EU summit accelerates war course: Arms build-up, trade war, social cuts and anti-refugee measures

Johannes Stern
19 June 2026

The EU summit held in Brussels on Thursday and Friday was in every respect a war summit. Behind the official formulations about “security,” “competitiveness,” “resilience” and “migration” lies a comprehensive program of rearmament, war escalation, social cuts and attacks on democratic rights.

The heads of state and government of the European Union decided to massively expand military support for Ukraine, ramp up arms production across the continent and make the EU war-ready by 2030. At the same time, they discussed a larger military role for Europe in the Middle East, a tougher trade war policy against China, a new EU budget increasingly subordinated to the needs of rearmament and a further tightening of refugee policy.

The summit followed directly from the reactionary line laid down by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz in his government statement to the Bundestag a week earlier. Merz declared rearmament, the strengthening of European “competitiveness” and the repulsion of refugees to be the central tasks of the EU. At the same time, he made clear who is to bear the costs: the working class. The population must “accept restrictions in other areas as well” in order to finance military rearmament.

The program now adopted in Brussels is the European implementation of this war agenda.

At the center stood the further escalation of NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky personally attended the summit and demanded still more weapons, ammunition, air defence systems and accelerated EU membership. The EU leaders reaffirmed their “unwavering” support for Ukraine and promised to continue their political, financial, economic and military aid.

In reality, this has long ceased to be “support” and has become direct participation in the war. The European powers are financing the Ukrainian state budget, supplying ever longer-range weapons systems, training Ukrainian soldiers, providing intelligence data and integrating Ukrainian warfare ever more closely into their own military planning. The summit reaffirmed that the first disbursement from a €90 billion loan for 2026 and 2027 is to take place before the end of June. At the same time, the member states were called upon to continue their bilateral military aid.

The decisions on arms cooperation are particularly dangerous. The EU demands that the production and delivery of air defence systems, ammunition, drones and missiles be “urgently” accelerated. Cooperation between the European and Ukrainian arms industries is to be further deepened. This integrates Ukraine even more directly into the European war economy.

Germany plays the leading role in this. Only a few weeks ago, the federal government agreed with Kiev to jointly develop and produce long-range drones and other weapons systems capable of attacking targets deep inside Russia. Pistorius, Merz and Zelensky made openly clear at the time that this is no longer merely about defending Ukrainian territory but about attacks on Russian cities, refineries, energy facilities, military bases and industrial centers.

The consequences are incalculable. The Ukrainian army is already regularly carrying out drone attacks deep inside Russia. The Kremlin has repeatedly declared that Western states enabling such attacks will be regarded as parties to the war. At the same time, the European powers are pressing ever more openly to assume a key role themselves in future “security guarantees” for Ukraine and even to deploy their own EU troops to Ukraine.

The official conclusions of the summit state: “The path to peace in Ukraine cannot be decided without Ukraine.” Immediately thereafter comes the decisive sentence: “The European Union will decide on matters of its competence or affecting its security.” The following point continues: “Europe has a key role to play in any future settlement and stands ready to defend its interests.”

The passage on future “security guarantees” is also particularly far-reaching. The European Council declares that the EU and its member states are “ready to contribute to robust and credible security guarantees for Ukraine, notably through the Coalition of the Willing and in cooperation with the United States.” This includes supporting Ukraine’s ability “to deter aggression and defend itself effectively, also in the long term,” including through the EU Military Assistance Mission, EUMAM Ukraine, the EU Advisory Mission, EUAM Ukraine and ceasefire monitoring by the EU Satellite Centre.

In other words, the EU is explicitly asserting its claim, in any future military-diplomatic settlement, to sit at the table not merely as a supporter of Kiev but as an independent imperialist power and to enforce its own geostrategic interests. The European powers want to prevent Washington and Moscow from reaching an agreement over their heads. The relative withdrawal of the US from direct leadership of the Ukraine war, accelerated by the Iran war and the crisis of American imperialism, is being used by Berlin, Paris, London and Brussels to act more aggressively themselves.

The danger of a direct war between the NATO powers and Russia grows by the day. This was shown particularly clearly this week by the confrontation between Britain and Russia in the English Channel. A Russian warship fired warning shots near a British yacht. The exact circumstances are disputed, but the incident makes clear how quickly a military provocation or clash between NATO states and Russia could lead to an uncontrollable escalation.

The WSWS warned in its perspective, “Shots fired in the English Channel—Britain, Russia and the danger of World War III,” that the incident must be understood by the European working class as a warning: Governments are dragging it ever more directly into a war with Russia.

© World Socialist Web Site

This warning is confirmed precisely by the EU summit. The European powers are responding to the growing danger of war not with restraint but with still more rearmament and escalation.

The summit once again declared Russia an “existential challenge” for the European Union and called for Europe’s “defence readiness” to be decisively increased by 2030. In the official conclusions, drone and counter-drone systems, early warning systems, air defence, space capabilities and “deep precision strike capabilities” are named as central priorities. Behind this technical term lies nothing other than the ability to destroy distant targets with precision weapons—that is, the development of offensive strike power against Russia.

At the same time, “military mobility” is to be accelerated. The corresponding legislative proposals are to be adopted by the end of the year. This is intended to align roads, railways, bridges, ports, airports and border crossings throughout Europe with the rapid movement of troops and heavy equipment. This corresponds exactly to Germany’s “Operation Plan Germany,” which prepares the whole of society, the economy and infrastructure for a major war on the eastern flank.

The official phrases about “defence” are sheer mockery. The European powers are preparing an imperialist war against nuclear power Russia. The German ruling class is thereby taking up its criminal history. Eighty-five years after the beginning of the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, a German combat brigade is once again deploying in Lithuania; German arms companies are producing weapons for the war against Russia; and Berlin is claiming leadership in Europe.

The second major foreign policy focus of the summit—the Middle East—is also marked by the militarist offensive. The European powers regard the US-Iranian agreement negotiated by Washington not as a step toward de-escalation, but as an opportunity to strengthen their own role in the region. Already at the G7 summit, Merz, Macron, Starmer and Meloni had signaled that they were preparing a European naval presence in the Strait of Hormuz. Merz explicitly declared in the Bundestag that Germany was prepared to participate in securing the Strait of Hormuz as soon as the conditions were in place.

This threatens to escalate another imperialist theater of war. The Strait of Hormuz is one of the most important energy and trade routes in the world. Whoever stations warships there is not pursuing the goal of “protecting” merchant shipping but preparing military interventions to secure control over energy, trade routes and geostrategic influence in the Middle East. The European powers are responding to the crisis of American predominance by attempting to appear in the region as imperialist powers of order themselves.

The same applies to policy toward China. Under the buzzwords “competitiveness,” “economic security,” “reducing strategic dependencies” and “global macroeconomic imbalances,” the summit discussed a tightening of Europe’s trade war policy. China is being treated ever more openly as a systemic rival whose industrial strength is to be combated through tariffs, export controls, subsidies for European corporations and the building of Europe’s own supply chains.

Trade war policy is inseparably bound up with war policy. The EU wants to restructure its industry, energy policy, raw material supply, research and infrastructure in line with the requirements of global imperialist competition. In this context, “competitiveness” means wage cuts, social cuts, deregulation and massive state subsidies for banks, corporations and arms companies.

This is particularly clear in the debate over the new multi-annual EU financial framework for 2028 to 2034. The Commission had proposed a budget of around €2 trillion. Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and other net contributors are demanding even deeper cuts. Merz declared that the figures must “come down.” At the same time, the aim is not to limit rearmament. On the contrary, traditional spending on agriculture, cohesion and civilian programs is to be cut or redirected, while defence, the arms industry, border protection, industrial policy and “strategic” investments are strengthened.

This is the social logic of the war course. While billions are made available for weapons, ammunition, drones, missiles and warships, wages are to be pushed down, pensions cut, health and education spending slashed and public services destroyed. The ruling class knows that this policy is meeting with growing resistance. That is why rearmament abroad goes hand in hand with rearmament at home.

The tightening of migration policy was another central point of the summit. The EU leaders reaffirmed that work would continue “on all strands,” particularly on the “external dimension” of migration policy. What is meant are agreements with dictatorships and authoritarian regimes to intercept refugees before they reach Europe, establish camps in third countries and accelerate deportations.

Shortly before the summit, the European Parliament had cleared the way for a new return regulation that enables so-called “return hubs” outside the EU. Italy, Denmark, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and other governments are pushing for an even more brutal policy of sealing off Europe. Refugees fleeing wars that the imperialist powers themselves have fueled or waged are to be stripped of their rights, locked up and deported.

The agitation against refugees serves several purposes. It strengthens the extreme right, divides the working class and creates the repressive state apparatus that will also be used against strikes, protests and anti-war opposition. The same governments that spend billions on war declare that there is “no money” for hospitals, schools, housing and social support. Social anger over this is to be directed against refugees.

The EU summit shows that the entire European ruling class—conservatives, social democrats, liberals, Greens and the nominally left parties—stands behind this course. There is no peaceful or progressive faction within the EU. All defend European imperialism and capitalism. Their differences concern only the question of how quickly, by what means and under whose national leadership Europe is to be armed into a global military power.

Germany is driving this process forward particularly aggressively. The Merz-Klingbeil government is implementing the largest rearmament program since Hitler, transforming infrastructure into war logistics, preparing the reintroduction of conscription and demanding cuts in the EU budget wherever spending does not directly serve the strategic interests of German capital. At the same time, Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt is arming the police, intelligence agencies and civil defence and driving forward the construction of an authoritarian state apparatus.

The summit is a warning. The ruling class of Europe is responding to the crisis of world capitalism not with concessions but with war, social cuts and dictatorship. The escalation against Russia threatens to turn into a direct war between nuclear armed powers. The military offensive in the Middle East, the trade war against China and the attacks on refugees are parts of the same development.

Only the international working class can oppose this. The struggle against war requires a break with all parties of the capitalist order, with the European Union and with the NATO war alliance. What is necessary is the building of an international socialist anti-war movement that mobilizes the power of the working class, expropriates the arms industry, stops war credits and replaces capitalism—the cause of war, dictatorship and social impoverishment—with a socialist society.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site