict over the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, which connects Russia directly with Germany, also continues to smoulder. The US wants to stop it to isolate Russia economically, while Germany, which has hardly any energy reserves of its own, considers it irreplaceable to guarantee its independent energy supply (also independent of the US). A solution is now to be found by August that will ensure that Ukraine, as the previous transit country, does not suffer any loss of income.

The tensions between the imperialist powers that have built up over the past decades will inevitably lead to a violent explosion if the working class does not intervene, unite internationally and put a stop to the warmongers. The struggle against war and militarism is inseparable from the struggle against their cause, capitalism.

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