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France – Germany– Europe: taking back control of our future

1. OBSERVATIONS

The current state of Franco-German relations can hardly be described as satisfactory or positive; it is worrying and great cause for concern: Are we in fact facing a '*cordial disagreement*'? Is this mission impossible? Not quite, but it will require courage and a return to basics.

The attempt to revive the relationship in 2019 through the Aachen Treaty failed to provide either new impetus or new objectives. The 15 points of the Aachen Agenda clearly lack fresh political impetus. Nevertheless, there is one exception worth defending: [the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly](#), which got off to a good start at both the National Assembly/Bundestag and the Senate/Bundesrat levels – the sole positive aspect of the Aachen Treaty.

During my political career I was fortunate enough to have experienced an extraordinary period of Franco-German – and, consequently, European – transition, marked by crises, ups and downs, but also by major successes and political breakthroughs.

The objectives that were set for this period were not fully achieved, but it did at least lay the foundations for a shared future direction: we took a huge step forward with the euro, whilst other areas remained relatively underdeveloped; the most difficult question of internal security has remained and the 'common' foreign policy is an illusion!

Since then, our countries – and Europe – have generally moved forward in a sort of '*crisis management*' mode, but without ever achieving

consolidation or making any real progress. We have not provided our countries – or Europe – with the means to cope with an environment that has changed significantly since then.

2022 marked the latest '*Zeitenwende*' (turning point) from which we are only just beginning to draw conclusions – panic-stricken and without a clear strategy. And also, it might be added without having learnt from other previous upheavals that have occurred since 2001 – the 2001 attacks on the United States, the 2007 banking and financial crisis, the 2014–2015 migration crisis, the rapid advancement of new technologies, and so on. During this period, we have taken only short-term measures and have failed to dispel many illusions.

For two decades, despite the euro, French and German societies – both political and economic – have not grown closer. On the contrary, we are drifting further apart. In other words, they have largely failed to rise to the challenge of drawing the necessary and vital conclusions.

2. THE DOMESTIC SITUATION IN BOTH COUNTRIES

To a large extent, an explanation for this lies in our domestic circumstances. The situation appears precarious on both sides of the Rhine, though more so in France than in Germany.

France

The country is gearing up for a presidential election – arguably the most challenging in the history of the Fifth Republic – with the risk of

having no clear parliamentary majority as a result. The political class does not seem — at least so far — to be rising to the challenge.

For a good twenty years now, France has not seemed capable of completing the reforms necessary; its debt is rising and poses serious risks; the country seems paralysed, fearing the two parties that lie on either end of the political extreme with a fragmented centre offering multiple candidates.

Despite everything, France has always found the strength to bounce back; but when will that be this time round? I sincerely hope it will be soon!

The three key factors for this are the economic and social situation and the necessary reforms; budgetary margins and debt; and growing concerns regarding internal security. And one could add a fourth: the future identity of France, with a population of immigrant origin exceeding in reality 15%, leading to a reinterpretation of secularism?

I would add two fundamental underlying issues that apply to both our countries: the loss of 'control' or 'trust' and the consequences that we are witnessing in both Germany and France – and the lack of leadership and credible political figures.

And in Germany?

A few weeks ago, the French press reported with some glee that there had been a "mutiny" within the CDU against Friedrich Merz. It should have added that the same situation prevails within the SPD.

Does this mean a government "on borrowed time"? In any case, there is a coalition that has so far failed to seize new opportunities.

On 2 July, the '*stimulus and employment*' measures presented by the CDU/SPD coalition restored hope regarding pensions, healthcare, work, employment and taxation, following a 'hiatus' in reforms and genuine adjustments since 2003! Since then, rebels have been on the move ... on both sides! This is

particularly baffling when one looks closely, for example, at the 'pensions' package: a cross-party commission presented a historic compromise, including a version modelled on the Swedish system. Intensive efforts are now underway to reopen this package, which was, after all, very well-balanced. What is missing, however, is a vision for the future of the German economy, whose model has been rendered obsolete by developments over the last two decades. Otherwise, Germany could very well become an "*industrial museum*".

It remains to be seen in the coming months how the reforms will be implemented against an extremely tense backdrop! Even though few observers are betting on this government surviving until the end of the parliamentary term in March 2029, I can see few alternatives to the current government and the Merz-Klingbeil 'tandem'.

The CDU does not appear resolute enough, with a Chancellor who often acts spontaneously — some would say clumsily. One of the main problems stems from the CSU and its leader Markus Söder, as well as, to some extent, from the calibre of its own staff. The SPD is '*searching for its identity*', with disastrous poll ratings and a 'revolt' that has gone as far as the threat of an extraordinary party conference in the autumn. In the opposition, the Greens are also struggling to find their identity, divided between a liberal-conservative faction (Cem Özdemir, Franziska Brantner) and one on the left – which bears joint responsibility, amongst other things, for the energy disaster of the last two decades ("*Trittin*"). And now there is a new phenomenon: Die Linke, a party with its roots in the former communist movement, which is polling at over 10 per cent.

What they all have in common is a fear of the AfD. The problem is that the three major parties are chasing after this right-wing party without applying an old rule of politics learnt from Helmut Kohl and Helmut Schmidt: once you have lost the public's trust, it is difficult to regain it. There is only one solution: to strive to take the lead on critical issues and set an agenda that clearly meets the public's expectations.

There is too much talk of a “*Brandmauer*” against this party instead of highlighting solutions to the country’s concerns.

Furthermore, it must be remembered that Helmut Kohl and Willy Brandt had another fundamental agreement: not to tolerate a party to their right, or indeed to their left – a principle that has been challenged since reunification.

In Germany, elections are being held in September

Firstly, in [Saxony-Anhalt](#) on 6 September, the AfD came out well ahead with 43.8% (and 39 seats, up 16), but fell short of the absolute majority of 42 seats. The CDU saw its support plummet to 17.2% (15 seats, down 25). Next came the SPD with 9.3%, the Greens with 8.9% and The Left (Die Linke) with 8.6% (each with 8 seats). Finally, Sarah Wagenknecht’s movement (BSW), with 5.3% (5 seats), exceeded the 5% threshold required to be represented.

Taking place fifteen days later, on 20 September, the elections in [Berlin](#) have also revealed ‘shocking’ poll results: Die Linke is said to be in the lead with 19–22%, followed by the CDU with 18–20%, then the AfD with 17–18%, the Greens at 16% and, finally, the SPD at 12–15%.

On the same day, in [Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania](#), the polls put the AfD in the lead with 36%, followed by the SPD on 29%, Die Linke on 11%, the CDU on 10%, and the Greens on 4.8%.

I’ll venture a prognosis: the AfD will not yet be part of the next governments, either at state or federal level. But Germany is becoming harder to govern! However, if the traditional parties continue to ‘sleepwalk’, they are taking huge risks for the future.

3. KICK STARTING THE TANDEM

This sombre description rings true at a time of crisis in Europe and beyond. Where is the much-vaunted

Franco-German engine? It would seem it has run out of both oil and gasoline – has electrification brought it to a standstill?

I do not like to speak of the ‘couple’, but rather of the ‘tandem’ – necessary, but not enough for Europe – which should finally take charge of its shared responsibility to lead, or at least help steer, Europe, given the European and international constraints.

Our partners expect a minimum of Franco-German unity, joint initiatives, or at least a common stance – they may not like this alliance, but they are aware of its necessity as we approach the ‘*moment of truth*’ for both our countries and for Europe.

From the outside, it seems as though Berlin and Paris are ‘deaf’ (and are in the illusion that all is well), yet both are doing everything they can to stoke fear of one another. What seems to link Paris and Berlin is rather more mutual mistrust, jealousy, contempt, envy and recriminations – which, it seems, are quite often based on a lack of real knowledge of ‘the other’^[1] and especially of political realities.

One example is the French argument regarding a “remilitarisation of Germany” – a dangerous and misleading notion that has been regularly put forward in Paris in recent months without any consideration of the reality of Germany’s defence capabilities. The Germans need at least 20 years of catching up to do. This mistrust is fuelled by Germany’s aim to eventually build the largest conventional army in Europe – as was, in fact, the case during the Cold War!

The Bundeswehr has been underfunded over the past two decades, and the ‘100 billion’ that was pledged is an attempt to make up for lost ground. This figure sent shockwaves through Paris and prompted calls for the introduction of Eurobonds to fund defence spending.

Had the protagonists analysed the two countries’ military budgets closely, they would have realised that the proportion of investment was relatively higher in France than in neighbouring Germany.

^[1] The mutual attraction between France and Germany seems to have waned considerably, as evidenced by language teaching. It is a futile exercise to dream of a revival of these languages, even if they could easily establish themselves as a second language after English. But it might also be important to revive shared content in history and geography teaching and to strengthen curricula for young people on both sides of the Rhine!

Germany is in the process learning, but it has not yet fully come to terms with reality. It still, to some extent, ignores its actual situation and the danger! Let us not harbour any illusions: additional financial resources do not automatically translate into new, tangible military capabilities. The only relatively well-prepared operational army in Europe is — for the foreseeable future — the one in France.

4. FOCUSING ON WHAT IS VITAL

What should be done in these critical circumstances that are affecting all areas? Ultimately, Paris and Berlin should focus on what really matters: common interests. This means the analysis of the situation in a level-headed manner, reducing our weaknesses and, above all, our dependencies, so that we can better retain control of our future — one that we cannot safeguard on our own, and only as part of the 'group' of Europeans, or at least a core circle that essentially shares the same assessment and envisages compatible solutions – and this applies to vital areas.

I shall name six such areas that will shape the future, in which our policies have lost control and must urgently regain the citizens' trust, convincing them that our policies are steering us in the right direction to create greater stability:

- economic and trade policy,
- energy and technology policy,
- internal security,
- external security,
- our place in a chaotic world,
- our internal organisation and enlargement.

These are concrete issues that must be addressed as a matter of urgency within a Franco-German Council for Strategic Foresight!

The economy and its international dimensions — with all the differences, divergences and complexities — warrant a genuine, in-depth Franco-German debate. The same essentially applies to enlargement, an issue we keep dragging our feet over because we refuse to engage in objective debate – just as we

have so often done in the past! Might a more strategic approach perhaps help to avoid serious mistakes?

Both federalists and sovereigntists may well be annoyed that I am refusing, for the time being, to address the issue of future institutions. I am convinced that we have to tackle these urgent issues — all of which are highly sensitive — through using a step-by-step approach under control of the Member States, at least in the initial phase, if not forever.

The following issues strike me as being of particular urgency.

A – Energy and technology policies

Energy policy is a particular area that has been dominated by mutual recriminations and a degree of discord over the past decade.

Even when it comes to nuclear energy, Europeans are far from being self-sufficient given the origin of the fuel – France buys it from the Russian sphere of influence and is trying to have it processed jointly with the Russians in a country that has not yet come to terms with nuclear power, and this in a region governed by the Greens – naturally, Paris will add to this criticism the fact that, ever since the Schröder-Fischer era, the Germans have relied on cheap gas from Russia and rejected nuclear power.

Is it not high time we aligned the essential aspects of our national energy policies — which, unfortunately, differ greatly— to ensure carbon neutrality and the security of our supply, to assess our imports from third countries more carefully and, above all, to create a genuine common European electricity grid?

Would this not be the time to recall the early days of European integration and to establish the Energy Union so as to create a network through which electricity flows can be redirected to other Member States 'in an instant', as and when necessary, thereby enabling the seamless integration of energy from different sources, both nuclear and renewable?

The first steps have been taken, for example through a sophisticated facility on the border between Spain and France that enables the exchange of electricity – whether generated by nuclear or wind power – depending on the situation – a model for other border regions in Europe to follow. And let us not forget the technological infrastructure – the switches needed to better manage power flows whilst verifying their origins and safety – an oversight that was only recently discovered.

It is up to Germany and France to design and implement the foundations of this kind of shared network – and to invite their neighbours to follow their example.

Another sensitive issue is research and disruptive innovation. In the field of future technologies – for example, in tackling climate change, secure communications, space technology and defence, to name but a few areas – the European Union has become increasingly dependent on the United States and China over recent decades.

A few years ago, within a small multidisciplinary group in Paris, we founded the 'Joint European Disruptive Initiative (JEDI)' – with the aim of shaking up politics and science with a view to fundamentally changing methods, as well as fostering the necessary appetite for risk-taking. The basic idea is to use a method with which the Americans relaunched their cutting-edge disruptive research more than 60 years ago. They established the DARPA to develop future technologies, even though success was by no means guaranteed. Put simply, they consciously took risks and positioned themselves at the forefront of the technological movement.

Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel seemed to view these ideas favourably. But in Paris, Berlin and Brussels, within government departments and specialist organisations, we came up against brick walls: born of a fear of losing control over budgets and resources. These were grand words from leaders with no real substance! It is high time

that Europeans understood this challenge; it is up to both governments to finally create a small group that initially dedicates 10 per cent of their science budgets to this approach.

B – Internal security, migration and asylum policies

In the field of internal security and migration, we have achieved perhaps 30 per cent of what Helmut Kohl sought in vain to achieve more than 30 years ago, despite this being of vital importance to our national policies. It is also a European issue that the interior ministers have neither relished nor wished to address; their instincts have remained too national in focus for too long, with no desire to take greater account of the European context and their dependence on 'others'.

At the request of the Austrians and the Commission, I spent a year observing the Council's proceedings – a disconcerting experience given the ministers' aloof and unfocused attitude – despite all of the Commission's 'goodwill', which was at times somewhat naïve.

The European Pact on Asylum and Migration, which came into force on 12 June 2026, represents undeniable progress, but not a genuine breakthrough in regaining control in these highly sensitive areas. The example of Ceuta, the German-Italian disputes over rescue vessels in the Mediterranean supported by Berlin, and the dominance of the mafia in the drug trade are all warning signs.

An emergency programme – ranging from police cooperation, joint control of external borders, a clear and targeted immigration policy, and cooperation with transit countries to a common interpretation of the right to asylum – should demonstrate our shared determination! I would like to add an example that troubled me during my sessions on the Council; together with the Commission, we had developed a model to reduce the flow of illegal immigration. The suggestion was this: we would open European 'liaison offices' in all the countries surrounding

Europe, with a simple task: to receive and forward asylum and/or immigration applications – to be decided by the national governments, without any transfer of powers to the Commission. The model had been a British office in a Palestinian refugee camp. The debates came to nothing.

C – External security, in particular defence

This is no less a contentious issue, with so many open and hidden points of disagreement. In the face of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and developments in US policy, Germany, France and Europe are rearming, but we remain dependent on the United States – an ally that has become less reliable and which has turned away from us.

It finally seems time to develop 'European defence' – distinct, autonomous if necessary, but not entirely separate from NATO. However, for the time being, this idea is still a source of political disagreement between Paris and the majority of Europeans, including Berlin.

Germany, which for two decades neglected its defence due to a 'pacifist dream', is beginning to rearm following the '*Zeitenwende*', although this change remains fragile and chaotic: the Bundeswehr is still limited in its defence and alliance capabilities.

But it is up to France and Germany to take the initiative, despite their differences in this particular context and their opposing instincts: an operational and autonomous army versus one built within the Atlantic Alliance; an executive army versus one that is parliamentary; a conventional and nuclear army – and whilst France has always known how to pursue its national interests, Germany has had to learn to do so.

The Franco-German projects – the MGCS tank and the SCAF fighter aircraft – are glaring examples of what should not have been done. A political 'process' that is, in essence, inexcusable. Why were the two countries unable to structure these projects along the lines of traditional industrial management, with

accountable leaders? A broad compromise was possible at the outset; Berlin and Paris speak of a 'Franco-German priority', but the reality is quite different.

I am all the more disheartened as this is the second major Franco-German failure.

In 1993, we agreed with Paris to introduce interchangeable equipment across our armed forces – including, amongst other things, French artillery and the Leopard 2 tank as the standard for our armed forces – as well as a mandate for BAE and Dassault to jointly build the future European fighter aircraft. This failed due to resistance from Dassault, backed by the Prime Minister at the time. When it comes to satellites, it seems to me that there is a wall between Paris and Berlin rather than a common approach. Why does each military headquarters need its own satellite communications system? Internal and external constraints prevent us from pursuing luxury solutions.

Air defence – particularly against drones – is another example that must be causing despair not only amongst our military personnel. The recent incident in Leipzig starkly highlighted our weaknesses. The weapons exist, but everyone carries on working in isolation. We need to put an end to this and finally develop a joint solution. And there is, moreover, another issue that the Germans and the French are addressing in parallel, albeit with some trepidation: the reintroduction of conscription.

The lack of Franco-German cooperation is more than just symbolic; it reveals the true state of European cooperation. Admittedly, there are a few positive examples, but they are neither the norm nor in the majority, nor are they the first instinct.

In part, this is still the consequence of France's partial break with the Atlantic Alliance, followed by its return to the Alliance's military integration, with the exception of nuclear matters.

To break the deadlock on 'European defence', it is imperative to draw up a political 'roadmap' and an

intensive agenda for the coming years. The aim is not to choose between a federal or intergovernmental approach, but rather to focus on ensuring effective action amongst our states. Otherwise, the erosion of European influence on vital questions will accelerate.

Following withdrawal by the US – at least a partial one – from Europe, this question seems urgent to me: How can we establish a new consensus, a largely autonomous European defence – but one that operates in close cooperation, or even complementarity, with and within the Alliance?

Why is it so difficult to draw up and finalise an ‘action plan’ for implementation and to negotiate a new division of labour with the Americans – or at least to try to do so? It is as though we were afraid to speak openly about it – I am aware that this requires courage and commitment. Are we afraid of the American reaction? Do we not have even a modicum of trust in our French partners? Are the Germans afraid of finding themselves on their own without the Americans?

The specific issues underlying the ‘work plan’ are often highly contentious: command, strategy, equipment, armaments, and nuclear matters. It goes without saying that reforms at national level will need to go hand in hand with this agenda. This development – including its nuclear aspects – will require, at least in Germany, a genuine political debate within the parties, in parliament and, ultimately, with the aim of achieving a consensus across society.

D – Our place in a chaotic world

The development of international policy deserves to be dealt with separately; here are just a few current insights.

Neither the United States, China, or Russia recognise us as a partner on their level. In reality, in the face of geopolitical developments, we have neither a common strategy nor a common foreign policy.

In the Middle East, Europe is marginalised! Yet we were there thirty years ago, acting in harmony and complementing the Americans. Now, the Americans are weakened by their own lack of strategy, whilst new coalitions – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan (and Egypt?) – are seeking to restore the balance.

In Ukraine, we appear to be the key players given the permanently changing American stance – but with what real influence over the Russians and the Ukrainians? In truth, we find ourselves trapped somewhat, given that we have underestimated the underlying dynamics of this conflict and its “agreements to disagree”, and have tried to act as super-diplomats – without giving sufficient thought to the substance and origins of the conflict.

In particular, there is every reason to express strong doubts about the German proposal for associate-membership – particularly in view of the application of Article 42.7, which forms part of the suggestions. This could well mean the European Union’s official entry into the war between Russia and Ukraine. It goes without saying that we support Ukraine in its defence, given Putin’s utterly unacceptable behaviour, but must we go that far? Until his death, Helmut Kohl rightly supported the idea of an association, viewing Ukraine as a bridge between the West and the East. And what should we do about Russia? Our strategic situation has changed profoundly over the past two decades – and we ourselves have contributed to these adverse consequences.

5. JOINT GOVERNANCE IS ESSENTIAL... FOR EUROPE

We must take a bold and pragmatic look at where the possibilities lie for a joint Franco-German approach, or even for initiatives involving a degree of joint leadership, together with European partners where necessary.

Let us not delude ourselves: this is not the time for grand European designs, but what matters is an overarching strategy that enables us – building

on a Franco-German foundation – to set a course, regain control, focus on what really matters and reduce our dependence on other ‘competitors’ who are targeting our vital interests – so as to make our shared project more robust and, above all, sustainable.

I must admit, in the light of a number of issues I have been following and given my understanding of how things work, that I feel that Paris and Berlin, too preoccupied with their internal crises, need a ‘mediator’, an ‘intermediary’, a helping hand to guide them. In my day, there were Jacques Delors,

Jacques Santer – who was often underestimated – Wilfried Martens, Jean-Luc Dehaene and, above all, Jean-Claude Juncker. We were able to count on the Benelux countries for support; I am now thinking of the three, or even four, northern countries.

But it is up to the Germans and the French to find their bearings again, to pull themselves together, and to focus courageously on these vital questions, on concrete projects and approaches that can put our policies on the right track at a common, indeed European, level.

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