

Europe rearms amid crisis in NATO alliance

Peter Schwarz
27 February 2025

Since Donald Trump's return to the White House, the conflict between the US and Europe—and Germany in particular—has intensified day by day. Even the end of NATO, the world's most powerful imperialist military alliance, which has dominated transatlantic relations since the Second World War, can no longer be ruled out. The European powers are reacting to this with frenetic rearmament.

There were already sharp political and economic conflicts during Trump's first term in office. In 2017, following a tense G7 summit with Trump, then German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the times were over “when we could completely rely on others.” The Europeans would have to take their fate into their own hands, she continued. However, there was no complete break at the time.

Under President Joe Biden, the US and Europe worked closely together again to escalate the war against Russia in Ukraine. Germany, which had initially been reluctant to end its gas supplies from Russia, became Ukraine's most important donor after the US. Both pursued the goal of defeating Russia militarily.

However, after Trump took office it quickly became clear that his “Make America Great Again” policy was not only directed against China and other rivals, but also against his erstwhile European allies. He has announced punitive tariffs of 25 percent against imports from Europe and declared war on the European Union (EU). At a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, he complained, “The European Union was formed in order to screw the United States. That's the purpose of it, and they've done a good job of it.”

At the Munich Security Conference, Vice President JD Vance backed far-right parties that reject the EU in a provocative, incendiary speech. Trump confidant and multi-billionaire Elon Musk openly supported the fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) during the German election campaign.

When Trump then contacted Russian President Vladimir Putin over the heads of the European and Ukrainian governments and agreed negotiations to settle the Ukraine conflict, panic spread in European capitals that Trump and Putin would come to an agreement at the expense of Europe. There was talk of a new Yalta, where Stalin and President Roosevelt divided Europe up into zones of influence in February 1945.

The probable next German Chancellor Friedrich Merz

(Christian Democratic Union, CDU) warned in the “Morgenmagazin” programme on German public television: “We must prepare ourselves for the fact that Donald Trump will no longer accept NATO's collective defence obligations without restrictions.” He demanded that Europe must now “pull out all the stops to at least be able to defend the European continent on its own.” Among other things, he proposed a joint nuclear defence shield with France and the UK: “We need to talk about what this could look like.”

Merz already declared on election night that his absolute priority was to strengthen Europe “so that we can achieve independence from the United States step by step.” He added, “I would never have believed that I would have to say something like that in a television programme.”

Merz's CDU has been the most pro-American of the German parties since the time of Konrad Adenauer, the first post-war German chancellor. Merz himself was chairman of the Atlantik-Brücke think tank and German head of the US investment fund BlackRock. The fact that he is now so clearly opposed to Washington shows how deep the conflict runs.

French President Emmanuel Macron responded to Trump's unilateral action by inviting government heads to two European crisis summits in Paris and then flying to Washington himself to try to change Trump's mind. But he returned empty-handed.

Trump and Macron publicly celebrated their man-to-man friendship and showered each other with compliments. But Trump did not give ground on anything of substance. He was not prepared to provide American security guarantees for Ukraine and insisted that this was the task of the Europeans. He also only agreed to European and Ukrainian participation in the negotiations in the most general terms.

Trump will receive Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, whom he previously insulted, in Washington Friday, but only to sign a treaty that will make the country economically dependent on the US for decades. Kiev will undertake to pay 50 percent of all future revenues from raw materials and associated logistics into a fund that will be co-administered by the US.

The agreement is very general; the details will be worked out later. Zelensky rejected an original agreement under which Ukraine was to transfer \$500 billion in raw material revenues to the US.

The Europeans are extremely angry about this deal because

they feel they have been cheated out of their share of the spoils. Berlin has long been organising conferences on the “reconstruction” of Ukraine, from which German companies expect to make huge profits. And France has been negotiating with Ukraine since October 2024 about the use of valuable raw materials for the French defence industry, according to Defence Minister Sébastien Lecornu.

While Trump met with Macron, the US voted in the UN General Assembly together with Russia, Belarus and North Korea against a resolution tabled by Ukraine, which describes Russia as the aggressor in the Ukraine war and calls for the restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. In the Security Council, the five European members abstained from voting on a resolution on Ukraine, which was supported by the US, Russia and China. It advocated peace in Ukraine without condemning Russia and demanding the restoration of the old borders.

Although such resolutions have no practical significance, their symbolic value is all the greater. Never before has the US joined forces with Russia, China and North Korea against Europe on such important geostrategic issues.

The European powers are reacting to the division in NATO by rearming as never before since the end of the Second World War and endeavouring to continue the war in Ukraine under their own steam. Having already significantly increased military spending in recent years, they are now set to increase it by hundreds of billions of euros in a very short space of time, convert industry to arms production, reintroduce compulsory military service and militarise society as a whole.

This requires massive cuts in spending on social welfare, education and health, and a fierce attack on the working class, which will have to bear the consequences of rearmament and serve as cannon fodder for future wars.

The transformation of Germany into a major military power will be the central axis of the next German government, a coalition of the CDU/Christian Social Union (CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD), which, if all goes according to plan, will be sworn in by mid-April. There are increasing calls in the media and politics to dispense with lengthy coalition negotiations and a detailed coalition agreement in order to avoid wasting time.

CDU foreign policy expert Norbert Röttgen described the seriousness of the situation as “historic” on Deutschlandfunk radio. According to Röttgen, this shocking reality must be recognised. Only if Germany was able to act quickly would Europe also be able to act. It is now a matter of fate, he continued, stating that if Ukraine disintegrated, the EU and NATO would no longer exist in their current form.

Acting Defence Minister Boris Pistorius (SPD), who is also expected to be a member of the next government, told the *Bild* newspaper that the military budget would have to be at least doubled to over €100 billion in the coming years: “We are talking about more than three percent of gross domestic product.”

Green Party European affairs politician Anton Hofreiter called for “a major investment offensive to provide Ukraine with even more support and to improve the EU’s defence capabilities quickly and efficiently.” This would require “a 500 billion defence fund to support Ukraine and for joint arms procurement in the EU.”

In mid-February, the CSU, the Bavarian sister party of the CDU, presented a “master plan to strengthen the Bundeswehr [Armed Forces] and Germany’s defence,” which calls for the Bundeswehr to be increased from its current 182,000 uniformed personnel to “500,000 combat-ready soldiers and reservists” as well as the reintroduction of compulsory military service.

In addition, it called for the procurement of 1,000 new Taurus cruise missiles and the development of new cruise missiles with a range of 2,500 kilometres. An “Iron Dome” is to be erected as a protective shield against missile and air attacks. To finance the entire plan, military spending should rise to 3 percent of GDP.

In the meantime, Merz is trying to create a *fait accompli* with the old parliamentary majority before the newly elected Bundestag is constituted, which must take place March 25 at the latest, by making hundreds of billions available for armaments. A further special fund totalling €200 billion is being discussed, for which a two-thirds majority in parliament is required. In the new Bundestag, the CDU/CSU, SPD and Greens together do not have enough votes and would have to rely on support from the Left Party or the far-right AfD.

Merz also flew to Paris on Wednesday for a three-hour confidential meeting with President Macron, although he has not yet been elected chancellor and cannot expect to be until April at the earliest. Afterwards, he thanked Macron on X for his “trust in Franco-German relations” and wrote, “Together, our countries can achieve great things for Europe.” Macron has long pursued the goal of strengthening Europe against the US and building a European army.

However, the conflict with the US will also exacerbate the differences within Europe. Many EU members are not prepared to subordinate themselves to German and French supremacy.

The rearmament of Europe is not for “defence” and “peace,” but is ushering in a new phase of fierce conflicts between imperialist predators, such as those that characterised the first half of the 20th century with its two world wars. Only a powerful anti-war movement that mobilises the international working class and fights for the overthrow of capitalism can prevent another catastrophe.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact