

French President Macron's China trip exacerbates conflicts between imperialist powers

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The sharp tensions over French President Emmanuel Macron's recent trip to China shed light on the real goals of the US and its allies' offensive against China and Russia. Driven by economic crises, tumultuous financial markets and the growth of the class struggle, the imperialist powers are struggling to forcibly re-divide the world, risking a nuclear third world war that would call into question the survival of mankind.

Their immediate objectives are the subjugation of Russia and the plundering of its vast natural resources, as well as the containment of China, whose economic rise is to be stopped. But the intensification of the confrontation is inevitably leading to fierce clashes between the imperialist powers themselves—especially between the US and Europe, but also between rival European powers.

The US has been launching new provocations against China on almost a daily basis over recent months. The one-China policy, which governed relations with China for 50 years, has now been abandoned. The US military conducts one aggressive military exercise after another off the Chinese coast. Last week, the biggest joint maneuver with the Philippines in history began.

In this tense situation, Macron traveled to China accompanied by a large economic delegation, had President Xi Jinping roll out the red carpet, agreed on a number of lucrative economic deals and praised Chinese President Xi's peace initiative for Ukraine.

On the return flight, the French President then openly expressed what many other European politicians think, but for political reasons do not want to state openly. In an interview with journalists from *Les Échos* and *Politico*, he distanced himself sharply from the US's China policy.

"Europe is in the process of creating elements of genuine strategic autonomy and should not fall into a kind of panic reflex and follow American policy," he said. It should not enter into a block logic and allow itself to be drawn into crises "that are not ours." If it is only a "follower" on the subject of Taiwan and "adapts to the American pace and a Chinese overreaction," Europe will become a "vassal," although it could be a "third pole."

The "battles" that need to be fought are the "acceleration of our strategic autonomy" and the "securing of the financing of our economies," Macron stressed. The key to reducing dependence on the Americans is to expand the European defence industry. What is needed is a "European war economy."

In a clause that was likely noted with particular care in Washington, Macron also explicitly spoke out against the role of the US dollar as the leading global currency. "I would like to take this opportunity to emphasize one point: we must not be dependent on the extra-territoriality of the dollar," he said.

Representatives of French Imperialism

Macron spoke as a representative of French imperialism and not as a peace advocate. For a long time, he was one of the hardliners on Chinese policy. Considering France an Indo-Pacific power, due to its overseas territories with 1.6 million inhabitants, he sought an anti-Chinese alliance with Japan, India and other countries.

But the United States sidelined him. When the US signed the AUKUS tripartite alliance with Britain and Australia in September 2021 and Australia cancelled the purchase of \$56 billion worth of French submarines, the conflict escalated. Macron recalled the French ambassadors from Washington and Canberra in protest and stepped up his campaign for "European sovereignty," or "strategic autonomy," which he had already promoted in a 2017 programmatic speech at Sorbonne University in Paris.

This push for "strategic autonomy" in the economic, political and military fields is accompanied by a massive military build-up. The latest French military budget envisages an increase in defense spending of €3–4 billion per year. By 2030, the military budget will rise to €69 billion—from €32 billion in 2017. More than half of the funds are earmarked for the modernization of France's nuclear arsenal: the renewal of warheads and missiles, as well as of Rafale jets and submarines that can fire them.

This is to be financed, among other things, by reducing pensions, against which millions have been taking to the streets for weeks. Macron meets them with dictatorial measures—with brutal police operations, defying the will of the population and without a vote in parliament.

Macron's remarks on America's China policy were met with angry protests in the US and among its closest allies, as expected. The *New York Times* accused the French president of undermining US efforts to contain China. A *Wall Street Journal* editorial threatened to leave Europe to its own devices in the war against Russia, which the US is significantly pushing and funding:

Macron wants the US to rush to Europe's aid against Russian aggression, but apparently takes a vow of neutrality against Chinese aggression in the Pacific. Thank you, my friend.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said the alliance with the United States was "an absolute basis" for European security. Without mentioning Macron's name, he accused him of dreaming of "working with everyone, with Russia and with powers in the Far East."

Criticism from Germany

There was also strong protest from the European Union and Germany. The European Commission said that Macron had done the opposite of what he had agreed with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who travelled with him to Beijing and sharply criticised China's Taiwan policy.

The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* carried the headline: "Is Macron now completely out of his mind?" The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* accused the French president of "driving a wedge in Europe's relationship with the US and at the same time opening a trench across Europe." The Christian Democratic Union politician Johann Wadepuhl criticized: "Macron's appeal for more European sovereignty is just as true: We are not pursuing this goal against the USA, but with them."

The German Foreign Ministry said that while it was opposed to fierce competition with China, the belief that Europe could stand aside in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan was absurd. In addition, the close connection to the US was not seen as a threat, but as a prerequisite for European security, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock traveled to China on Thursday to restore the impression of European and transatlantic unity damaged by Macron, according to official accounts. At a meeting with her Chinese counterpart Qin Gang, she stressed that a forcible reunification of China with Taiwan was unacceptable for Europe. At the same time, she downplayed Macron's remarks, claiming that French China policy "reflects" European China policy exactly.

The fact is that Berlin, too, has long pursued a policy of "strategic autonomy," even if it uses other terms for it. Leading politicians and media outlets assume that NATO is a temporary alliance, that the global economic interests of the US and Europe are not compatible in the long run and that Germany must pursue its imperialist interests on the basis of its own military strength.

In a commentary on Macron's remarks, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (F.A.Z.) explained that Europeans have known since Donald Trump's presidency that "Washington can no longer be trusted in every situation of life." A similar constellation could exist again in 2024, it continued. Macron's analysis that Europe must strive for something like strategic autonomy is therefore not wrong from the outset.

Already in 2003, the Iraq war led to sharp conflicts between the governments in Germany under Gerhard Schröder and in the US under George W. Bush. Since 2014 at the latest, Germany has been officially pursuing the goal of once again playing a major role as a global military power. And in 2017, after a confrontation with US President Donald Trump, German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that the times in which Germany could completely rely on others were over. "We Europeans really have to take our destiny into our own hands," she said.

The rivalry between Germany and France

But the pursuit of a European great power policy inevitably brings back the old rivalries between Germany and France, which fought fiercely between 1871 and 1945 in three major wars. The much-vaunted Franco-German partnership and post-war European unity flourished under US sponsorship, which for geopolitical and economic reasons had an interest in pacifying Western Europe.

Even if Paris and Berlin could agree on the goal of developing Europe into an independent world power—a "third pole" as Macron put it—the question of who is in charge and who dominates Europe would lead to

irreconcilable conflicts. Especially since the beginning of the Ukrainian war, German and French interests have clearly diverged.

Germany, which was initially reluctant to cut off its economic relations with its main energy supplier, Russia, joined the US at the start of the Ukrainian war and is now using the war for the most comprehensive rearmament programme since Hitler.

Its stated goal is to become Europe's "military leader." "Germany's size, its geographical location, its economic strength, in short, its weight make us a leading power, whether we like it or not. Also militarily," said former Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht six months ago.

Germany has tripled its arms budget and has become the main warmonger after the US. According to calculations by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, the US spent €71.3 billion in the first year of the war, while Germany spent €7.4 billion and France only €1.8 billion.

According to a commentary by the F.A.Z., Macron's interview was therefore aimed not least at "the Federal Government, which has demonstrated its proximity to the United States since February 2022 and shows little commitment to a Franco-German axis."

With the Ukraine war, Germany pursues its own geostrategic interests, which exclude French interests. In addition to the subjugation of Russia, German imperialism is concerned with the domination of Eastern Europe—or "Central Europe," as it was formerly called—which was already one of its most important war aims during the First and Second World Wars. After the defeat in the Second World War, it had to give up large, formerly German territories in the region.

Today, Poland, the Baltic States and other Eastern European countries form an important reservoir of cheap labour for the German economy. Whenever there was a conflict with the US, these countries oriented themselves towards Washington.

In order not to jeopardize the alliance with the US in the Ukrainian war, the German government is moving further away from China, with which it has had the closest relations of all European states so far. Economically, China is still Germany's most important trading partner. In 2022, German companies invested €11.5 billion, more than ever before, in China.

The German government is now pushing further afield and is seeking new alliances with Japan, India, Brazil and other countries. While in Beijing, Baerbock described China as a "partner, competitor and systemic rival" and objected to "unhealthy dependencies," but also stressed that this means "not decoupling."

The steady escalation of the war in Ukraine by NATO, the systematic US war preparations against China, and the rival great power aspirations of Germany and France show that there is no way out of the danger of war on a capitalist basis. What is driving the imperialist great powers into the madness of a nuclear Third World War is—as in 1914 and 1939—the irresolvable crisis of the capitalist system, which can only bring about social inequality, societal decline and environmental destruction.

What is needed is the construction of an international anti-war movement based on the mobilization of the international working class, combining the struggle against militarism and war with the struggle against its cause, capitalism. This question will be at the center of the worldwide online rally to celebrate May Day organised by the International Committee of the Fourth International on April 30.



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