

Starmer-Trump meeting resolves nothing for British imperialism

Chris Marsden, Thomas Scripps
28 February 2025

Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has announced Britain will host a summit on Sunday, reportedly involving over a dozen European leaders including France, Germany and Italy, to report back on his Thursday White House meeting with United States President Donald Trump.

The only message he can deliver is one Europe's leaders are already all-too familiar with: Maintaining even a semblance of relations with the US, at this point at least, means doing what Trump demands.

Amid the self-congratulatory commentary in the British media on Starmer's successes in schmoozing Trump, there are guarded acknowledgements that not very much was, in fact, achieved.

Starmer prepared his visit with an emergency Parliamentary announcement of an incremental rise in military spending from 2.3 percent GDP to 2.5 percent by 2027, paid for by slashing Britain's aid budget. This was the move most welcomed by Trump and afforded Starmer a relatively smooth audience.

Everyone in the room was aware, however, that this is only a down payment. Both Trump and the British and European bourgeoisie, for conflicting reasons, want military spending by the NATO powers across the European Union (EU) to rise to at least 3 percent, and in short order.

The hundreds of billions in funding required demands the elimination of vast tracts of essential social spending on welfare, health and education. And this agenda has not been changed one iota by Starmer's diplomatic overtures.

Secondly, Starmer went to the White House promising to deliver the message that a peace agreement struck with Russia in Ukraine would only be policed by the European powers with the guarantee of an American military "backstop"—especially air cover.

Trump contemptuously rejected this demand, declaring instead that Ukrainian President Zelensky would on Friday sign an agreement with the US over US access to rare earths, unilaterally and over the heads of the Europeans. As for a backstop, "you can have European countries because they're right there. We're very far away. We have an ocean

between us."

America would provide a guarantee only in the sense that "we'll be over there, we'll be working in the country," said Trump, adding on a separate occasion, "I don't think anybody's going to play around if we're there with a lot of workers and having to do with rare earths and other things."

In short Trump reiterated that Europe's imperialists would have to stump up all the cash and military resources so that the US can exclusively reap the spoils of war.

Also intensely problematic for Starmer's ongoing attempt to re-engage with Europe were Trump's efforts to encourage Britain to identify its national interests with the US and in overt opposition to the EU. This was made most obvious regarding Trump's announcement of 25 percent tariffs on the EU, which he indicated Britain might avoid, saying it was "a very different place [to Europe]... I have investments there."

He added, "I think we could very well end up with a real trade deal where the tariffs wouldn't be necessary. We'll see."

In a backhanded attack on the EU, which Trump has said was created to "screw" the US, Starmer emphasised that US-UK trade was "fair, balanced and reciprocal."

The UK prime minister's pitch to Trump was framed around the "special relationship" forged in the aftermath of the Second World War between US and British imperialism. He delivered a personal invitation on behalf of King Charles inviting Trump to Dumfries House or Balmoral, in anticipation of an "historic" second state visit for a US president.

None of this prevented Trump from returning to lording it over Starmer on the issue of defence. When Starmer tried to claim, "Whenever necessary, we've absolutely backed each other up," Trump put him in his place by interrupting, "Could you take on Russia by yourselves?" and laughing with the press at Starmer's fumbled response of, "Well..."

British imperialism faces an historic dilemma similar but not identical to that facing the other European powers.

The "special relationship" was based on Britain's eclipse

by the US as a premier world power. Particularly in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis in 1956, British governments of whatever formal colouration have placed the maintenance of economic, diplomatic and military relationships with the US at the centre of their foreign policy.

Inside or outside of the EU, they have offered themselves as America's voice on the continent, a counterweight to Germany and France. Trump confirmed that the only way of preserving even much-reduced British-American ties is for London to continue pitching itself against Berlin and Paris.

Starmer continues to speak of acting as a bridge over the Atlantic, but there is now no basis for such a strategy. However reluctantly, British imperialism must choose a side.

More fundamental still, any attempt to respond to Trump's challenge to the existing order will pit the Labour government, and governments throughout Europe, into head-on confrontations with the working class, as the "peace dividend" comes to an end and remilitarisation becomes the order of the day.

These dilemmas were addressed in the *Financial Times*. Under the headline "Can Starmer rise to meet his Bismarck moment?", the FT chief political commentator and executive editor Robert Shrimsley states that Germany's Iron Chancellor "likened statesmanship to waiting to hear the footsteps of God sounding through events and catching hold of his coattails as he passes. Keir Starmer has heard those steps. The Trump presidency has created, he declares, a 'generational moment' for Britain and Europe."

Starmer had made a good start by raising military spending, but this, said Shrimsley, was "desperately incremental for a generational moment. Starmer has talked of hitting 3 percent of GDP in the next parliament but even this may not be enough."

Massively hiking military spending meant raising taxes and launching an assault on public services: "Labour will use the crisis to defy its own members about the new political priorities for a rearming economy. From soft to hard power; soft to hard choices," including "a significant culling of health officials" and "welfare reform" centred initially on "reducing the perverse financial incentives which have added to the huge rise in those claiming sickness benefits."

The FT then urges Starmer "to use British distaste for Trump to power a step change in re-engagement with the EU. This will, at first, be about defence and security rather than revisiting Brexit. But a bold leader might use this moment to remake the argument for where the UK's destiny (and geography) lies. From crisis he can fashion a glide path for a return to the European economic orbit too."

There are good reasons for scepticism, it concludes, before hoping that "Events may ultimately force bolder policy shifts."

Guardian, the virulent anti-communist George Monbiot gave full vent to the rising hostilities between the US and the European powers, to which he is oriented: "All the talk now is of how we might defend ourselves without the US. But almost everyone with a voice in public life appears to be avoiding a much bigger and more troubling question: how we might defend ourselves against the US."

Monbiot writes of Trump as the representative of an enemy power, who believes that "Russia is no threat to US dominance, but Europe, with a combined economy similar to that of the US, and a powerful diplomatic and global political presence, could be." Trump was using "Putin as his proxy, to attack a rival centre of power."

He warns that "So much of our intelligence and military systems are shared or reliant on the US—if it becomes the enemy, it is already inside the gates," before noting that the US has 11-13 military bases and listening stations in the UK and that he is not sure whether the UK's weapon systems "nuclear or conventional, are operationally independent of the US." Urging rearmament, Monbiot concludes with an appeal to his readers: "I hope you can now see what a terrible mistake the UK has made, and how we should have followed France in creating more independent military and security systems."

Whatever path is taken by British imperialism, either clinging on to Washington or fully committing to a new and independent European military security system, is a road to hell. It portends only escalating international conflict, repression and social devastation for the working class.

The response of workers and young people must be to reject all attempts to line them up behind one or another imperialist bloc, to oppose all national divisions with their brothers and sisters internationally and to defy all attempts to impose the costs of militarism and war on their backs. A new, mass, socialist anti-war movement must be built in implacable opposition to Starmer, Trump and their fellow warmongers in Europe.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact