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Allies no more: Trump escalates threats against Europe

On Tuesday, US President Donald Trump will arrive in Brussels to attend a summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) amid the greatest crisis in US-European relations since the Second World War.

“For the first time,” wrote the *Financial Times*, “the arrival of a US president on European shores is anticipated with trepidation and even fear.”

The Trump administration launched a global trade war by levying tariffs on European steel and aluminum imports last month, and then exploded the G7 summit just ten days later by refusing to sign its communiqué. Now, the European powers are worried that Trump might also blow up the NATO summit. US officials have anonymously told the press that Trump could do anything at the event, from announcing a withdrawal of US troops from Germany to threatening to exit the alliance itself.

All international relations, including those between the United States and its closest allies, have been thrown into disarray by Trump’s transactional “America first” approach to trade, geopolitics and diplomacy. As German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas recently put it, the “old pillars of reliability are crumbling.”

It is dawning upon European leaders that Trump is not some fluke or traffic accident on the scene of global relations. His brand of politics—of extreme nationalism based on unadorned self-interest—represents a new world order embraced not only by the United States, but the European powers themselves.

In his demand that the EU countries contribute more to NATO's rearmament, Trump expresses the predatory drive of US capitalism to extract concessions from the whole world, "allies" and enemies alike. Rearmament on this scale cannot be carried out without the destruction of the social safety net and workers' living standards. This is a central aim of Trump's agenda, not an accidental byproduct. The White House is telling the European powers, in effect, to get on with their attacks on the working class in order to lower labor costs for American corporations operating in Europe.

Even before landing in Brussels, Trump began hurling rhetorical bombs. "I'm going to tell NATO: You've got to start paying your bills," Trump said at a campaign rally in Montana last week. "The United States is not going to take care of everything."

Trump lobbed insults at German Chancellor Angela Merkel. "Germany, which is the biggest country of the EU, European Union, Germany pays one percent. And I said, you know, Angela, I can't guarantee it, but we're protecting you, and it means a lot more to you than protecting us, because I don't know how much protection we get by protecting you."

Trump explicitly tied his demand that Washington's EU allies spend more on defense to the escalating trade war between the US and the EU, declaring on Monday, "On top of this the European Union has a Trade Surplus of \$151 Billion with the US, with big Trade Barriers on US goods. NO!"

There is a growing consensus among EU figures that the actions of the Trump administration express an objective and growing divergence between the European powers and the United States.

"What is on the table right now, in a sort of brutal way, is a real problem [that] is not created by President Trump and will not vanish at the end of the term or terms of President Trump," a leading European official told the *Guardian*. "The transatlantic relationship that all of us around the table consider as a given—is not a given."

"We used to roll our eyes at Trump's policies, but now we are seeing the craziness becoming strategic," another senior EU diplomat told *The Hill*. "We now have to seek out all kinds of partners to further our goals." Notably, Trump's arrival in Brussels was preceded by a visit to Berlin by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and talk of an EU-Chinese alliance to offset threats from the United States.

"The US is now being viewed in Europe as evolving from a strategic partner to a strategic problem," Dan Price, a former advisor to George W. Bush told the *Wall Street Journal*. European Council President Donald Tusk echoed these sentiments, declaring that Trump

“should not be underestimated,” because he “is systematic, consistent and has a method to undermine... European values.”

In other words, after the initial shock has worn off, European officials have themselves largely embraced an inverted version of Trump’s worldview, seeing the United States as a strategic competitor in the quest for markets, resources and economic advantages.

The central irony of the NATO summit, however, is the fact that despite the mutual recriminations between the NATO members over spending targets, all members of the alliance are rearming to the teeth.

NATO General-Secretary Jens Stoltenberg boasted in an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* that “last year NATO allies boosted their defense budgets by a combined 5.2 percent, the biggest increase, in real terms, in a quarter of a century. Now 2018 will be the fourth consecutive year of rising spending.

“In 2014, only three allies—the United States, the United Kingdom and Greece—met the 2 percent target. This year, we expect that number to rise to eight, adding Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania.”

To pay for its military rearmament, every member of NATO has slashed social spending and carried out a frontal attack on its working class, exemplified by French President Emmanuel Macron’s headlong offensive against France’s rail workers.

The alliance set its two percent spending target in response to the proxy war that erupted following the US/EU-backed and fascist-led putsch in Ukraine and the consequent annexation of Crimea by Russia. Since then, NATO has deployed thousands of troops in the Baltics and in Poland, and it has staged a series of provocative war games just a few hundred miles from St. Petersburg.

This week’s summit will aim to continue these policies, including the creation of a “30 times four” plan that would make 30 land battalions, 30 ships and 30 warplane squadrons ready to deploy on 30 days’ notice.

The summit will also set up two additional NATO commands, “one in Norfolk to focus on maritime issues, including reinforcement by sea, and one in Germany to tackle the logistics of moving troops across Europe,” *Foreign Affairs* noted.

Unsurprisingly, the NATO members’ breakneck pace of rearmament has not brought them unity. Rather, in the four years since 2014, NATO members have seen unparalleled divisions among them, not just between the US and Europe, but within the EU itself, expressed most directly by the UK’s 2016 vote to leave the European Union.

Following Brexit, the UK has been rocked by one crisis after another, culminating in this week's exit of two high-level cabinet members and rumors that the May government might fall. The remaining EU members, meanwhile, have been locked in mutual recriminations as they race each other in a mad dash to the right on refugee policy.

In other words, the NATO members have responded to every crisis with military rearmament, nationalism, trade war, shutting their borders and retreating behind a "hedge of bayonets," to borrow Leon Trotsky's phrase. But each shift to the right has only created the conditions for new crises and conflicts.

A year and a half into Trump's presidency, it is clear that the current resident of the White House represents not some deviation from the norm of capitalist politics, but rather its most concise expression. Global war, trade conflict, xenophobia, nationalism, the attack on refugees, the dismantling of democratic rights—all the hallmarks of Trump—are in fact the hallmarks of rotten and decaying capitalism.