US-EU rift over relations with China widens after AUKUS pact

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Recent weeks have seen mounting conflicts between Washington and the European imperialist powers over China. Last month, Australia suddenly repudiated a €56 billion French submarine contract to sign instead the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) alliance targeting China, and European countries this month successfully overrode US accusations that IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva improperly promoted China in official reports.

When French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire arrived in America for this week's G-20 finance ministers' summit in Washington, the *New York Times* largely asked him about China. The *Times* wrote that it is impossible to "mask stark differences on China and other issues" between America and France. Le Maire asserted that US and European Union (EU) policies towards China are fundamentally incompatible.

"The United States wants to confront China. The European Union wants to engage China," he said. Washington, he added, sees China as a threat and does not "want China to become in a few years or decades the first superpower in the world." Asked if this meant a divergence between America and Europe, he replied, "It could be if we are not cautious." To avoid US-EU conflict, he said, Washington must agree to "recognizing Europe as one of the three superpowers in the world for the 21st century," together with the United States and China.

Workers must be warned: deep, historically rooted conflicts between the world's most powerful imperialist states, that twice in the 20th century led to world war, again threaten to erupt. It is thirty years since the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union deprived the NATO powers of a common enemy. Today, amid a horrific social and economic crisis caused by the criminal official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, profound conflicts over economic and military interests are driving US imperialism and the European powers apart.

Le Maire said the "key question now for the European Union" is to be "independent from the United States, able to defend its own interests, whether economic or strategic interests." Such independence, he added, "means to be able to build more capacities on defense, to defend its own view on the fight against climate change, to defend its own economic interest, to have access to key technologies and not be too dependent on American technologies."

The *Times* listed demands presented by Paris to Washington through Le Maire. One is that the Biden administration end steel and aluminum tariffs imposed by the previous Trump administration. France, the *Times* wrote, also wants "greater American commitment to independent European defense ambitions … as well as evidence of American respect for European strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region."

Washington's signing of AUKUS behind the EU's back only underscores, however, that it has no intention of respecting EU ambitions or of accepting a role as co-equal of anyone. Maintaining US global primacy has, in fact, been US policy throughout the post-Soviet era.

A 1992 Pentagon strategy paper asserted that US national security required Washington to convince "potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role," and to "discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order."

Already after Trump's election, however, the EU powers had signaled a more antagonistic military posture. In 2017, German Chancellor Angela Merkel commented amid Trump's first tour of Europe as president that "we have to fight for our own future ourselves." The EU announced multibillion-euro plans for independent EU weapons and armed forces.

Washington has since been weakened by its championing of a disastrous "herd immunity" response to

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the COVID-19 pandemic that has left millions dead worldwide, and the humiliating collapse this summer of its Afghan puppet regime in Kabul. The French finance minister's role in criticizing US policy is not accidental, given longstanding French criticisms of US handling of the dollar. These criticisms have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last year, the IMF became the focus of a battle between Washington and the EU, which demanded IMF subsidies for Africa to deal with the pandemic, which US officials opposed as a threat to its monopoly of printing dollars. With Georgieva's support, the EU and African countries ultimately overcame US opposition. This month, 15 African states, including Nigeria, Egypt, Ivory Coast, Senegal and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, signed a letter in the Paris-based monthly *Jeune Afrique* endorsing Georgieva against Washington.

Calling her an "invaluable partner," they wrote, "Georgieva played a decisive role in the unprecedented issuing of Special Drawing Rights (SDR) equivalent to US$650 billion, providing liquidity and cash buffers to many countries in need. She fought to promote multilateralism …"

Inter-imperialist rivalries over the profits to be extracted from China, Africa and beyond are ever more clearly acquiring a military dimension, however, and the risk of war is growing rapidly. France's Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS) think tank recently published a report on the AUKUS alliance and the Indo-Pacific. It wrote that AUKUS demonstrates US "mistrust towards Europe (not only France) which Washington cast aside, notably because it is not hard-line enough towards Beijing and also tends to compete commercially in the Chinese market."

It dismissed US attempts to mend fences with France: "US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, flanked by Australian officials, trying to temper French indignation ('France is a vital partner … we want to take every opportunity to reinforce trans-Atlantic cooperation on the Indo-Pacific') fools no one. This is the pursuit of a strategic agenda based on and seeking to reinforce the marginalization of the European Union."

Noting the "imbalance between Europe's means and its ambitions," the FRS called for a military buildup: "Promoting effective strategic autonomy (while preserving necessary trans-Atlantic solidarity), European sovereignty in its various dimensions, and a will to power in a universe where force rules is now absolutely urgent. Deceiving oneself with words is useless, we have just had that proven to us. … France needs a global China strategy not limited to the Indo-Pacific (due to a lack of inter-ministerial coordination, Paris has no clear view on the 'New Silk Road' program)."

The FRS made clear that this entails rising strategic tensions inside Europe, notably with Britain. "To imagine that the fact that Europe is still England's leading trading partner after Brexit means that Britain is tied to the EU is an illusion that has (at least partially) been dispelled. … London's role in AUKUS and its industrial participation in the future Australian nuclear submarine program must lead to broader reflection on the future of Franco-British strategic relations," it wrote. It added that this "could impact the 2010 Lancaster House accords" on UK-French military collaboration.

The force emerging as the alternative to the disintegration of the international institutions of world capitalism is the international working class. Strikes and protests are mounting worldwide against super-exploitation, social inequality and massive unnecessary deaths caused by the official response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Significantly, Le Maire told the *Times* he fears "inequality divides" and warned, "a new 'Yellow Vest' [protest] movement remains possible everywhere within Europe."

Workers face the bankruptcy not of individual politicians or governments, but of an entire social system. While US war threats against China are the most aggressive and reckless elements of imperialist foreign policy, the EU powers are not fundamentally different. They are planning the diversion of hundreds of billions of euros into weapons programs, social attacks on the workers, and cultivating a militaristic "will to power," in the FRS's words.

A key task for workers and youth mobilizing to fight attacks on wages and conditions, reactionary official policies on the pandemic and police-state policies is the unification of their struggles in an international, socialist anti-war movement.

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