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Diverging French-German views

Which strategy to stop Putin's war?

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Although Europe provided a quick, united response to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a closer look at Franco-German strategies to stop Putin's war over the last two years reveals major differences. The Franco-German tandem, that supposedly leads any European action in such sensitive matters, appears

dysfunctional on multiple levels. Despite the main goal – stopping the war and freeing Ukraine from Russian forces – remaining unchanged and clear, unfortunately Germany and France's diverging approaches rarely coincide, and friction frequently emerges. Three main observations can be noted in this matter.

European versus NATO approaches

Firstly, it might seem paradoxical, but France and Germany both find comfort in their pre-war logic, even though essentially, they are contradictory.

France has invested heavily in a more European approach to defence. Its current President Emmanuel Macron has especially reiterated that the answer to Europe's security and defence issues do not lie in the transatlantic alliance since the US is increasingly a partner that cannot be relied. After the start of the war in Ukraine, strengthening European defence mechanisms, joint actions, and investing in European defence industries has, for France, become ever pressing and obvious.

Germany, however, has long relied on the American security umbrella and shown attachment to its US partner in defence issues. The European scale has not been a priority for Germany – not even investments in its own defence – since only NATO seemed capable of defending Germany, and Europe as a whole. After Russia's aggression, it became even clearer to Germany that NATO should be strengthened, and that Europe's partnership with the US remains vital to defeat Russia.

Significantly, however, certain elements have changed more radically



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French President Emmanuel Macron (left) and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin, 15 March 2024

for Germany, likewise for France¹, due to the war in Ukraine. Both have adapted their views to the new geopolitical reality and should theoretically have opened up to the possibility of more fruitful cooperation.

For instance, Emmanuel Macron has understood that NATO is indeed an integral part of European defence, it is not experiencing “brain death” as suggested in 2019, and that the transatlantic alliance needs to be fully engaged in the defence of Ukraine. In contrast to Germany, however, France believes this to be a short-term solution, as it is sceptical about any future reliance on the US. And so, the shift in the French doctrine has been slight, but still perceivable, and this might have impacted cooperation with Germany positively since their views now seem more aligned.

As for Germany, it was shocked by Russia’s move on Ukraine and on 27 February 2022 Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke of a “Zeitenwende”,² announcing a €100bn package devoted to its defence. Germany realised that it must take responsibility for its own security and not rely solely on the US, that it must contribute to European defence more generally, and that its partnership with France is vital – a realisation that should have brought it closer to its French neighbour who applauded the “Zeitenwende” speech at the time.

Both leaders have also drastically hardened their language against Russia and its president. At the beginning of the war, both tried to convince Putin through diplomacy to cease his attack. Today, Olaf Scholz and Emmanuel Macron both clearly stress that Russia needs to be defeated and diplomatic pathways

“Franco-German divisions are playing directly into Russian hands.”

have been shut down by both leaders. Statements such as “Russia’s defeat is essential” (Emmanuel Macron, February 2024) and “If the Russian president believes that he just has to sit this war out and that we will weaken our support, then he has miscalculated” (Olaf Scholz, March 2024) clearly illustrate this.

Over the last two years while Russia has been waging war in Ukraine, it is clear that “rapprochement” might have been expected between the two historic partners, but this has not taken place because the basic views of European defence and of how Europe should respond to the Russian attack have remained the same for France, as well as for Germany. This is mirrored in their actions which have not occurred in unison, but rather unilaterally.

Dispute over military aid for Ukraine

Secondly, the German decision to send US-Israeli rather than European military equipment to Ukraine – the latest decision being to deliver a third US Patriot air defence system in March 2024 – has led to major rifts as France insists on the need to buy European to strengthen the Union’s defence industry and, in fine, enhance its security sovereignty. Germany’s argument has

been that European equipment would not have been manufactured as fast, deeming France’s approach too unpragmatic in this emergency. France, however, views Germany’s approach to be too short-sighted.

Moreover, the French President’s suggestion of possible boots on the ground in Ukraine after the international conference in Paris in February 2024,³ led to Germany’s ire and a negative response by Olaf Scholz. This major disagreement came amidst debate over whether Germany would send Taurus systems to Ukraine – a decision against which the German chancellor voiced his firm opposition as he feared this would imply direct German involvement in the war. Trying to explain his decision, the chancellor said that “*what the British and French are doing in terms of target control and monitoring of target control cannot be done in Germany*”. France and Great Britain were surprised by a sensitive revelation such as this to the press which did not help smooth out Franco-German relations, on the contrary.

Misunderstanding and disappointment

Thirdly, finding common approaches in the future will be increasingly difficult as mistrust, misunderstandings, and disappointments continue to grow and are more frequent. Recurring accusations have meant that clichés have started to fly between German and French officials, the media and the public, without much will to understand each other.

Debate over figures issued by the Kieler Institute is an interesting example in that sense. According to its statistics, Germany is the second largest donor to Ukraine (after the US) with France providing less than half of the military aid that Germany does. France explains this disparity with various arguments, but significantly here Germany persists in saying that France is lagging considerably behind, and France constantly accuses Germany of not sending the most pertinent equipment.

The most fruitful strategy – a strong Franco-German tandem pushing for a coherent European approach – seems to be the one losing out. And this is the one clear conclusion that must be drawn. Franco-German divisions are playing directly into Russian hands, although their approaches could be complementary, and their views brought together in a constructive way. ■

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1 <https://bit.ly/3WWhrEfU>

2 <https://bit.ly/4d8HRKh>

3 <https://bit.ly/4dfayVF>