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The Trump presidency and the coming conflict between Europe and America

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Donald Trump's inauguration as president of the United States heralds an unprecedented deterioration in post-war relations between the US and Europe, above all between the US and Germany.

The January 20 ceremony was preceded by an interview with Trump in Britain's *Sunday Times* and Germany's *Bild* newspaper. His remarks were a broadside against the institutions that have constituted the basis of the post-World War II European order.

Trump praised Britain's exit from the European Union, describing the EU as a vehicle for German domination and predicting that "others will leave." He added, "Look, the EU was formed, partially, to beat the United States on trade, OK? So, I don't really care whether it's separate or together, to me it doesn't matter."

Trump threatened Germany's auto industry with sanctions and attacked Chancellor Angela Merkel, blaming her refugee policy for destabilising Europe. He also opposed sanctions against Russia, while declaring that he believed the NATO alliance was "obsolete."

Never before has a US president set as his explicit goal the breakup of the EU. Trump made clear in his interview that he was seeking to pit the UK against Germany and he solidarised himself with the UK Independence Party and other right-wing anti-EU parties.

The response from Europe's political elite was uniformly hostile. In Germany, Merkel replied, "I think we Europeans hold our fate in our own hands." Sigmar Gabriel of Merkel's coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party, insisted, "We must not adopt a servile attitude now... In dealing with Trump, we need German self-confidence and a clear stance."

French President Francois Hollande said that "transatlantic cooperation" will from now on be based on Europe's own "interests and values."

Europe's think tanks and media predicted escalating militarism and an eruption of nationalist tensions. "EU member states will have to consider increasing strategic autonomy by reinforcing collective defence inside the EU," said Felix Arteaga of the Elcano Royal Institute in Madrid.

Judy Dempsey of Carnegie Europe wrote that Trump "might rekindle old fears of German encirclement" by encouraging a "gang-up on Germany." She added, "Since that is the new political outlook, Europe and Germany have to respond."

In the *Guardian*, Natalie Nougayrède suggested, "Europe may witness a return to spheres of influence... with governments rushing to try to secure their own interests whatever the cost to neighbours and the continent's future."

Trump's "America First" positions represent a seismic shift in US political relations with Europe. The *Christian Science Monitor* cited John Hulsman, a transatlantic affairs specialist, berating the "European elites" for having "grown accustomed to 'Wilsonian' American leaders who left unquestioned America's leadership of the postwar internationalist system," and not adjusting quickly enough to "a 'Jacksonian' and more nationalist US worldview promoted by Trump."

Until now, however, such unilateralist tendencies were generally in abeyance. The American ruling class recognised that their unrestrained application would undermine its ability to exercise effective global hegemony. One of the issues animating hostility toward Trump within the US intelligence agencies in connection with his relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin is their belief that a Russian "bogeyman" is essential to preserve the framework through which the US has long exercised its dominance within Europe, via NATO and the EU.

The last time tensions emerged sharply between the US and Europe was in 2003, during the run-up to the Iraq War, when US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld denounced France and Germany for failing to support the US in Iraq. Rumsfeld called the two countries "old Europe" and counterposed to them the states of Eastern Europe.

On January 26 that year, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a perspective comment by David North titled "How to deal with America? The European dilemma," which addressed the historic significance of that conflict.

North explained that America's postwar relationship with Europe between 1945 and 1991 "was determined fundamentally by its appraisal of its own essential economic and geopolitical interests within the specific context of the Cold War." He continued: "America's attitude toward Europe was determined by the overriding need to (1) enforce the isolation of the Soviet Union and minimize its influence in Western Europe ("containment") and (2) prevent social revolution at a time when the European working class was extremely militant and highly politicized.

"The United States' emphasis during that period on its alliance with Western Europe was, in fact, a departure from the historical norm. The more basic tendency of American capitalism, rooted in its somewhat belated emergence as a major imperialist power, had been to augment its world position *at the expense* of Europe."

North then wrote: "The collapse of the Soviet Union fundamentally altered the international framework upon which postwar diplomatic relations were based. There was no longer any need for the United States to prop up the Western European bourgeoisie as a line of defense against the Soviet Union. Moreover, the demise of the USSR created a vacuum of power that the United States was determined to exploit to its own advantage."

In this context, he cited the prophetic warning made by Leon Trotsky in 1928:

"In the period of crisis the hegemony of the United States will operate more completely, more openly, and more ruthlessly than in the period of boom. The United States will seek to overcome and extricate herself from her difficulties and maladies primarily at the expense of Europe, regardless of whether this occurs in Asia, Canada, South America, Australia, or Europe itself, or whether this takes place peacefully or through war."

The dilemma anticipated in 2003 now assumes its full significance. Sections of the US bourgeoisie continue to be deeply opposed to Trump's attacks on the EU and Germany, with outgoing Secretary of State John Kerry describing Merkel as "courageous" and Trump's remarks as "inappropriate." But regardless of such disagreements, the US is being objectively driven on a steep trajectory toward trade war and protectionism to counter the threat to its global hegemony due to economic decline, the challenge posed by the rise of China and other rival powers, and a series of military debacles suffered since 2003. This must inevitably provoke conflict with Europe.

No one can predict in detail the consequences of this geostrategic shift by the US—including what alliances Germany, France, the UK and Russia might eventually forge. To this must be added the precise role that may be played by China as a potential counterweight to America.

However, underlying all such developments will be an explosion of national antagonisms in which the corollary of Trump's "America First" agenda will be demands to put "Germany First," "Britain First" and "France First," which can lead only to the fracturing of Europe into competing power blocks.

The project of European integration under capitalism is coming to an end, unleashing all of the political demons it was meant to have contained.

Nothing is left of the promise that closer political union and the Single Market would bring prosperity and peace. Instead, right-wing reaction and the growth of fascistic parties is taking place in every country. The European powers speak constantly of the need to militarise, even as NATO troops mass on Russia's border, while austerity is the only issue on which they all agree.

The assault on the working class will worsen, as Berlin, Paris and London demand yet greater "national sacrifice" to compete against their rivals and pay the vast sums needed to rearm the continent.

The bourgeoisie has proved incapable of overcoming the fundamental contradiction between the integrated character of the global economy and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states based on private ownership of the means of production, which is once again driving them to a war for the redivision of the world.

The working class of Europe must proceed from an understanding that the post-war period, in which, since 1945, several generations have lived their lives, is over, and a new pre-war period has begun. It must assume responsibility for opposing the drive to austerity, militarism and war by all the imperialist powers.

Above all, it must seek the conscious unification of its struggles with those of workers in the United States and internationally. The explosion of working class opposition that Trump's government of oligarchs and warmongers must inevitably provoke will provide the most powerful accelerant for the struggles of the European working class.