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Merkel, Macron promote EU militarism amid growing conflicts with Washington

On Monday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel received French President Emmanuel Macron at Meseberg Castle near Berlin before the start of the German Presidency of the EU Council on July 1.

These talks took place amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the deepest economic crisis since the end of World War II, and growing US-EU tensions. There is rising shock and consternation internationally at the political and economic disintegration in the United States, where authorities refuse to take meaningful steps against COVID-19 even as the pandemic escalates wildly.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, right, and French President Emmanuel Macron give a joint press conference after a bilateral meeting, at the German government's guest house Meseberg Castle in Granssee near Berlin, Germany, Monday, June 29 2020. The meeting takes place ahead of Germany's EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2020. (Hayoung Jeon, Pool via AP)

After the EU blocked US citizens from entering Europe, Merkel and Macron called for stepped-up military spending and austerity to ensure Europe's ability to wage war independently from Washington.

Merkel began a joint press conference with the words, "We are living in a serious time." She cited both the pandemic and "the economic challenge associated with it, the likes of which we have not seen for decades or perhaps ever before."

She said Germany and France want to "play a joint role in the coming months, making it clear that Europe is our future ... Only in the European community will we be strong and play our role in the world." The "great challenges" she foresaw included digitization, climate change, but also "the question of war and peace in the true sense of the word."

Merkel and Macron did not explain which wars might be imminent, but they emphasized that the European states could only compete globally with other major powers by working together. "We must define our relations with the world as a European Union," Merkel said. "This has to do with relations with Africa, with relations with China and, of course, with transatlantic relations. The fact that we are facing a great challenge here can be seen every day."

The far-reaching character of the questions that were involved in the Meseberg talks was indicated by an interview Merkel granted to a consortium of European newspapers. Speaking to the *Guardian* in Britain, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* in Germany, *Le Monde* in France, *La Stampa* in Italy, *La Vanguardia* in Spain, and *Polityka* in Poland, she discussed Germany's upcoming presidency of the European Council and voiced the growing concerns in European ruling circles at their relations with Washington.

Asked whether Europe would establish strategic autonomy from Washington, she replied: "There are compelling reasons to remain committed to a transatlantic defence community and our shared nuclear umbrella. But of course, Europe needs to carry more of the burden than during the Cold War. We grew up in the certain knowledge that the United States wanted to be a world power. Should the US now wish to withdraw from that role of its own free will, we would have to reflect on that very deeply."

Merkel did not say what might lead Washington to abandon its role as the leading world power. However, it is no secret that the entire American capitalist establishment is desperate to maintain the United States' rapidly fading global hegemony. What Merkel and other European heads of state are "reflecting" upon, in reality, is not the possibility of a change in policy decided by Washington "of its own free will," but the accelerating collapse of American capitalism's world position.

Conflicts between Washington and European capitals on international issues are steadily growing. With the Trump administration threatening both Germany and China with hundreds of billions of dollars in trade war tariffs, Merkel bemoaned a "brusque" tone in global politics: "These days, we have to do all we can to stop ourselves collapsing into protectionism. ... I am under no illusions about how difficult the negotiations will be."

While calling China's economic rise "a major challenge for our liberal democracies," Merkel proposed a visibly different approach from Washington, which is threatening to default on US debt to China and dispatching three aircraft carriers to threaten China's coast. Merkel said Europe and China are "partners in economic cooperation and combating climate change, but also competitors with very different political systems. Not to talk to each other would certainly be a bad idea."

She also suggested that limited concessions would be made to governments of more indebted EU countries in order to secure their support for Germany's new bid for world power. She indicated Germany could contribute more money to a COVID-19 bailout fund because "Germany had a low debt ratio and can afford, in this extraordinary situation, to take on some more debt." She also said she could support Spanish Economy Minister Nadia Calviño as the head of the Euro Group of euro zone finance ministers.

The measures to help the economically weaker European countries, Merkel said, are "in our own interests too, of course. It is in Germany's interest to have a strong internal market and to have the European Union grow closer together, not fall apart."

In Meseburg, Merkel and Macron left no doubt that the working class will bear the costs of the crisis. Merkel made clear the €500 billion "Recovery Fund" proposed by Germany and France will be linked to savage austerity against working people. "Everyone must make themselves fit for the future at home" and "strengthen their own competitiveness," she said. She cited the example of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, who she said had already "made proposals to modernise his country."

Currently the European powers are working closely together on transforming the EU into a military alliance that—unlike NATO—can act independently of and if necessary against the US. But conflicts are also re-emerging between the European capitals. When Merkel suggested in her interview that the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) “can be used by everyone” hit by the crisis, Conte rebuffed her: “I’m the one who keeps the books. I take care of the Italian budget, together with Finance Minister Roberto Gualtieri, the state’s accountants and the other ministers.”

What keeps the European governments together at this point is not a unity of interests, but a desperate search for allies against foreign enemies and the working class at home. The only policy they can agree on is one of austerity, repression and militarism. Thus, the defense ministries of France, Germany, Italy and Spain issued a joint letter to Josep Borrell, the EU foreign and military policy chief, calling for a major joint EU military build-up in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, they wrote, “Our Armed Forces have been instrumental in helping to deal with the challenges posed—both in Europe and beyond. Today, the effects of the pandemic have already started aggravating existing conflicts and crises, further weakening fragile states and putting additional pressure on already strained systems and regions. Security and Defence must therefore remain a top priority. We want to live up to our responsibilities and be able to face present and upcoming challenges, at home and abroad.”

They called for strengthening the EU’s Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) on military issues; reinforcing EU defence industries; developing a “Strategic Compass” governing common EU military missions; stepping up military operations in Mali, Libya, and the Gulf of Guinea; and further coordinating EU military policy. Cooperation with NATO was listed dead last, in a section that committed the four EU powers to “strengthening the European pillar within NATO” as well as to taking “forward the cooperation in security and defence with other partner organisations.”

They stressed that building the EU’s ability to wage large-scale military actions independently of Washington would require pouring financial resources into Europe’s war machines.

They added, “Building Europe’s industrial, technological and digital sovereignty requires us to link our economic policies even stronger with our security interests ... The European Defence Fund (EDF) is key to financing and fostering defence research and capability development that will reinforce our ability to act and to face future military crises and

global threats. We therefore advocate for an ambitious EDF budget as a priority in the defence area and a swift adoption of the EDF regulation, in full respect of the discussions on the Multiannual Financial Framework.”

As the European powers prepare for war, they openly acknowledge that their relations with America are collapsing. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (SPD) told DPA: “Anyone who thinks that with a president of the Democratic Party everything will be the same again in the transatlantic partnership as it once was underestimates the structural changes.”

Three decades after the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, historically-rooted contradictions of capitalism that led to two world wars in the 20th century are again rapidly erupting. This must be understood as a warning by the working class. The way forward against the capitalist warmongering on both sides of the Atlantic is the building of an international anti-war movement and a struggle for socialist revolution.

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