

The return of the US-German conflict

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The first meeting between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and US President Donald Trump in Washington last weekend exposed the rapid deterioration of transatlantic relations.

Trump's refusal to shake Merkel's hand during their photo-op in the Oval Office attracted international attention. After the heads of government from the two close post-World War II allies appeared before the press following a 15-minute one-on-one discussion and were asked by the photographers present to shake hands for a picture, Trump did not respond. Merkel turned to him and repeated the photographers' request. But the US president ignored her and stared angrily in the other direction.

The press conference that followed was frosty and tense. Responding to a German journalist's question as to whether it would "not be a danger for America if 'America first' weakens the European Union?", Trump answered, "I... believe a policy of trade should be a fair policy and the United States has been treated very, very unfairly by many countries over the years, and that's going to stop."

Trump threatened Germany on several occasions with trade war measures before taking office. Without going into detail, Trump raised the issue again at the press conference, declaring, "The negotiators for Germany have done a far better job than the negotiators for the United States. But hopefully we can even it out."

He then added menacingly, "It's probably the reason I'm standing here, maybe number one—that and maybe the military—building up our military, which we will do, and we will be stronger than ever before—and hopefully not have to use it. But we will be stronger, and perhaps far stronger than ever before."

When Merkel, who according to press accounts was seeking to defuse the conflict with Trump, was on her return flight to Berlin, Trump went a step further. In one of his notorious tweets, he wrote, "Germany owes vast sums of money to NATO & the United States must

be paid more for the powerful, and very expensive, defense it provides to Germany!"

German Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen promptly shot back, "there is no account where debts are registered with NATO."

The G20 conference in Baden Baden, Germany, which concluded the same day as Merkel's trip to Washington, likewise ended with a provocation. American Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin prevented the inclusion of the usual declaration in support of free trade and in opposition to protectionism in the final statement. The contents of past communiqués were "not necessarily relevant from my perspective," Mnuchin said by way of justification.

The German ruling class has reacted to the escalating conflict with a mixture of concern and aggression. On Monday, the daily *Handelsblatt* published a commentary headlined "Transatlantic confrontation" which declared, "Anyone who hoped that Angela Merkel's visit to US President Donald Trump would lay the basis for a normalisation of transatlantic relations must learn to know better. The American president is sticking to his firm positions and is even intensifying the conflict with international partners. The tweet against the Chancellor is an affront, the incident at the G20 meeting an historic break with the past."

Even representatives of the German ruling elite who have been vehemently pro-American in the past and supported US-led wars are no longer taking Germany's partnership with the United States for granted. "Enough of making fun. There is no longer a generous patron, now someone is governing who recognises no allies, but only alleged debtors who take advantage of America. Yes, a new era is beginning in the White House," wrote Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

A comment in the *Rheinische Post* summed up the response of German imperialism to Trump's

aggressive assertion of US interests. Now it was necessary “to find even clearer statements against the new US protectionism and mobilise the majority of the remaining states against Trump.” Germany and the European Union have to “assert themselves and counterpose their own, different-sounding goals” to Trump, “instead of permitting themselves to be intimidated by Washington.” The prospects for this are good, wrote the newspaper, because at the G20 summit it became clear “that in trade policy, Germany not only has the rest of the EU, but almost the rest of the entire world, above all China, Brazil and Japan, on its side.”

Nobody should underestimate the historical and political significance of these developments. Twenty five years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the conflicts between the imperialist powers, which led twice in the 20th century to horrific world wars, are once again erupting in trade war and preparations for military conflict.

The international working class must counterpose its own strategy to the plans of the ruling elites on both sides of the Atlantic. This is what the Socialist Equality Party in the United States and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei in Germany, together with all other sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, fight for.

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