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Merkel, Macron meet in Berlin as Syrian strike deepens conflicts inside NATO

Yesterday, French President Emmanuel Macron traveled to Berlin for a summit with German Chancellor Angela Merkel after the US-UK-French strike on Syria of April 14, and before planned trips next week by both Merkel and Macron to Washington. At a brief joint press conference, they endorsed the unprovoked and illegal strike against Syria while also stressing that, together with Britain, they support maintaining the Iranian nuclear treaty.

The cracks in the edifice of the NATO alliance are showing, however, as its constant resort to war intensifies the rivalries between the member states. Not only does the support of Berlin and Paris for the Iranian treaty involve them in a clash with the Trump administration, which has threatened to cancel it, but the two leading European Union (EU) powers are also increasingly at odds. Merkel was silent on Macron's call for a new financial architecture on the euro zone, amid reports that Berlin and Paris are clashing both over financial policy and the April 14 strike in Syria.

The German chancellor began by demanding a strong EU military, striking an alarmist note and noting the rising tide of NATO wars surrounding Europe. "Despite the fact that Europe is a project for peace, we have to be able to defend our interests around the world," Merkel said, calling for a "plan for a common foreign policy" and warning: "We are surrounded by catastrophic wars."

The French President for his part claimed that the "common sovereignty" of European countries was under threat, and called for an upcoming Franco-German ministerial summit

in June that would deal with a common economic and monetary policy, as well as common security initiatives on defense and foreign policy within the European Union.

Asked about what messages they would bring to Donald Trump on Syria, Iran and world trade, Merkel replied: “I would like to show the United States that despite differences of opinion, discussion is important.” Macron for his part said that he and Merkel would be bringing “a common message” to Trump, citing the need to respect the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal, the “legitimacy” of the April 14 strike in Syria and the need to use Trump’s threats of trade tariffs for a common struggle against Chinese exports of steel and aluminum.

On the Syrian strike, Macron claimed that Germany had not joined the action because the German constitution did not allow for an attack without a parliamentary debate. In a flagrantly antidemocratic statement trampling on mass opposition to the strike in the US, Britain and France, he claimed that it was not possible to consult with the parliament on the strike, given the need for rapid and surprise action.

Asked about reforms of the financial structure of the European Union and the euro zone, Merkel and Macron said nothing explicitly about Macron’s call last autumn at the Sorbonne University for Berlin to accept a broad change in the financing of euro zone bailouts and investment policy. However, their remarks were barely able to paper over growing public differences over Macron’s proposals.

In the run-up to the summit, the number two of Merkel’s Christian-Democratic Union (CDU) issued a widely noted attack on Macron’s calls for greater public investments in the euro zone economies. “I do not think this would be a good idea,” said Annegrey Kramp-Karrenbauer, in remarks widely taken in the French media as a sign that Macron’s proposals were dead on arrival. In the event, Merkel’s remarks yesterday were only a somewhat softer version of Kramp-Karrenbauer’s view.

Apparently taking aim at Macron’s calls to build a European version of the International Monetary Fund to oversee euro zone bank bailouts, Merkel declared, “We cannot depend too much on the IMF. But we cannot work against the IMF.” She warned that the euro zone is “not solid enough to withstand a crisis,” and called for “responsibility” in the implementation of the austerity packages dictated to Spain, Greece and Ireland by the EU. She added that “even the smallest idea can create real problems.”

Macron replied that “the most important thing is not to comment on one or another proposed measure, but to check whether we have the same goals.” Calling for a European banking union and a convergence of economic conditions in Europe with those in the

stronger German economy, Macron warned, “No monetary union can survive without elements of convergence. We must work with the member states in this convergence.”

The aggressive comments of both Merkel and Macron reflect the reactionary character of the regimes on both sides of the Rhine. Both politicians preside over the most right-wing regimes their countries have known since the end of World War II and the collapse of fascist rule in 1945, as Merkel presses to remilitarize German foreign policy, and Macron moves to undo the social concessions granted to the working class in France at the Liberation from Nazi Occupation.

The comments of both Merkel and Macron at the press conference constitute a warning that the EU will not budge one iota from unpopular policies of militarism and austerity. It is fully committed to escalating its military involvement in the decades-long war drive in the Middle East. Even as the EU disintegrates amid mounting social discontent, with Britain’s 2016 vote to exit the EU and the recent election in Italy that saw right-wing, anti-EU parties win the leading positions, Berlin and Paris have nothing new to propose.

The conflicts between the NATO imperialist powers themselves are growing, most obviously in the opposition in Berlin and Paris to Trump’s threats to impose trade tariffs on European goods and prepare for war with Iran by canceling the nuclear treaty. Press commentary made clear, moreover, that these conflicts are rapidly undermining the German-French alliance that is supposed to be leading what remains of the EU. Behind the scenes, the tensions are increasingly bitter.

An article in the French edition of the *Huffington Post* citing high-ranking French officials pointed to growing military tensions between France and Germany in the aftermath of Germany’s decision not to participate in the Syria strike. “The hopes formulated by Emmanuel Macron during his speech at the Sorbonne in September seem badly compromised,” it said, pointing to the “negative effects of the French strikes in Syria.”

It cited the complaints of the German paper *Die Welt* that “In the Syrian conflict, Macron is turning towards Trump and not towards Merkel,” as well as remarks of Barbara Kunz, an official of the influential French Institute on International Relations (IFRI) think tank.

She pointed to growing difficulties in Franco-German military coordination, particularly under conditions where German law might prevent France from exporting a jointly developed, Franco-German weapons to influential clients in Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf sheikdoms. “If we want to build a battle tank together, but we cannot export it, that is a problem,” Kunz said.

Ten years after the 2008 crash led to a series of financial crises and euro bailouts in Europe, moreover, it is clear that none of the international tensions within Europe have been resolved. The major euro zone economies are still advocating widely different economic and monetary policies, with Merkel under pressure from growing factions of the CDU and the far-right Alternative for Germany to reject Macron's demands for more public investment.

CDU parliamentarian Eckhardt Rehberg told *Deutschlandfunk*: "We are skeptical of his proposals and of the proposals ... of the EU commission last December for the development of a European monetary fund." He added, "Without rules, without conditions, in the opinion of the CDU faction it is impossible to pay out money from German taxpayers."

"I know that Macron is pushing Merkel and she is not moving in the way he thinks she should be moving," an anonymous high-ranking French official told Reuters, adding that Macron might have to "adopt a more confrontational tone with Germany."