

Britain attacks plans for European military union at Bratislava summit

By Johannes Stern and Alex Lantier
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At an informal meeting of European Union (EU) defence ministers in Bratislava on Tuesday, British Defence Secretary Michael Fallon denounced German-French plans for a European military union and the possible creation of a European army.

“There are member states who would like to see... a single set of forces. That looks and sounds to me like a European army, and we would oppose that,” he told reporters. “NATO must remain the cornerstone of our defence and the defence of Europe.”

Fallon insisted it was up to NATO, not the European Union, to defend Europe against Russia. Lashing out against plans drawn up by Berlin and Paris to create a joint EU military headquarters, Fallon stated: “Europe is littered with HQs, what we don't need is another one.” He vowed “to continue to oppose any idea of an EU army, or an EU army headquarters which would simply undermine NATO.”

Fallon said Sweden, the Netherlands, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania have also raised concerns about the German-French plans.

Other countries proposed competing plans for EU militarization. An Italian paper seen by *EU Observer* proposed a “permanent European Multinational Force (EMF)” regrouping “member states willing to share forces, command and control, manoeuvre and enabling capabilities”. It aspired to deeper military integration in future, calling the EMF an “initial nucleus of a future European integrated force.”

The Finnish paper is reportedly weaker than the Italian or Franco-German militarization plans. It suggests a new “joint permanent civilian-military planning and conduct capability” to direct “non-executive military operations.” It implicitly designates Russia as the main enemy, however, calling on the EU to target “hybrid threats,” a term routinely

associated to Russia amid the current NATO build-up in Eastern Europe.

Fallon's remarks point to deeply rooted conflicts erupting among the leading European powers after Britain's vote to leave the EU. Amid an unprecedented war crisis with Russia and in the Middle East, and the discrediting of the EU by its anti-worker austerity policies, the most powerful states in continental Europe are trying to hold the EU together by turning it into a military alliance. Yet top officials in London and elsewhere in Europe see this as an intolerable threat to NATO and, in particular, to Europe's relations with the United States.

German and French officials at the Bratislava summit responded to Fallon's statement by downplaying any conflict between their military ambitions and those of NATO.

Standing together, German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen and her French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian claimed there were no plans to set up a European army rivaling NATO. “On the contrary,” von der Leyen said, “It is about bundling the various strengths of European countries to be ready to act together quickly”. She claimed that “everything that strengthens Europe in terms of defence also strengthens NATO.”

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg made a somewhat similar, albeit more tentative, statement. At a press conference, he said, “As long as this is in complementarity to NATO, and as long as this is not duplicating the efforts of NATO, I think we should only welcome stronger European defence, because that's good for Europe, it's good for the European Union, and it's good for NATO.”

There is no objective foundation for von der Leyen's claim that rearming German imperialism and its EU

allies will inevitably strengthen the US-led NATO alliance. In fact, London's opposition to plans for a "strategically autonomous" EU military reflects deeply rooted conflicts among the NATO powers.

In the quarter century since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Germany and France have repeatedly come into conflict with US war policies strongly supported by British imperialism. They opposed the illegal invasion of Iraq by Washington and London in 2003.

While Berlin and Paris fell back into line with Washington afterwards, the conflict between their policy and that of Washington amid the current war drive against Russia and China is ever more apparent. They ignored US pressure, as did London, not to join China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank last year. They also negotiated the Minsk accords with Russia and Ukraine to forestall all-out war with Russia, blocking the US arming of far-right Ukrainian militias against pro-Russian forces in east Ukraine after the NATO-backed putsch in Kiev two years ago.

The aim of German-French policy is not peace, however, but the assertion of their own imperialist interests. Amid growing war tensions, Berlin and Paris are articulating a longer-term strategy to develop the ability to mount imperialist interventions around the world without the approval of—that is to say, potentially in opposition to—Washington and London. That is, they do not oppose, but contribute to, the drive of all the main imperialist powers towards large-scale war.

Berlin and Paris openly announce, moreover, that a key goal of EU military planning is internal security, or, as foreign ministers Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Jean-Marc Ayrault wrote in a recent report, "the interaction between external threats and internal weaknesses." The French government's use of a state of emergency to attack protests against its reactionary labor law has shown that the central target is political opposition in the working class.

Before the first EU summit without British participation on September 16, German Defence Minister von der Leyen and her French counterpart Le Drian released a military policy paper, "Renewing the GSVP [Joint Security and Defence Policy]: Toward a comprehensive, realistic and reliable defence in the EU."

The paper calls for a "concrete plan of action" to

"quickly" implement a "new EU global strategy for foreign and security policy (EUGS)," presented by High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini at the first post-Brexit EU summit in July. Besides "a permanent EU HQ [headquarters] for military and civilian missions and operations," they called for "the support of GSVP military missions, the development of military capability and European defence cooperation as well as the concrete support of the European defence industry."

On this basis, "strategic autonomy is ensured," and a "strong, competitive and innovative" European defence industry can be built, the paper proclaims.

In the current context of explosive US-EU tensions on military and economic issues, there can be little doubt that the creation of such EU military structures would challenge NATO and deepen the same inter-imperialist conflicts that twice led to world war in Europe in the twentieth century.

At the September 16 summit, French President François Hollande gave voice to EU concerns that, particularly after the upcoming US presidential elections, Washington might prove to be an unreliable ally. He said, "If the United States decide to move away from us, Europe must be capable of defending itself. For the EU, defense is the critical challenge. Our task is to weigh on the destiny of the world, to give ourselves the capacity to project force ... and to ensure our defense, for France and for Europe."

At the same time, economic conflicts between Europe and the United States are deepening. Last month, French officials called for ending trade talks with the US on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, amid growing conflicts between US and EU trade negotiators. This month, as Deutsche Bank shares continued their historic collapse, US regulators imposed a \$14 billion fine that threatens to bankrupt Germany's biggest bank.

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