

*El salto 19-11*

## **Getting serious**

*Wolfgang Streeck*

In the last week of November the European Parliament declared a “climate emergency” for the European Union — a classic case of symbolic politics with no consequences, conceived solely for the benefit of Fridays for Future. Meanwhile, behind the facade, momentous decisions were being fought over that had nothing to do with climate change — except that they will require, not billions but trillions of euros, money that will be sorely missed in the battle against global warming and the social effects of neoliberal austerity.

What is at issue is European armament. A nasty fight is going on between France, Germany and the United States, over an old question: the relationship between “Europe“ and NATO. Should European countries contribute their military forces to NATO, where they would effectively be under American command, or should they integrate them into some European “defense” entity — which would then be either a consolidated “European pillar“ of NATO or a “European army“, perhaps allied with the U.S. or perhaps not, but in any case under “European“ command, whatever this might be?

The story, here much simplified, begins with the unanimous commitment of NATO members in 2002, confirmed in 2014, to raise their military expenditures to two percent of their GDP. Essentially the addressee was Germany whose defense budget was and still is no more than roughly half of this; France and the UK, both nuclear powers, have long met the target due to the high cost of nuclear bombs, bombers, submarines and aircraft carriers. Conventional troops are cheap by comparison, but if you have to pay for nukes there may still not be enough money left for them. When the 2002 resolution was passed, the United States were busy making Putin’s Russia the successor of the Soviet Union as the archenemy of „the West“. The intention obviously was to bring back the good old days of Yeltsin from 1990 to

1999 when Russia, with its huge reserves of natural resources, was a favorite hunting ground for American business, very much like Ukraine today.

In military terms, of course, Russia is no more than a minor player, leaving aside its nuclear weaponry. If Germany did spend two percent of its GDP on its military, its “defense” budget — Germany’s alone! — would be about 40 percent higher than that of Russia. As an alliance, even without the United States, NATO is so far superior to Russia that a Russian attack on Western Europe is simply inconceivable; it would amount to willful suicide. This might be why the 2002 pledge was not really taken seriously by European countries, including Germany.

Enter Trump. It seems that originally Trump tried an isolationist foreign policy, extricating the United States from foreign entanglements, so as to please his Midwestern voters. But this was sabotaged by the “deep state“ of the US military complex in alliance with American oil and gas interests. Today, while the United States still doesn’t care much about NATO, it does care about Eastern Europe, as a pressure point against Russia and for geostrategic reasons related to the Western end of China’s New Silk Road. If Europe refuses to take part, or is (rightly) afraid of being hit if the Russian strategy of the U.S. was to go wrong, the American government is willing to act on its own, relying on its huge military presence in Germany as well as on additional troops currently being stationed in the Baltics and in Poland.

Today both Germany and France have lost confidence in the United States as a European ally. But France has a nuclear capacity (four submarines, one aircraft carrier, a bomber fleet) while Germany, squeezed between the four nuclear powers of the U.S., the UK, France and Russia, has none. Moreover, France has little interest in Eastern Europe while Germany needs it as a market and an extended workbench for its manufacturing industry. What is Eastern Europe for Germany is Western Africa for France; there it is involved in several postcolonial wars which it is losing. The United States cannot be asked for help as it has its own interests there; so France needs “Europe“, meaning a more heavily armed Germany supplying

ground troops for “anti-terrorist“ warfare, conducted under French diplomatic protection on the UN Security Council where, post Brexit, France is the only EU member with a permanent seat and a veto.

This puts Germany in an uncomfortable position. France, seeking „strategic autonomy“ (Macron), rhetorically for „Europe“ but *de facto*, things being the way they are, for France, wants Germany to contribute its two percent to an EU army instead of to NATO. Getting impatient over German procrastination, Macron declared NATO „braindead“; seeks accommodation with Putin, wondering publicly why Russia should be considered an enemy in the first place; and blocks extension of the EU to the West Balkans. But France also continues to let it be known that the French nuclear umbrella cannot be extended to other countries, not even to Germany; if push comes to shove, Paris will not be sacrificed for Berlin. The United States, on the other hand, has promised to defend Germany with nuclear arms if necessary; it was on this quid-pro-quo that Germany signed the nuclear nonproliferation treaty of 1968. Doubts always persisted though, and attempts to assuage them were a running story in post-war German foreign policy. Now, with Trump, such doubts are stronger than ever.

Hopes still exist among German political elites that after Trump things will return to what was deemed normal in the past. But most consider this unlikely. Still, hardly anyone in the German foreign policy establishment, apart perhaps from diehard Franco-German “special relation” European integrationists, wants the country to be second-in-command in a French-dominated NATO *Ersatz*. Presently a majority seem to be willing to live with the risks of American anti-Putinism, one of which is Russia modernizing its nuclear arsenal to balance a German conventional build-up. On the other hand, Germany cannot afford a split with France, if only because the appearance of a German-French *entente cordial* helps hide Germany’s hegemonic position in the EU. So yes on a European army, but only as a “European pillar“ of NATO, and not as a step towards an independent, French-led third force on equidistance between the United States and China. There is space for lots of ambiguity here that can be

played on to hide the deep rift with France. But while Merkel was always a grand master in duplicity, her successors, whoever they will be, won't be able to match her. (If there was a political constant in Merkel it was her loyalty to the United States; remember that as opposition leader she demanded that Germany join the American invasion of Iraq.) What is clear already now, however, is that its refusal, in fact inability, to choose in favor of France and "Europe" and against the U.S. and NATO makes it impossible for Germany to help Macron compensate for his domestic weakness by allowing him to present himself to the French public as the secret ruler of Europe and, by implication, of Germany. Remember that keeping Macron in power for another term has, from the moment he was elected, been one of the central objectives of German European policy. The future of "European integration" is becoming murkier by the day.