

US-Europe conflicts erupt in run-up to NATO summit in Brussels

By Alex Lantier
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The NATO summit is opening today in Brussels amid unprecedented tensions between Washington and the European Union (EU). A month after the collapse of the G7 summit on June 10, as EU leaders criticized US President Donald Trump's trade war measures against the EU, Canada, Mexico and China, divisions are again erupting as the NATO powers try to coordinate the vast military buildup they are launching.

Conflicts broke out even before the NATO heads of state reached Brussels, after Trump repeatedly berated the EU powers, especially Germany, in recent days for not spending enough on the army.

Trump, who will travel on from Brussels to Britain and Finland, where he meets Russian President Vladimir Putin, again attacked the EU as he left Washington. Complaining of the intractable problems involved in his European tour with the NATO summit and the government crisis in Britain, Trump told the press: "I have NATO. I have the UK, which is somewhat in turmoil. And I have Putin. Frankly, Putin may be the easiest of them all. Who would think?"

The American president made clear that he did not necessarily see his nominal European allies as preferable to Russia or China, whom Washington has both at times threatened with military action. While he said that "getting along" with Russia and China is "a good thing" and declined to call Putin a "foe," instead calling him a "competitor," he took a different tack towards Europe. "We're being taken advantage of by the European Union," Trump said, adding that US spending on NATO "helps them a lot more than it helps us."

After an EU-NATO meeting yesterday, EU Council President Donald Tusk snapped back at Trump in front of a visibly nervous NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

Tusk said, "Speaking on the eve of the NATO summit here in Brussels, I would like to address President Trump directly, who for a long time now has been criticizing Europe almost daily for, in his view, insufficient contributions to the common defense capabilities, and for living off the US. Dear President Trump: America does not have, and will not have a better ally than Europe. Today Europeans spend on defense many times more than Russia, and as much as China." He pointedly added, "Appreciate your allies. You don't have many, after all."

Calling EU military spending "an investment in common American and European defense and security," Tusk boasted of Europe's role in the bloody, US-led NATO occupation of Afghanistan. He concluded, "Dear Mr. President, please remember this tomorrow, when we meet at the NATO summit, but above all when you meet President Putin in Helsinki. It is always worth knowing: who is your strategic friend? And who is your strategic problem?"

As Washington and the EU launch a trade war with tariffs on tens of billions of dollars of each other's goods, the basic framework of relations between the world's most powerful imperialist blocs is collapsing. NATO was a Euro-American military alliance founded after World War II, in 1949, and directed above all against the Soviet Union. But NATO is being torn apart as world capitalism heads towards another global war.

The conflicts inside NATO are not due to a lack of EU military spending. In fact, despite US complaints about EU defense spending that began under Obama, virtually the only thing the NATO imperialists agree on is that hundreds of billions of dollars and euros should be looted from workers and from basic social programs in order to beef up the war machines. In this, they intend to call for stepped-up military spending to play a

major role.

Germany, France, Spain and even Belgium have all pledged this year to increase military spending by tens of billions of euros. In a national address on Monday, French President Emmanuel Macron again called for France to return to the draft, based on deep cuts to basic social programs. Also this year, Sweden has begun conscription of a portion of youth born in 1999.

It is ever clearer that far broader conflicts than a budgetary dispute are at stake in the spats inside NATO. Trump's denunciations during his election campaign of NATO as "obsolete," and of German auto exports to the United States as "bad," were not a product of his personal hotheadedness. Amid the continuing, long-term economic decline of US imperialism, it was an expression of a bitter inter-imperialist struggle over the division of markets, profits and strategic advantage, which has now escalated into a developing trade war and the public divisions inside NATO.

These conflicts, well known to the Marxists of the early 20th century, twice exploded into world war. Indeed, analyzing the inevitability of economic and military conflict under capitalism in his classic work *Imperialism*, written in 1916 during World War I, Lenin concisely summed up the essential issues posed to workers by inter-imperialist alliances like NATO. "Peaceful alliances prepare the ground for wars," he warned, "and in their turn grow out of wars."

Having grown out of World War II, NATO's different competing factions are all preparing in various ways the ground for a new, global conflict. None of these factions have anything to offer to the working class. The question posed to workers around the world, now as at the time of the Russian Revolution of October 1917, is the struggle against wars rooted in the structure of international capitalism itself.

Significant sections of the ruling class on both sides of the Atlantic still aim to hold NATO together, based, however, on drastic attacks on the working class and a war drive against Russia. NATO's reckless expansion into Eastern Europe is continuing. Visiting Latvia yesterday, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that Canadian troops would remain in Latvia, on Russia's borders, for four years after their mandate stops in 2019.

In his press conference yesterday previewing the

Brussels summit, Stoltenberg praised Saudi talks with the Taliban in Afghanistan and discussed plans to integrate the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. This reckless move has vast implications. It poses the threat that if far-right Georgian or Ukrainian regimes start wars with Russia or attack Russian borders—as they did in 2008 and 2014, respectively—all of NATO could find itself obligated by treaty to go to war with Russia, a nuclear-armed power, to defend them.

At the same time, other sections of the ruling class, going far beyond Trump, are pursuing a more confrontational policy towards US-EU relations. On Monday, just before the NATO summit began, German Chancellor Angela Merkel met with Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang, amid growing criticisms of Trump's tariffs against both EU and Chinese goods. Despite growing EU-China tensions and threats of EU trade sanctions against Chinese metal exports, Beijing and Berlin united in making overt criticisms of US trade war measures.

Chinese ambassador to the EU Zhang Ming told German financial daily *Handelsblatt*, "China has tried extensively to stop the trade conflict with the United States escalating into a trade war but it takes two hands to clap. ... The Chinese are peaceful people and I think the Europeans as well, but we must demonstrate to the trade war's initiator that its action is wrong."

Garima Mohan of the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin told the *South China Morning Post* that the US-German trade conflict is "an opportunity for China and Germany to band together" against Washington, though he warned that Sino-German cooperation would be "tenuous" and fragile.

These intractable divisions will underlie the tensions that, it seems safe to say, will likely erupt in the coming days at the NATO summit.

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