

Germany's new chancellor and foreign minister visit Paris and Warsaw: Promoting European Great Power policy

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The new German government wasted no time in revealing its foreign policy priorities.

On her first day in office, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (Greens) flew to Paris to meet her French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian. From there, she continued on to Brussels, where she met with EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Josep Borrell and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. A day later, on Friday, she visited the Polish foreign minister in Warsaw.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) followed on the heels of the foreign minister. On Friday he visited Paris and Brussels, and on Sunday he was received in Warsaw by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

The meetings took place against the backdrop of a growing threat of war and a coronavirus pandemic that is completely out of control. In Europe alone, more than 1.5 million people have died from COVID-19 so far because of irresponsible government policies. But the talks have been dominated solely by the question of how Europe can best advance its own economic and power interests in the escalating conflict between the United States and China and Russia.

The “traffic light” coalition—Greens, SPD and Liberal Democrats (FDP)—regards a strong European Union as a prerequisite for an aggressive, militaristic German foreign policy. This requires close cooperation with France, the EU's sole nuclear power and the second-strongest economic power, following Britain's exit. The coalition agreement commits itself to a “more capable and strategically sovereign European Union.” This is to be achieved by means of “foreign, security, development and trade policy.”

Baerbock brought this message with her on her trip. She expressed delight to have come to Brussels via Paris on the very first day “to send a clear signal that a strong German foreign policy needs a strong Europe,” she said upon her arrival in the Belgian capital.

After his meeting with President Emmanuel Macron, Scholz also said, “It's about how we can make Europe strong, European sovereignty in all the dimensions that go with it. That's about economic issues, security issues and foreign

policy issues.”

This is also how the French government sees it. Macron had already promoted the idea of “European sovereignty” in a keynote speech at the Sorbonne University in 2017. In the field of defense, the “goal must be for Europe to be capable of acting independently, complementary to NATO,” he demanded at the time.

In Berlin, this had been initially met with reluctance, fearing becoming too dependent on France in foreign policy and military terms. However, under pressure from the conflict with US President Donald Trump, President Macron and Chancellor Angela Merkel eventually worked closely together.

The change of government in Berlin is now seen in Paris as an opportunity to achieve Europe's “strategic sovereignty” more quickly. “Relations between Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel got off to a bad start and never really got going,” the financial newspaper *Les Echos* comments. “With Olaf Scholz taking office and his three-party coalition yearning for renewal, this could now change.”

Macron himself presented his program for the French EU presidency—a rotating position that begins on January 1, 2022—at a press conference a day before the meeting with Scholz. The goal of the presidency, he said, is “that we must move from a Europe of cooperation within our borders to a powerful Europe in the world, fully sovereign, free in its decisions and master of its destiny.”

Macron plans new military interventions, trade war measures and the targeting of certain industries to strengthen Europe against its international rivals. He advocated a “renewed commitment” by the EU in the Balkans, a deepening of relations with Africa, and increased sealing off of European borders against immigrants by sending security forces from other member states.

Macron wants to relax the Stability Pact in order to finance large future investment needs in defense and climate policy. In certain areas—hydrogen, batteries, space, semiconductors, cloud computing, culture and health—he wants to create “European champions” through state funding. Europe should set the standards of tomorrow and catch up with the global leaders,

especially in the digital sector, he said.

“The French president criticized the heavy dependence on countries like China and thus expressed the aspiration for ‘European sovereignty’ not only in foreign and security policy, but also in economic policy,” writes the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

The traffic light coalition is pursuing similar goals. It counts energy supply, health, raw material imports and digital technology among “important strategic areas.”

Strengthening the defense industry plays a central role. France is the world’s third-largest arms exporter after the USA and Russia, while Germany is the fourth largest. The Merkel government had already agreed gigantic joint arms programs with France. The Future Combat Air System (FCAS) alone costs between 100 and 500 billion euros.

However, the mutual commitment to friendship and cooperation does not mean that conflicts between Germany and France will disappear. Rather, the struggle for political and economic world power is intensifying the rivalries between the former archenemies.

This is particularly evident in the issue of the Stability Pact, which sets tight limits on the national debt of EU members. Macron declares it “obsolete,” while the traffic light coalition agreement explicitly acknowledges it. Above all, the FDP, whose leader Christian Lindner is Germany’s new finance minister, is insisting on its observance. But Chancellor Scholz, the previous finance minister, is also considered a hawk in this regard.

The issue is explosive because government debt in the euro zone is at an all-time high. While the Stability Pact allows for a total debt of no more than 60 percent of GDP, Germany’s debt is more than 70 percent and France’s is nearly 120 percent. New debt in 2021 is also far above the permitted 3 percent, at 5 percent in Germany and 8 percent in France.

With rapidly rising military spending and huge injections of money into the economy, these debts can only be reduced by massive cuts in social spending, which, along with growing opposition to profit-before-life policies in the pandemic, will trigger explosive class conflict.

Macron wants to bring EU interests to bear much more strongly than before on China and Russia, without being subordinate to the United States. Baerbock also advocates an aggressive course against Russia and China. She threatened Russia that it “would pay a high political and, above all, economic price for a renewed violation of Ukrainian statehood,” and announced a “combination of dialogue and toughness” toward China.

Chancellor Scholz, who has the final say on German foreign policy, has so far kept a low profile. There is a strong wing in the SPD that believes the confrontational course with Russia is wrong for economic reasons.

There are also open or subterranean conflicts between Berlin and Paris on many other issues. On climate policy, for example,

France backs a massive expansion of nuclear power and is demanding the EU classify it as “green energy.” In Germany, which has decided to completely phase out nuclear power, this would lead to domestic political conflicts.

The Polish government gave Baerbock a cool reception. Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau acknowledged that she had immediately come to Poland for her inaugural visit, but then reproached her in numerous ways and demanded reparations for the damage of World War II.

Poland would never agree to a world divided into spheres of influence by great powers, Rau said, alluding to Franco-German dominance in the EU. The leader of the nationalist ruling PiS party, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, is even said to have accused Berlin of trying to turn Europe into a German-dominated “Fourth Reich.”

Baerbock, who had railed fiercely against the Polish government’s violation of the rule of law during the election campaign, was diplomatic. There were major “discrepancies” here that should be resolved in talks, she said. The EU is currently pursuing a rule of law case against Poland over the systematic subordination of the judiciary to the executive.

Warsaw and Berlin are working closely together despite the public conflicts. For Germany, the largest Eastern European country with 38 million inhabitants plays an important role in expanding its influence throughout that region, the traditional expansion area of German imperialism. Poland serves as a low-wage country for German and European corporations, where they can exploit well qualified workers at a fraction of Western European wages. For example, the cost of labour per hour worked in Poland in 2019 was 10.40 euros, compared with 35.90 euros in Germany.

For the Polish government, EU subsidies and remittances from workers employed in Germany and other Western European countries are an important source of income. That is why, for all its rhetoric against Brussels and Berlin, the PiS has never seriously questioned EU membership; stoking nationalism serves it primarily to mobilize right-wing forces at home.

On foreign policy issues, Baerbock stands close to the PiS. She shares its attacks on Russia and, like the PiS, wants to prevent the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from becoming operational.



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