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50th Anniversary of the Elysée Treaty: The Franco-German Couple's "Golden Wedding" Celebration

Abstract :

For nearly three quarters of a century, generation after generation, from 1870 to 1945, the French have kept their eyes riveted on the "blue line of the Vosges", this horizon, a bearer of war, national defence and patriotic values. If we calculate almost year for year, without including the Napoleonic period of broken alliances, at a time when Germany was still but an idea, direct conflict between the Germans and French lasted 75 years. In view of the turbulent history of the European continent and with all respect due to the victims of three wars, 75 years is both a long period for the price of the blood spilled and little in terms of its relative duration: for nearly 75 years France and Germany have been at peace and with them, all of Europe, if we consider that the Cold War - a simple parenthesis - is, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990, far behind us. Fifty years after the signature of the cooperation treaty between General De Gaulle and Chancellor Adenauer, France and Germany have perpetuated the grand wager which they mutually committed to: the duo sometimes appears to be in a peaceful yet competitive duel. The friendship between Paris and Berlin is more demanding than any other on the continent because it influences them. The Germans are no longer the singular, even frightening inhabitants of a strange planet. They too have chosen Europe. On this anniversary we should remember that the latter face a simple choice: to exist via a relaxed, free Franco-German friendship or sink into historical stalemate.

At the end of the Second World War Germany no longer enjoyed the necessary conditions to recover the rank of an acknowledged power, since the idea of power was proscribed, buried in the ruins of the Third Reich. But this was without counting on the vision of just a few leading politicians who were driven by an unprecedented, overarching vision.

In August 1949, in support of an inspection mission in the Rhineland Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman met Konrad Adenauer in Koblenz, just before the advent of the Federal Constitution and before the candidature of the former Mayor of Cologne for the position of Chancellor. It was also six months before the major event which was to be the French proposal of the European Community of Steel and Coal (ECSC): a truly "revolutionary" idea was to become a reality in August 1952. The author of this idea was Jean Monnet who worked almost secretly in the discreet shadows of the rue Mar-

tignac in Paris, unbeknown to the government at the time, in short, he was Europe's maverick. According to Robert Schuman himself the project was supposed to have the effect of a bomb in May 1950. In this founding episode the pioneers were incredibly audacious. At the risk of a journalistic short cut which is not that of an historian - let's cut a few corners. Enter de Gaulle.

After some moments of highly symbolic prayer together in the Cathedral of Reims, after the military review of the French hussars and German grenadiers in joint manoeuvres at Mourmelon, of the triumphant journey by the General to Federal Germany, Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer signed the friendship and cooperation treaty between the two countries on 22nd January 1963 in Paris. That was fifty years ago. The Elysée Treaty, unique in its kind, almost united French and Federal Germany "institutionally" together in a detailed agreement which existed nowhere else in the world.

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And so the visionary founding fathers wrote a page of history. The first Frenchman to fight against Germany during the War was the first (or one of the first) to hold out his hand – to the Patriarch of Rhöndorf, who had never collaborated with the Nazi regime. It is as if the two Statesmen accomplished an impossible dream and turned this almost “surreal” dream into reality. They opened an important historical chapter and their successors had to write the sequel after experiencing some temporary difficulties. And this continues today ... Before retiring to Colombey, de Gaulle convened his ministers and said *“Gentlemen never forget that for France, there can be no other alternative but friendship with Germany.”* Now, to qualify Franco-German relations we shall speak of the “couple” – the term which is more appropriate than “tandem” (in a tandem said Helmut Schmidt, both pedal but only one drives) or worse still “axis”, which holds negative connotations in view of history.

As with all couples there have been highs and lows, temporary crises, with progress being made in fits and starts, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, but to date there has been no long term divorce. It is according to this idea of the couple that we can review the fifty years of this marriage of convenience, since the Romanticism and the passion of the beginning have tended to fade somewhat. Anecdotes of relations between people highlight the story between States. It reveals the hidden façade of official press releases published after the now routine Franco-German Summits. It comprises various phases that bear the mark of the protagonists in office in each of the countries. It is particularly interesting to note that in the main, democratic alternation in France and Germany has led to agreements on politically opposite fronts, even though the extremely binary left-right classification cannot really cover the more subtle nature of the cooperation that was decided upon and codified in 1963: the Franco-German relationship is often played in the centre with each side taking a step towards the other in a bid to compromise on a middle-road. Following a time-line we see a sequence of events in the grand film covering the fifty years of Franco-German relations. Just for the record starting with the origins of the Treaty:

De Gaulle-Adenauer, the founding visionaries (1958-1963)

We cannot really speak of “love at first sight” between these two Statesmen. When they met for the first time, the second was mistrustful of the first. Their mutual esteem, then their friendship, grew gradually. To the prophetic warmth of the project to bring France and Germany together, followed at first with mitigated affinity, mixed with the curiosity of the two peoples, we might add the realistic coldness of a political calculation. Wouldn't there be a leadership problem in Franco-German led Europe sooner or later – between the two leaders of its management team notwithstanding the external problem of independence and the ostracism of other powers, particularly the USA? Neither party placed exactly the same hopes in the marriage dowry. The old man of Rhöndorf was not totally ready to follow the general over the sharp hills of a solitary Europe. For the Germans the dilemma lay in not wandering too far from the American big brother, who was supposed to watch over their security on the Eastern front. And the memory of the salutary Marshall plan was still high in their minds. But in all the patriarchs knew they were making History and that they were undertaking a sacred mission, that of reconciliation.

De Gaulle-Erhard or the intermediary of the German economic miracle (1963-1966)

The Franco-German friendship, which was launched on an extremely pro-active policy was already running into the rut of routine. Adenauer's successor, Chancellor Ludwig Erhard, the father of Rhineland capitalism, seemed to more concerned about German economic success than the grand European policy. He played the game but relations were strained. In Bonn there was a German Gaullist and an anti-Gaullist clan. Maurice Couve de Murville and Gerhard Schroeder (a simple homonym) went for weeks without speaking to one another. Federal Germany, which was boosted by its remarkable success, started to rule the markets, and competition between the two countries emerged, and this has continued over the last fifty years. Pause, yes, separation, no.

De Gaulle-Kurt Georg Kiesinger: the measured consolidators (1966-1969)

Under Kurt G. Kiesinger Franco-German relations improved slightly. Misunderstandings were slowly ironed

out. The new Chancellor who liked to speak French was representative of the Christian-Democratic staff and quite a remarkable Francophile. The Foreign Minister and Vice-Chancellor in the grand coalition with the Social Democrats was none other than Willy Brandt, who tried, in spite of everything, to close his eyes on Kiesinger's past membership of the National Socialist Party (from 1933 to 1945), and his role as subordinate to Goebbels. He undertook his Franco-German apprenticeship under the benevolent eye of a major Social Democrat, Carlo Schmid, a fervent defender of good relations with Paris.

Georges Pompidou-Willy Brandt: pragmatic realists (1969-1974)

With President Georges Pompidou and Chancellor Willy Brandt a new era in "exemplary but non-exclusive" relations was launched. The two men appreciated their reciprocal realism, but only enjoyed an average relationship. With Edward Heath Pompidou rediscovered the "entente cordiale" with London. The danger of a "ménage à trios" in Europe started to emerge, without ever becoming a reality. For his part Willy Brandt patiently undertook his famous "Ostpolitik" with Warsaw, Moscow and East Berlin, which Paris viewed with somewhat suspicion, since it had not forgotten that the rapprochement policy with the East – from the beginning – was France's domain – and singularly that of de Gaulle. In sum the Franco-German period of "Europe stone by stone" or step by step had come, on the basis of tacit competition. A cruise was organised on the Rhine for the French President's birthday but relations were cool. Moreover and in spite of the "Thirty glorious" years and of France's modernisation under Pompidou – Germany's economic superiority became increasingly evident. The French started to fear Finlandisation which was linked to Germany's "normalisation". The Rapallo complex reared its head again [1]. This episode in Franco-German relations ended dramatically with Georges Pompidou's early death and Willy Brandt's resignation, after his embarrassment in the scandal with the East German spy, Guillaume.

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing-Helmut Schmidt : the pro-active idealists (1974-1981)

Change in men, change in style, change in pace. In

Willy Brandt's Germany it was a time for moral reconstruction and in particular the "Warschauer Kniefall", a gesture of repentance. With Helmut Schmidt there came managerial action. In France with Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the Helmut-Valéry period was freer, more open. The two men met when they were Finance Ministers – and often worked together – on the sidelines of the Franco-German summits as if they were preparing for what came next. As many observers commented, the Chancellor and the President "addressed each other familiarly" in English – a language they both mastered perfectly. Inflation was the main concern. The term "parallelism" became the leitmotif in the vocabulary of Franco-Germany policy: parallel reduction of inflation rates, parallelism in economic developments. As is often the case in Paris-Bonn relations, the Chancellor, above all a citizen of Hamburg, at first turned seawards and to the Anglo-Saxon world. But very quickly Giscard and Schmidt became inseparable (and still are today). They decentralised the twice-yearly Franco-German summits to the provinces, as planned for in the 1963 treaty, alternating between Paris and Bonn. Should we interpret this period, often qualified as "idyllic" as a sign – since Valéry Giscard d'Estaing took office on 19th May 1974 and Helmut Schmidt, on the 6th, some two weeks earlier? During the Guadeloupe Summit at the beginning of 1979 Giscard even invited Schmidt alongside Jimmy Carter and James Callaghan, introducing him to the "big league".

The oil crisis and the "currency snake" and even the community strong currency snake were on the agenda of what our European neighbours grievingly called "the Franco-German torque". The obvious complicity between Paris and Bonn – unequalled afterwards – irritated the partners of both France and Germany who formed a kind of tacit management team for European integration, in spite of the skill and manoeuvring of their diplomats, headed by Jean François-Poncet, an excellent Germanist and brilliant Foreign Minister from 1978 to 1981. The extremely moderate left led by Schmidt and the modernist right led by Giscard really did meet in the middle of the political playing field and also of Europe.

1. Rapallo, a town in Italy where in 1922 Russians and German revived their diplomatic relations, three years after the end of the first world war.

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François Mitterrand–Helmut Kohl: passionate calculators (1982-1995)

We might have expected a rift between Mitterrand and Kohl. The political couple switched positions (we should also note that once more the left and the rightwing is absent from the Franco-German couple). True friendship formed between two men who succeeded in combining the passion and great political freedom shared by both. In this long relationship there were some rather sensitive moments. The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9th November 1989, then the reunification on 3rd October 1990 were amongst these. Kohl's readiness to "take hold of the cloak of history" to bring down the Wall with the complicity of Mikhail Gorbachev and the German population's enthusiasm, followed by the forced march to reunification, possibly caught François Mitterrand off guard.

Hesitation, dithering, playing a multiple game with Margaret Thatcher? These questions in the tumultuous history of the Franco-German couple will probably never be answered in full. There was a move over from Bonn, the "federal village", the "Parisian suburb" – the capital desired by Konrad Adenauer in 1949, to Berlin, the sprawling "Hauptstadt" at the cross-roads of the East and the West. Suddenly re-unified Germany comprised 80 million inhabitants, which reminded us of Mauriac when he said *"I love Germany so much that I prefer there to be two of them ..."* It was enough to shake the French, but this outdated concept was soon eclipsed by the true friendship that united the two men. Beyond the doubts nothing – in all appearance – would change in the Franco-German relationship, which, against all odds was decidedly indestructible. The gladly imperious side of the French President and the false bonhomie of the German Chancellor seemed to serve as a balance in this new, extremely subtle relationship.

Well before the major change in history that came with the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9th November 1989, the image of Verdun, an incommensurable event of the century, will remain as François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl held hands in front of the whole world: an unforgettable moment in Franco-German history. In the meantime Germany gave up its sacrosanct Deutsche-

mark and the euro was born thanks to the sacrifice accepted by the Chancellor.

Some audacious comments summed up this key phase, in the choice words of "the euro in exchange for reunification." This relatively intense period in Franco-German relations should be seen through the extremely personal prism of two strong personalities, who never lost sight of what Europe meant, at a time when all points of reference were shifting and when the world changed appearance. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Cold War Europe collapsed like a pack of cards in the East. The monolithic "block" was replaced by a myriad of freed States, which sooner or later, were bound to integrate Europe that was still a formidable pole of attraction.

Jacques Chirac-Gerhard Schröder: peaceful partners (1998-2005)

On the face of it the former leftist Schröder and Chirac, the political stuntman, had very little in common. At first the Chancellor temporarily turned towards Atlanticism and the Anglo-Saxons. But the Franco-German path was decidedly far too well defined for him to drift from it long term. It is always returned to fast - and the French President and the German Chancellor found a *modus Vivendi*, a middle ground far from set ideology and readymade theories. They started what we might casually call "buddy moments". In Blaesheim and even "Chez Yvonne" in Strasbourg, they initiated a new type of informal tête-à-tête summit over a beer or a hearty meal. Conviviality was the watchword. But the content of their discussions was much more serious since they decided together not to take either France or Germany into the Iraq war: quite an eloquent illustration of the anecdote becoming a major element of history marking their complicity profoundly. In the eyes of the public their decision was serious bearing the stamp of a certain independence of mind. In the main both public opinions approved of what they did.

At the beginning of his second term in office, which he never completed, Schröder launched a series of drastic reforms, under the constraint of unemployment and poor economic figures, (Agenda 2010) which ultimately put his country back on a growth path. By doing

this he re-invented modern social democracy, at the price of electoral defeat against Angela Merkel in 2005.

The transition between the first woman Chancellor in German history and President Chirac, until the end of his term in office in 2007, took place harmoniously with a hand-kiss that became a tradition and was visibly appreciated.

Angela Merkel- Nicolas Sarkozy: iconoclastic heirs (2007-2012)

Nicolas and Angela. Sarkozy and Merkel: for the first time they comprised a true male-female coup in Franco-German rapprochement. They were also from the same political trend, right-centre right. They also had another thing in common: in a way – and in a political sense of the term – they killed their father – she, Kohl and he, Chirac. When they first made contact (in 2007, when Angela Merkel had been in power for two years already, they sized each other up, and *a priori* they had nothing in common. They were mutually puzzled by each other, and making a virtue of necessity there was a rapprochement: having won each other over they adhered to the path of their predecessors, but according to a specific manner and style. However, at the start of their journey together observers did not think their relationship would last and gladly gloated over the superiority or the advantage held by one over the other: the expression “Merkozy” flourished in the press. Would the degree of German slowness which was always calculated combine well with a certain degree of French hyperactivity? Observation-fascination? In Berlin people wondered at “this omnipresent Frenchmen who moved so fast.” One thing was certain: the European and world monetary situation was in the red. Beyond the subtleties and inevitable differences in approach Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy faced the storm together at Europe's helm. And we have to admit that temporarily at least they succeeded in saving the day. If it had been the opposite way round what would have happened? Again a degree of Franco-German leadership asserted itself in Brussels and elsewhere. But domestic and international criticism was rife – fed by the rise of anti-German feeling particularly in France and in the countries of Southern Europe. This temporary anti-German feeling merged into an anti-European

sentiment without however it ever reaching the stage of an irreversible rejection of Europe.

Angela Merkel-François Hollande: the new competitors (2012-)

The story of this new couple still has to be written. It has just started. Franco-German relations are in a “halfway house; it is a kind of observation period with some “arm-wrestling” occurring between Merkel and Hollande. This diagnosis is a euphemism: some experts are more alarmist than others and go as far as to say that the Paris-Berlin relationship is “waving” We might have thought – if we look closely – that Angela Merkel and François Hollande's personalities would have been closer than the Chancellor and the former French President. A certain amount of reserve should be employed. The demonstrative side of the Franco-German relationship is being erased to a certain extent, fading to the benefit of a more distant, less “tactile” image. The most accomplished diplomats give us some clues on this. Angela Merkel, who was raised in the East in a culture of dissimulation – inherent to all survival in the regime of the former GDR – is giving nothing away. She is not a gambler – she does not place bets, she calculates. She does not improvise and allows her decisions to mature; this is why the time of response is not the same as in Paris, where we sometimes feel, wrongly, that she is hesitating. After all in well-informed quarters – as Laurent Fabius, the French Foreign Minister likes to say “*we always wrongly believe that the Germans are French who speak German.*” In short the period of time it is taking for the new Franco-German couple to get to know each seems long and full of obstacles. On an official, high level visit to Berlin, the Social Democratic opposition is paid a visit: this is the response made by the shepherd to the shepherdess, who supported Nicolas Sarkozy in the last electoral campaign in France. Angela Merkel is keeping an eye on the elections she faces in September 2013. However she dares to give signs of hope to Greece, which is not really appreciated at home, and seems to want to ease the situation when she says that she understands that – rightly or wrongly – that no “second front” has been opened comprising France, Italy and Spain against Germany.

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An historical paradox and surprise: the first visible effusion of friendship took place on 22nd September 2012 in Ludwigsburg, on the 50th anniversary of De Gaulle's triumphant visit to Germany. This was the first joint public walkabout and the first real, apparently sincere hug. Angela Merkel and François Hollande each called on the general's spirit, exalting the absolute need for Franco-German 'entente' for European integration. In both the real and figurative sense the sun came out from behind the clouds. The barometer indicated settled weather ahead. Bravely François Holland even tried to express himself in German: „Es lebe die deutsch-französische Freundschaft“, a variant of „Long Live Franco-German Youth“ expressed in French by Angela Merkel.

It remains that the coordination or at least the rapprochement of the policies undertaken by Paris and Berlin will require greater consultation in terms of the structural reform to be accomplished if the economies of Europe are to be consolidated. Privately, in diplomatic and ministerial circles in Berlin, there is a certain pessimism about the present state of Franco-German relations, even if their validity and their necessity are not being questioned. The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union was the occasion – arms raised as a sign of friendship – for a demonstration of proximity between the President and the Chancellor to the audience in Oslo. But undoubtedly it will take more than this gesture for the convergence of their points of view: undoubtedly time and most certainly political will.

In conclusion to this panorama of the fifty years that have passed since the signature of the Elysée Treaty

– only one thing is certain: the commemorative ceremonies on 22nd January in Berlin will not just be symbolic. They will be vital for the future of Franco-German friendship and cooperation. They should herald the true desire for revival, to emerge with dignity from a situation in which the two countries seem to be lacking an essential spark. A share of soul and dreams which the Europeans need can only come from France and German united in a joint effort towards creating “more Europe.” There will always be ones who follow and the ones who don't. Sooner or later we shall have to choose between an ad hoc Europe in which we cherry pick according to our national interests and a Europe in which slightly more federalism would not be incongruous or even a swear word, without us having to fold our flags away. If this doesn't happen, an entire generation of demotivated youth, from Paris to Berlin, will give up hope. A culture that has been patiently shaped will simply fade away. As we stand before the Founding Fathers and their various successors who, year after year, maintained the Franco-German flame, no head of State or government can assume the responsibility of allowing it, slowly but surely, to go out.



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