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By Alex Lantier
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NATO riven by tensions between major powers

At their summit Wednesday in Brussels, NATO foreign ministers tried to close ranks, despite growing divisions in the alliance as it escalates plans for war with Russia, a nuclear-armed power.

The central item on the agenda was the state of the alliance, after French President Emmanuel Macron gave an interview to the *Economist* earlier this month declaring NATO to be “brain dead.” He also called for closer European relations with Russia and a more independent military policy from America, criticizing US policy on Russia as “governmental, political and historical hysteria.”

This statement threw into question the December 3–4 NATO heads of state summit in London, and the massive Operation Defender 2020 war games planned next year. In addition to naval maneuvers in the South China Sea, it includes NATO’s largest land exercises in Europe in a quarter century, with 37,000 troops—including 20,000 US troops transported across the Atlantic to Europe. It simulates coordinated, all-out mobilization for war with Russia.



Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo holds a press conference, in Brussels, Belgium on November 20, 2019. [State Department Photo by Ron Przysucha/ Public Domain]

NATO officials repeatedly stressed their unity around an aggressive policy of targeting Russia and China and boosting European military spending to be closer to America's. "Reports of NATO's death are greatly exaggerated," Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius told Reuters as the summit began Wednesday.

"We are going to have an important foreign ministerial meeting," NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg said before the summit, saying it would "address strategic issues like Russia, arms control, but also the implications of the rise of China."

Arriving in Brussels, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stressed that Berlin still sees NATO as critical, despite growing US-German tensions and trade war tariffs. Warning against "breakaway tendencies in NATO," he said the alliance with America is Europe's "life insurance and we want it to remain so." Maas proposed forming a group of "experts" to oversee changes to NATO, stating: "What is important is that the political arm of NATO is strengthened."

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian made no public statement, though he had previously floated similar proposals for a "group of wise men" to reform NATO. Stoltenberg passed over Le Drian's proposal in silence, however, and endorsed Maas: "I think that the German proposal is valuable."

NATO officials pointed to growing rivalries between Berlin and Paris. A senior diplomat told Reuters: “This is about who the natural leader of Europe should be, Paris or Berlin, or possibly both together, and where NATO is heading.”

The only strategy the NATO powers found to deal with their escalating trade war and diplomatic tensions is military escalation, however. After the summit, NATO announced two new initiatives: spying on China, and forming a NATO space command, shortly after Washington launched its own military space command in August.

Pointing to China’s \$175 billion military budget, and the addition over the last five years of 80 ships to its navy—more ships than the entire British navy—NATO announced it would officially begin military surveillance of China. “When there is a military build-up, you have to see what you need to defend against,” declared US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison.

NATO officials also said they were preparing to turn space into an “operational domain,” that is, a battle zone. Stoltenberg said that “this can allow NATO planners to make a request for allies to provide capabilities and services, such as satellite communications and data imagery.” He added, “Space is also essential to the alliance’s deterrence and defence, including the ability to navigate, to gather intelligence, and to detect missile launches. Around 2,000 satellites orbit the Earth. And around half of them are owned by NATO countries.”

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also gave a press conference afterwards, thanking Maas for his help. Denouncing Russia, China and Iran for having “very different value systems” from NATO, he demanded all NATO member states “confront” them, stressing in particular the “long-term threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party.” He hailed the build-up launched by the European powers, who have pledged to increase military spending by \$100 billion by 2020.

This summit confirmed again that there is no escape from the spiral of military escalation driven by the NATO imperialist powers inside the capitalist nation-state system. Macron’s criticisms of NATO reflected alarm in European ruling circles, as they conclude the imperialist wars launched since the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 have led to a dead end and a danger of nuclear war. However, they have no alternative policy.

“A pervasive conception developed in the 1990s and 2000s around the idea of the End of History, an endless expansion of democracy, that the Western camp had won,” Macron

told *The Economist*. He added, “Sometimes we committed mistakes by trying to impose our values and change regimes without getting popular support. It is what we saw in Iraq and Libya... and maybe what was planned for Syria, but that failed. It is an element of the Western approach, I would say in generic terms, that has been an error since the beginning of this century, perhaps a fateful one.”

Macron left unsaid that France, Germany and other European powers participated in wars in Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria that killed or wounded millions and that led to the highly dangerous military standoff that exists between the NATO powers, Russia and China.

While calling in the *Economist* for better relations with Russia “to prevent the world from going up in a conflagration,” Macron is at the same time waging bloody wars in former French colonies like Mali. Berlin has contributed 1,000 troops to the Mali war, and getting these troops is a key goal of Macron’s call for a separate European military policy.

Despite Europe’s growing trade war and strategic conflicts with America, Macron’s proposals have not won broader support, and for now the European NATO powers are backing a US-led escalation against Russia and China. “Paris is isolated,” the daily *Ouest France* concluded, citing a diplomat from a “country close to France’s position” who said: “Macron received no support inside NATO for his virulent criticisms.”

The paper also cited Ulrich Speck, an official at the German Marshall Fund think-tank, who said: “Macron forced Germany to take a position, and for Berlin NATO is still the future of European defense. ... Most of the Eastern European states want to keep the United States in the game to keep Russia away, and they have little interest in the war on terror France is waging to the south.”

In particular, there are clearly growing tensions between Paris and both Berlin and Washington in Eastern Europe. Paris plans to host a conference with German, Russian and Ukrainian officials next month, excluding Washington, to try to broker a deal preventing renewed war in Ukraine after the US- and German-backed coup there in 2014 to oust a pro-Russian government. In October, Paris angered Berlin and Washington by vetoing the EU accession of the Balkan state of North Macedonia—a move Merkel publicly criticized yesterday, speaking in Croatia.

The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* wrote that Macron’s *Economist* interview “greatly upset Berlin. The reply came back quickly: NATO is not brain-dead, but the cornerstone of European defense. ... Something is now in the open that was long known, but seemed to be without

consequence: France and Germany have very different ideas of Europe's strategic future." Macron, it added, "wants to try to put himself and France in America's place as the leading power. But the leadership he offers is no more multilateral and inclusive than the leadership the United States offered earlier."

Amid US-led campaigns targeting Russia and China, the re-emergence of strategic conflict between Germany and France is a dangerous sign. The conflict between the two traditional leading EU powers twice in the 20th century exploded into world war in Europe. The European countries are not moderating policies or slowing the drive to war, but are centrally involved in pushing a war drive that can only be stopped by mobilizing the working class internationally in opposition to imperialism and war.

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