

European imperialists seek access to markets, cheap labour and critical raw materials amid deepening great-power rivalries--Part 2

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The EU has also signed a series of strategic partnerships on raw materials and supply chains with African countries.

In 2022, Brussels signed a memorandum of understanding with Namibia covering rare earths, lithium, and renewable hydrogen. A more extensive memorandum with Zambia followed in 2023, including copper and cobalt extraction, and extensive investments in transport infrastructure. A strategic partnership with the Democratic Republic of Congo, by far the world's largest extractor of cobalt, a key component for digital equipment, was concluded the same year.

The EU wants to expand the Lobito Corridor, which will facilitate the transportation of raw materials from DRC and Zambia to the Atlantic coast through Angola for export to the world market. Financed by the European Investment Bank and private institutions, this infrastructure is aimed directly at weakening Chinese and US influence in the region.

In the Americas, the Mercosur trade agreement strengthens economic ties between the EU and two of its most important partners for accessing critical minerals: Argentina and Brazil. Chile, which together with Argentina is part of the so-called "lithium triangle," struck a separate free trade agreement with Brussels in 2024.

Further north, Canada is seen as a supplier of critical minerals and natural gas with considerable potential for expansion. Canada is interested in deepening ties with the European powers. Trump has declared his intention to annex the country as the 51st state and threatened to crash its economy, which is heavily dependent on the US market.

The presence of Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the recent EPC summit in Yerevan as the first non-European head of government to attend such a gathering indicated the advanced breakdown of traditional transatlantic relations and Canada's desire to strengthen economic ties with Europe as a counterweight to Washington's threats.

Raw materials and rearmament

The global quest by the European imperialists to secure raw materials and trade markets requires a combat-ready military force capable of imposing their interests against their rivals. The European

powers are pouring hundreds of billions into their military machines. Germany, an outlier, has amended its Basic Law to exempt military spending from constitutional debt limits, enabling it to take out €1 trillion in loans to fund the military and related infrastructure. The EU has made €800 billion available for military investments.

This money will count for little if the European imperialists fail to lay their hands on the materials needed to construct a modern war machine. According to one estimate, each US-built F-35 fighter jet requires 400 kilograms of rare earths to construct. Battle tanks, armoured vehicles, and radar systems all depend on key inputs of critical minerals that EU countries currently obtain from China, Russia, or other countries not directly under their control. A study by the International Institute for Strategic Studies describing the necessary inputs to construct a main battle tank, notes:

The capability of a modern main battle tank (MBT) is now judged by both the sophistication of its sensors and optronics as well as traditional metrics such as firepower, protection and mobility. In this regard, better sensors offer better battlefield awareness, which means the crew has the potential to extend target detection, recognition and identification ranges. Sensors are increasingly complex and rely on a series of critical materials. The basic glass and mirrors utilise silicon and ceramics, while infrared (IR) and night-vision (NV) sites—which are key enablers in low-visibility environments—can contain mercury, cadmium telluride, germanium, copper and tantalum. Laser rangefinders and muzzle reference sensors are common features of modern tanks, serving to accelerate the generation of firing solutions once a target is visually identified. These can utilise neodymium–yttrium–aluminium garnet and indium and erbium. Neodymium and yttrium are REEs, with yttrium 94% sourced from China, according to the US Geological Survey.

MBT communication systems, it notes, rely on "copper and other critical materials such as gallium arsenide, gallium nitride, beryllium, silicon, silver and indium." As for the tank's main gun and armour, they require "antimony, carbon, manganese alloys, chromium, nickel, molybdenum and vanadium," while ammunition and armour rely on tungsten and titanium due to their hardness.

The IISS study goes into similar detail for military equipment in the

naval and airborne spheres. As the introduction puts it, “Europe’s high dependence on external supplies, and particularly of critical raw materials that are highly concentrated, often in one location, represents a significant and growing risk for European defence manufacturing.”

From trade blocs to world war, and the working-class socialist response

The EU’s efforts to secure natural resources and cheap labour and expand markets take place amid a global capitalist crisis whose contradictions have already led to the early stages of a third world war, engaging the major powers in a new redivision of the world. The attempt by any one power to stabilise its supply chains generates new tensions with its rivals. The attempt by all powers simultaneously to do so must inevitably escalate into imperialist war. Within Europe, there is the added complication that the EU is not a single power, but an alliance of imperialist powers whose interests diverge, as shown by the repeated flare-up of tensions between France and Germany.

These conflicting agendas have already exploded in Ukraine, where the US and NATO systematically provoked a war with Russia in Ukraine. As part of Washington’s effort to reach an accommodation with Russia over the heads of the European powers, Trump concluded a bilateral agreement with Ukraine last year on the exploitation of the country’s critical minerals that would exclude the European imperialists.

Trump has deepened tensions with the European powers over the past year with repeated threats to annex Greenland, a Danish autonomous territory rich in raw materials and holding a key strategic position at the heart of Arctic sea lanes becoming accessible due to climate change. The *New York Times* reported in May that the US is seeking in talks with Denmark and Greenland to secure permanent bases for US soldiers and veto powers for Washington over any major investment decisions on the island.

The intensification of inter-imperialist antagonisms and open reemergence of conflicting blocs resembles the competing trade blocs of the 1930s that preceded and fuelled World War II. The International Committee of the Fourth International identified the origin of this process at a much earlier stage of its development during the early 1990s in the breakup of the post-war equilibrium based on the unchallenged hegemony of the United States. As the ICFI wrote in its May Day 1991 statement, issuing the call for an international congress against imperialist war and colonialism that was convened in Berlin later that year:

Not since the end of World War II has there been such uncertainty in international relations. The predictable channels through which international diplomacy flowed during the Cold War have been superseded by events. Old alliances are breaking down; and new ones are still in the process of formation. The struggle of the powerful transnational corporations for world domination imparts a terrific tension to international affairs... The alignment of “friends” and “enemies” may yet take a quite unexpected form. But imperialism being what it is, the clash of interests leads

inevitably toward war.

Thirty-five years on, world war is no longer a future prospect, but a terrifying process unfolding before the eyes of workers. The illegal US/Israeli war on Iran, which the European powers endorsed while complaining about not being consulted on its launch, was the culmination of an entire historical period stretching back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But American imperialism’s attempt through a series of uninterrupted wars to offset its economic decline through the deployment of military force has failed.

Iran and the broader Middle East is one front in a rapidly escalating third world war, which also encompasses the war on Russia and preparations for war with China in the Indo-Pacific. While the European powers are working to retain some level of transatlantic cooperation in the global scramble for markets, natural resources, and cheap labour—because they remain heavily dependent on the US for military supplies and intelligence—these erstwhile allies view each other as rivals on all the global war’s fronts.

Lenin described the historical stage opened by the First World War and the Russian Revolution as an epoch of wars and revolutions, since the contradictions of capitalism had matured to the point where they cannot be resolved except through imperialist world war or socialist revolution. It was with this understanding of the epoch that the ICFI’s May Day 1991 statement emphasised:

“[H]istorical experience testifies eloquently to the fact that it is the objective contradictions of imperialism, not the moral qualms or subjective fears of capitalist politicians, that decide the issue. The only force in the world that can prevent another world war is the revolutionary working class.”

The task of workers in Europe is to build an independent political movement that opposes war, rearmament budgets, assaults on social conditions, and the entire logic of capitalist competition—and to do so in conscious unity with workers in the United States, Russia, China, Ukraine, India, Africa and across the world. Workers in all countries must fight for the socialist transformation of society: the replacement of production for profit with production for human need, and the replacement of the nation-state system with a fraternal union of socialist republics.

This is the programme of the International Committee of the Fourth International. There is no other way to prevent the catastrophe toward which the entire logic of the present social order is driving humanity.

Concluded.



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