

European interview

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# « Ten urgent Franco-German inputs for Europe »

## What is your assessment of the situation in Europe?

In recent years, political and economic upheavals have accelerated: the ongoing migration crisis, the spillover of the conflictual relationship between the United States and China, the global pandemic, the energy crisis, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine and the conflict over Gaza following the terrorist attack by Hamas. Faced with this growing insecurity and volatility, the European Union has shown to be only partially united, or even convincing: in some respects, Europe seems to be rather more on the defensive. It is far from achieving its objective of being a global player on the same level as the United States or China on the international scale, and is unable to demonstrate a real strategy to tackle these accumulated challenges and, above all, to convince Europe's populations. In the light of the electoral trends, we have been observing for some time in various Member States, the European elections in June 2024 may even further jeopardise the strength and prospects of the European Union, as well as its operational capacities. Under these conditions, how can we ensure its credibility and cohesion in a deeply troubled world? An ambitious programme of consolidation and reinsurance is a political necessity now more than ever. Such a programme, initiated by Paris and Berlin, should provide a common compass for the Union over the next five years. In my view this comprises 10 urgent inputs.

## What would the first of these urgent inputs be?

Firstly, the survival of the hard core of integration - our European internal market and its economic and social model - must be secured, reviewed, modernised, debureaucratized and strengthened, because this

remains a constant challenge. So far, it seems that the opposite attitude prevails, despite the fine words on one side and another. There is still no real driving force! In Brussels, both the Commission and the European Parliament should finally focus on what is essential at European level, and the Member States should give up their national bureaucratic perfectionism. Europe's "[strategic autonomy](#)" should form our basic common objective. The European Union must defend its vital interests and avoid overdependence on one partner and/or competitor, and instead advocate diversification. To that end, it is up to us to reduce, if not choose, our dependence and further develop our relations with the United States, China and other partners on the basis based on strict reciprocity to ensure free trade and mutual investments.

## Does this incentive not require a new impetus for research?

European [research](#) urgently needs a new strategic impetus to reduce Europe's growing gap with the United States and China in the technologies of the future. To date the inertia of national and European institutions and their timidity in the face of the risks involved in research have so far blocked any fundamental change. But only a revolution in mind and approach can put us back at the forefront of progress. Finally, let us have the courage to introduce the methods of the American DARPA for major «disruptive» projects, which has been the basis of a real revolution and great success stories in the United States since 1958 as a response to Soviet Sputnik. Needless to say, the last major Franco-German research initiative - "[Eureka](#)" - dated back almost forty years ago!

## 02

**In the Franco-German relationship, isn't the main disagreement about energy?**

In order to achieve its objectives in the fight against climate change, the European Union is called upon to finally adopt a «common» energy policy that includes renewable energies, hydrogen and the means for a long-term transition, such as gas and... nuclear power. Europe once again needs a genuine historic compromise, like the one that formed the foundations of modern Europe seventy-three years ago - together we should create a «new» ECSC, accept the choices of our neighbours and get over our ideological reflexes. We must not fall from one uncontrolled, or uncontrollable, dependency into another. We must be open, and rapidly establish a genuine pan-European «network» integrating common cross-border infrastructures, at the level of common challenges ahead, that can carry out «split-second» interchanges between our countries to ensure the stability of the networks and generate considerable savings. Such a network could also contribute to the flexibility that we shall need, in particular because of delays and difficulties in national and European programmes aimed at gradually reducing CO2 emissions towards carbon neutrality, ([net zero](#))!

**One of the major steps forward was the introduction of the euro. How does the land lie today?**

The single currency system is still incomplete. Progress towards a Banking union and a Capital markets union is stalling. We remain blocked by fundamental disagreements based on national preferences and because of our existing structures. The European Stability Mechanism ([ESM](#)) should become a genuine «European Monetary Fund»! This gap is incomprehensible on the international stage! Only a clear «roadmap» from the Heads of State and Government can take us forward quickly and strengthen the euro against other currencies internationally, in particular the dollar. It is clear that the [Stability and Growth Pact](#) will need adjustment in the light of external and internal changes, or conditions, as well as clear criteria, such as the deleveraging of Member States to ensure the credibility of the euro. In this

context, it is particularly difficult to understand why defence expenditure as well as investment to secure our future should be treated in the same way as regular expenditure.

**What do you think Europe should do about immigration, asylum and protection?**

Finally, we should begin to take seriously the need for a coherent internal security policy on immigration, asylum, police and judicial cooperation, and the protection of our borders. This is an essential issue to regain the confidence of citizens. Otherwise "[Schengen](#)" may risk to be the gravedigger of a free and open Europe! Our first steps and initiatives date back more than thirty years. If we were honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that we have only achieved perhaps a third of what is needed. Admittedly, these are very sensitive issues, but when faced with these challenges and the reality of Europe, observers must be stunned to learn that pragmatic and effective solutions exist and have been on the table for years. Our Heads of State and Government should give clear instructions to the Home and Justice Ministers, with a precise timetable and clear objectives to be achieved.

**The neighbourhood and enlargement policies are back in the spotlight. What do you recommend?**

Relations with our neighbours - in particular with the «half-moon» of nations around us - must be reviewed without delay! Not just because of the war in Ukraine or the Middle East, but because we are now facing a situation of failure. All of these relationships - from Russia to the Middle East, from North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa - need to be rebuilt. There is no point in complaining about the lack of a foreign and neighbourhood policy. Europe now faces the most serious international crisis since the end of the Cold War. It is up to us to review and develop our so-called common foreign policy «strategy» by focusing on priorities centred on our vital interests. No one wanted to see that the latent conflict between Russia and Ukraine, concealed for a long time by an «agreement to disagree», would one day erupt if we failed to find a compromise solution acceptable to the two

«brother-enemies». Let's stop looking for the culprits of such a development. Our political classes have been sleepwalking for two decades. There is an urgent need to think and act in favour of a peaceful solution, at least a temporary one. That was the reason for the appeal written with Nicole Gnesotto shortly before the outbreak of war<sup>[1]</sup>. It goes without saying that the European Union supports Ukraine against Russian aggression, but it must not lose sight of the ways out of this conflict and the future of our relations with our European neighbours. It is incomprehensible that the European Union was in no way prepared for the conflict in the Middle East. So far, it has been unable to speak with one voice, and the last time there was any strategic thinking to help overcome this was more than two decades ago. The prospects of the countries of the Western Balkans must be of concern to every European citizen. There is an urgent need to develop a credible perspective, a tailor-made support programme for each of these six countries. Admittedly, the integration of these countries and a Europe of more than 30 members seems to highlight the traditional dilemma of «enlargement and deepening», but it is up to us to find an intelligent and pragmatic solution if we do not wish to lose them and risk a new powder keg in this region. Nobody talks about Turkey's accession anymore; has it become a kind of «mission impossible»? Not necessarily. It is up to us to find a way to anchor this key partner more firmly to Europe. I dare to recommend the following system: Why not proceed by step and first bring Turkey into the internal market as a full member and then, after a decade, consider how we can achieve the ultimate objective?

### **Isn't another of the urgent inputs a new policy for and with Africa?**

Africa is our neighbour to the South, and its importance for our future still seems to be underestimated - a large market on our doorstep, a continent with major risks for us - to mention only migration and terrorism. We are gradually losing ground there to China with its «New Silk Roads» programme, to the Russians with the Wagner military group and also to Turkey. An in-depth review of our African policy is required. It is up to us - without imposing it - to support the creation of

a common African market step by step and region by region, and above all to listen to our neighbours about their objectives and then develop this cooperation jointly. And let us stop trying at all costs to export our «values», on which we are less united than the European Court of Justice or we ourselves claim to be! The world around us has different convictions, so we should focus on what is feasible for our policies and our industries, and, for example, develop an interest in our ideas about economic and social management.

### **What about transatlantic relations?**

Our relations with the United States and Canada also deserve careful consideration. Before the next American elections in November 2024, we should propose to the Americans and Canadians a «new transatlantic deal» covering defence, trade and investment, as well as international coordination on issues of common interest! The Americans protect us and for years have rightly accused us for not contributing enough to our own security and defence. The Europeans have accepted, for those of us who haven't already done so, the target of spending 2% of GDP on defence - without actually delivering on the promise. It is now up to us to conclude with Americans the creation of a European pillar within NATO. The Americans will have to accept a genuine autonomous European defence, just as the Europeans will have to accept a common defence with some American leadership. In this context, Joschka Fischer was right to relaunch the debate regarding a European nuclear force, for which the French and British forces constitute an essential base.

### **War has reappeared in Europe again. How can we better ensure our defence?**

European defence is still in its infancy. The European «[strategic compass](#)» is certainly a serious step forward, but the European heads of State and government must instruct their defence ministers to draw up an ambitious roadmap to be implemented in stages, by bringing our « mindsets » and our approaches to the use of our armies closer together. It is a matter of gradually creating common training and joint structures - a real European «headquarters» should have existed several

<sup>[1]</sup> [Le Monde](#) 8 February 2022

years ago, as well as a military academy. We need to start thinking about possible specialisations between our armies and about joint units - not a European army, but ultimately a joint army of European nations. We have no alternative in fact but to develop a genuine European defence industry, with the same rules as those in force within NATO, procurement by and from European governments and excluding VAT! Finally, the use of the two existing institutions the European Defence Agency ([EDA](#)) and the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation ([OCCAr](#)), as well as the sharing of the best weapons systems should be the norm as multi-nation projects. Defence ministers should - like finance ministers in the euro area - elect one of their peers to chair the Defence Council, who should also chair the EDA.

#### **Won't all of this affect European governance?**

How should the institutions be developed to take forward an enlarged Europe of more than 30 members in the medium term? Is it a question of moving openly towards a multi-circle or multi-speed Europe? We must first reform our policies before tackling this tricky issue and use the existing means of the Lisbon Treaty! We should stop endlessly and blindly repeating the plea for generalised qualified majority voting as the supreme remedy - a vote that already settles 80% of EU issues! Are France and Germany really prepared to stand aside in vital areas such as defence, foreign policy or the economy and finance? Don't our vote weighting rules deserve to be re-examined with a view to a Europe of 30 or more? Why not intelligently apply a new "[Luxembourg Compromise](#)" to overcome through targeted negotiation the threat of a veto by one Member State? That is the deep meaning of this compromise, successfully developed over fifty years ago by German diplomats to overcome the «empty chair policy» practised by General de Gaulle's France! This does not exclude, if

necessary, finding a positive way out, opting for an intelligent route, that matches the wishes and convictions of the vast majority of Member States. In almost twenty years of my involvement with the European institutions, I have witnessed crucial moments when this was achieved through the wisdom of great Europeans. Finally, how can we get the national parliaments more involved in the European concert? For years I have been advocating the idea of a European Senate made up of a limited number of national parliamentarians with well-defined competences - an institution that could perhaps complicate our institutional network, but which could undoubtedly one day provide a means of ratifying any changes to the Treaties. The European Union and its Member States must learn more about how to «co-exist constructively» and cooperate, if necessary, by entrusting a specific dossier, or an area, to a Member State or even to a person as «leader». It is urgent to think about innovative structures and decision-making processes.

#### **What message would you like to send to the younger generation?**

European citizens observe European institutions and policies with growing scepticism and even mistrust. They have the right and the need to be (re)assured that Europe is on the right track, that it is guiding them and protecting them. [Die Zeitenwende](#), the change of era, is not yet sustainable, neither for Germany nor for France, either in the fields of energy or defence, nor in the other areas fundamental to Europe's survival. Now more than ever, our common integration needs a genuine, realistic leap forward, a "[Ruck](#)" (jolt) in the words of German President Roman Herzog in 1997. The Franco-German relationship has experienced its ups and downs, but it remains the hard core and fundamental basis of European

integration. It must assume its responsibilities, together and with the help of its partners and friends who are watching it with great attention! The political task remains tough and the ten inputs set out here represent the key challenges that the European Union has to face. It involves relentlessly translating and deciphering the opinions, attitudes, perceptions and positions of the two countries and their partners – taking conscious stock and uncompromising inventory of the situation, defusing the terrain sometimes so as not to jeopardise the European

venture, to take it forward more effectively. It is a task that may sometimes recall Sisyphus or Don Quixote, but nowadays it is more essential than ever to ensure the survival of our countries and that of Europe.

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**Joachim Bitterlich**

Former Ambassador, former European, Diplomatic and Security Advisor to Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Professor at the ESCP, member of the Scientific Committee of the Foundation.

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Publishing director : Pascale JOANNIN  
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