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French President Macron calls for the draft and threatens strikes on Syria

On Tuesday night, at a meeting of the French presidential press association, Emmanuel Macron called for a return of the draft and threatened possible air strikes in Syria, a former French colony. Coming only days after a US bombing killed dozens of Russian military contractors in Syria and Israel struck targets in Syria, this constitutes an unambiguous warning of the danger of world war.

It also exposes the character of the German-French axis that Macron is trying to assemble with a potential “Grand Coalition” government between conservatives and social democrats in Berlin. It aims to convert Europe into an aggressive militarist bloc, sending youth to kill or be killed in imperialist wars involving all the major world powers.

“I want obligatory service, open to women and to men, [that provides] an insight into military matters,” Macron declared, repeating a campaign pledge made last year to return to the draft. He added that the length of service could be “between three to six months, but that is not yet fixed.”

As he did when first calling for the draft during his 2017 presidential campaign, Macron cynically tried to downplay its significance, claiming that the draft could have a “civic” component. That is, conscripted youth might also end up patrolling cities in France, as soldiers did during the recent, two-year state of emergency. However, Macron himself admitted in his 2017 speech on the draft that it is also in preparation for major wars, saying: “We have entered an epoch in international relations where war is again a possible outcome of politics.”

On Tuesday night, Macron said he was ready to launch air strikes on Syria, as the media whipped up a campaign around unsubstantiated US allegations that the Syrian government used chlorine gas. A campaign had erupted in the French press accusing Macron of forgetting the “red line” he set in his UN speech last September, pledging to attack Syria if France or its allies declare that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons in the ongoing NATO war in the country.

“If [France] has reliable evidence that banned chemical weapons are being used against civilians, we will strike,” he said. “We will strike the places where these weapons are being used and where their use is organized. The red line will be respected.”

Macron added that he was in close contact with Russian President Vladimir Putin, a key ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, to send warnings and threats to the Syrian regime. “I repeated this to President Putin, asking him to be very clear with the Syrian regime, which has reaffirmed that it is not using chemical weapons. ... But we are watching it,” Macron said, adding: “As soon as the proof is established, I will do what I said.”

Should Macron launch these strikes, this would be an unprovoked act of war by France against its former colony, abetted by the other NATO powers, threatening to provoke war with Russia. The attempt to justify it based on unverified US allegations of poison gas use stinks of a provocation. Previous such claims, including poison gas attacks in Ghouta in 2013 and Khan Shaykhun in 2017, proved to be provocations, where NATO-backed Islamist militias staged gas attacks that they blamed on the regime in order to provide a pretext for NATO attacks on Syria.

This follows German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen’s trip to Iraq last weekend to announce an escalation of the German military presence there, and the publication last week of the program of a proposed “Grand Coalition” government in Berlin.

A key plank of the program is collaboration with France on trade, military and Middle East policy. Von der Leyen and her French counterpart, Florence Parly, are set to jointly open the Munich Security Conference this weekend, in a show of Franco-German military unity.

Macron’s discussion of an attack on Syria underscores that the Berlin-Paris axis is preparing a vast expansion of European military aggression, with explosive global consequences. Over the 25 years since the Stalinist regime dissolved the USSR, removing the main military counterweight to imperialist war, US imperialism has consistently

sought to counterbalance its growing economic weakness by resorting to war and the use of its military advantages.

This culminated in the unveiling last month of a US National Defense Strategy that brands Russia and China, both major nuclear-armed powers, as Washington's principal enemies.

Over the same period, Paris has pursued an ever more bellicose foreign policy. Besides fighting wars in its former African colonial empire, it repeatedly joined US-led wars--in 1991 against Iraq, in 2001 in Afghanistan, and the 2011 wars in Libya and then Syria--despite clashing with Washington over its 2003 invasion of Iraq. Under Macron, it is stepping up this offensive, while handing over billions of euros in tax cuts to the rich and financing these reactionary policies with deep social cuts aimed at the working class.

What is emerging is an explosive political collapse of the world capitalist system that threatens workers across Europe and the world with catastrophic consequences. It involves not only NATO conflicts with Russia and China, but the eruption of barely concealed differences between the NATO powers, which fought world wars between rival alliances twice in the 20th century.

Macron's remarks Tuesday night pointed in particular to significant differences emerging between Washington and the Berlin-Paris axis over Russia and the Middle East.

Firstly, despite his bellicose threats against Syria, Macron ruled out an immediate strike and indicated his distrust of US allegations of Syrian poison gas use. "But today we do not have proof, established by our intelligence services, that chemical weapons banned by treaty have been used against civilian populations," he said.

This begs the question of why Macron reacted to these unverified allegations, which he himself apparently does not trust, by threatening to bomb Syria.

Secondly, according to the business daily *Les Echos*, Macron called for dealing with the Syrian war by developing closer ties with Russia and opening "a dialog with the three member states of the 'Astana process,' that is, Iran, Turkey, and Russia." This seems to place Macron on a very different course than the US National Defense Strategy and the US bombing of Russian contractors in Syria. It followed Macron's cordial February 9 phone call with Putin, in which he also called for stepped-up trade and political collaboration with the Kremlin.

According to an Elysée palace communiqué, during this phone call, Macron congratulated Putin on "the dynamic of our bilateral relations since the Versailles meeting on May 29," and noted that, "Our political exchanges are regular and ongoing." It also hailed the

ongoing development of relations between French and Russian “economic and cultural forces, thinkers and youth.”

Finally, Macron hailed the “permanent dialog” now ongoing between France and Turkey, who Macron said earlier this month had “reassured” him about its invasion of Syria to attack Kurdish forces. By contrast, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson arrived yesterday for crisis talks in Turkey, whose Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu warned that its alliance with Washington could “break completely” over US support for Kurdish forces in Syria

These European-American differences again erupted into the open around yesterday’s NATO defense ministers’ summit in Brussels. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned that it would be “absolutely without any meaning if NATO and the EU start to compete.”

US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison warned of a potential break-up of military relations between the United States and Europe over plans led by Berlin and Paris for European military cooperation. She said, “Certainly we do not want this to be a protectionist vehicle for the EU and we’re going to watch carefully because if that becomes the case then it could splinter the strong security alliance that we have. We want the Europeans to have capabilities and strength but not to fence off American products or Norwegian products or potentially UK products.”