

The France-Germany Rift: Rationale and Insights

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This policy outlook explores the sources of the tension between Paris and Berlin. While both capitals are at the heart of the European project, issues have been simmering between the two sides about the Russia-Ukraine War, energy policies, arms procurement, stimulus packages, foreign affairs, and the EU enlargement. However, there are strategic root causes for this crisis, including the shift in the global geopolitical paradigms and the latent economic decline of France.

Introduction

The France-Germany strategic partnership is in crisis mode. Several indicators are there but the postponement of the Franco-German Council of Ministers, scheduled for 26 October in Fontainebleau, was the most revealing sign. This is the third time this important bilateral meeting (initially scheduled to take place in July) has been postponed.

Berlin made some face-saving comments that the meeting would take place in January 2023, but nothing is set in stone at this stage. The leaders of the two countries, Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz, held a tête-à-tête business lunch in Paris on 21 October, but the lack of a joint press conference in front of the cameras, which is normally a diplomatic routine after bilateral meetings, makes this one of [iciest](#) Franco-German high-level meetings of recent memory.

Several warning signs in recent weeks foreshadowed this crisis. During his speech on the European Union at the end of August in Prague, the German Chancellor barely mentioned France, to the great displeasure of Paris. Another point of tension is that Berlin aspires to further enlarge the EU towards Eastern Europe, hoping to constitute a union with "30 or 36 members", which Paris is not keen on. Concerning the recent energy crisis, Berlin decided to offer €200bn in state aid to businesses and households to get them through the energy crisis, an initiative Paris was unaware of beforehand. In addition, Germany opposed putting a cap on gas prices, which France saw as a good option. Berlin also wanted France to authorise a new pipeline to carry gas - and eventually green hydrogen - from Spain. But France rejected this idea.

However, these issues represent merely the tip of the iceberg. In reality, many factors contribute to the brewing tensions between them. Some are strategic and connected to global geostrategic shifts, while others are more of political and economic nature.

Strategic factors

France's fading geopolitical status

Although France was initially defeated by the Nazis, General De Gaulle's manoeuvring managed to position his nation among the victors of World War II, obtaining a seat as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). France also emerged from World War II as the world's fifth army, thanks to its colonies. The detonation of its first atomic bomb in 1960 and the maintenance of a strong military and nuclear arsenal cemented the country's status as a major global power. Preserving sizable spheres of influence in Africa also gave Paris a weight in international affairs that went far beyond the actual size of its economy or population.

However, France's status had eroded by the end of the Cold War. The wave of decolonisation had deprived Paris of sizable territories and economic assets. The [Nuclear Club](#) was no longer restricted to the five members of the UNSC as a handful of countries built nuclear weapons (Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea) while 59 other nations can construct such weapons.

After the Cold War, the French defence budget was slashed by 18 per cent between 1991 and 2001. It then increased slightly but did not reach the level of yesteryear's generous spending. Subsequently, France moved from fifth to sixth position worldwide in terms of military [expenditure](#). Macron has endeavoured to reverse the trend lately. He increased the military budget in his first term and boosted it [again](#) in his second term by 74% in the 2023 budget. However, France's position could potentially move further down (to seventh position) in light of Germany's recent decision to rapidly [expand](#) its military expenditure to 2 per cent of its GDP while setting up a special €100bn fund to modernise its forces from 2022 onwards.

France's decline is not merely gauged from the perspective of military spending. It is also about the overall French military posture and strategy. In Africa, for example, France followed De Gaulle's paradigm to maintain France's world status, preserving an exclusive sphere of influence in the post-colonial era. Therefore, From the 1960s to the mid-1990, the French state pursued a heavy interventionist policy in Africa. This approach resulted in 122 military interventions that [averaged](#) once a year from 1960 to the mid-1990s. Many of these interventions were [designed](#) to protect local dictators from popular uprisings and sometimes to topple out-of-favour rulers. In the case of its intervention in Rwanda, Paris played a dubious [role](#), enabling the Hutu genocidaires to stage their genocide against the Tutsi population and resulting in about 600,000 Tutsi [deaths](#).

However, since the mid-1990s, France is no longer capable of implementing interventionist policies on a larger scale. Paris had to review its approach, considerably reducing its presence and closing many of its bases. The French preserved merely four permanent advanced operational bases (Djibouti, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Gabon) and a de facto permanent airbase in N'Djamena, Chad. Such a restructuring means that the French government lacks the capability to launch a long-lasting, heavy-footprint-style intervention in the region.

Meanwhile, the budget for military assistance dwindled, and the French bilateral development aid, a cornerstone of its African cooperation policy for a long time, went through a sustained reduction. Subsequently, the French presence in Africa has come increasingly under [question](#). Paris' most recent intervention in Mali, also known as Operation Barkhane, turned into a fiasco, with authorities in Bamako turning to the UN, accusing Paris of aiding and arming [ter-](#)

[riorists](#). As a result, France, alongside its allies, had to leave Mali in disgrace. What is clear, however, is that France lost touch with reality in Africa, producing a catalogue of rookie political [mistakes](#), misinterpreting local conflict dynamics, and botching military operations. More significantly, France relied uniquely on a militarised approach which proved immensely counterproductive.

At the Origins of the France-Germany Tandem

In the Post-WWII context, France's Charles De Gaulle and West Germany's Konrad Adenauer envisioned a path other than war and conflict in Europe. Their efforts, Alongside other European leaders from Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, led to the signing of the Treaty of Rome (1957), which is the treaty establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) that was a key stepping stone towards founding what is now the European Union.

Both leaders understood that Europeans needed each other to constitute a force to be reckoned with, but both also had different national agendas. Germany's economy was in shambles after the war, and the government needed stability and strong partners. Despite being among the victors, France was considerably diminished and could not preserve most of its colonial legacy. However, Paris viewed the European sphere as a platform where the French could revive their historical grandeur and provide serious alternatives in the great power chessboard. On the other hand, the German leaders had much modest aspirations, viewing the EU as an enlarged market for German products, which helped boost its economy and commerce. Ultimately, the French-German partnership represented a win-win situation, creating opportunities for both sides.

The ensuing periods witnessed a greater engagement between both nations at multiple levels: civil society, parliamentary, and ministerial. Two prominent landmarks in contemporary Franco-German cooperation are the Elysée Treaty (1963) and the Aachen Treaty (2019). These treaties, and a set of other institutional markers ensured that both sides became acquainted with each other institutionally, politically, and culturally. Ideas on social issues or economic matters would be proposed and tested through this prism before being proposed to the rest of Europe. Subsequently, this partnership grew from strength to strength and was designed to be the growth engine for Europe.

Let us not forget that in the 1970s, the Franco-German tandem was based on a certain [parity](#) between these two European powerhouses. In the 1980s, West Germany's economy and population were somewhat larger than France's, but not by a wide margin, whereas French economic growth, at times, exceeded Germany's. Four decades later, the disparity has become [striking](#). Germany's population is now 22% larger than that of France. The German GDP is 30% more than France, and Germany's USD 1.46 trillion export revenues are [three times](#) more than France's. As French commentator Nicolas Baverez [stated](#) in an article titled "The late Franco-German couple", France had only itself to blame for letting itself be eclipsed by Germany over the years.

This situation made German leaders exceedingly tired of France's lacklustre economic performance and demanding behaviour. Meanwhile, French leaders believed their country's military advantage would always give them a unique and central position within the EU. Some French decision-makers thought Brexit was a godsend opportunity, making France's position more advantageous in Europe.



French President Emmanuel Macron (C-L), President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (Rear 2nd R), Prime Minister of Spain, Pedro Sanchez Perez-Castejon (Rear), President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis (L), Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz (2nd L), and European Council President Charles Michel (3rd L) attend day two of the European Union (EU) leaders summit at the European Council headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, on October 21, 2022. The European Union agreed to press ahead with a set of emergency actions to address the bloc's energy crisis, with Germany yielding to pressure from other member states to pave the way for a temporary price cap on natural gas. (Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

After the departure of Britain from the EU, France became the only nuclear-armed state in the European Union (EU) and its only permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. It also has one of the best-equipped armies in the world. These assets, buttressed by the enduring German economic power, provided France with expanded political clout and diplomatic prestige for a long time, allowing France to define the EU's interests and positions internationally.

A Changing Outlook Post-Ukraine War

This outlook changed following the Russia-Ukraine War. Germany, which traditionally viewed the European question from an economic prism, has revisited its position. In the past decades, Berlin considered Europe a vast market and a subcontracting factory serving German export industries, with Eastern Europe serving principally as a source of labour. This economically motivated position was combined with a deeply rooted pacifism, which led Berlin to subcontract the defence of the European Union primarily to the US and, to a lesser degree, France (and pre-Brexit Britain).

However, soon after Russia invaded Ukraine, Germany [formulated](#) a new position, as Chancellor Olaf Scholz accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of trying to establish a new 'Russian empire' through military might. Consequently, Berlin abandoned, overnight, decades of reticence to increase its military spending. Scholz announced that his

government would establish a special €100 billion fund to promptly upgrade its armed forces and that Germany would adhere to the NATO goal of spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence. In comparison, France's total [defence budget](#) for 2020 was €48.3bn (including pensions). Germany's move means that Berlin will again be a military giant in a few years and no longer need to be under the French military umbrella.

While some French industrialists and politicians thought that the French arms industry [could benefit](#) directly from Berlin's military spending, they were quickly disappointed. In its re-arming quest, Germany sought to purchase defence systems immediately and not to prioritise some partnerships with French (or European) weapons manufacturers that would deliver supplies many years later (when it could be already too late). Therefore, Berlin chose mostly US systems - like Patriot air-defence systems and F-35 stealth fighter jets. The latter are [nuclear-capable](#) and are among the few nuclear-coded jets with more NATO [interoperability](#) abilities than the French Rafale jets, for example.

Mounting Disagreements

While Germany had more economic clout, France was readily mirroring its military edge. A sense of self-aggrandisement led the French decision-makers to slowly lose touch with reality. The rejection by the French people of the European Constitution in 2005 harmed the image



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy meets Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz, France's President Emmanuel Macron Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi and Romania's President Klaus Werner Iohannis in Kyiv, on June 16, 2022. It is the first time that the leaders of the three European Union countries have visited Kyiv since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war. (Ukrainian Presidency - Anadolu Agency)



Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) meets French President Emmanuel Macron (R) on February 07, 2022, in Moscow, Russia. (Kremlin Press Office - Anadolu Agency)

of France in Europe. Unilateral decisions by successive French presidents, such as Nicholas Sarkozy, who decided to conduct the military intervention in Libya in 2011 while ignoring the EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels, were perceived as an affront. Prior to that, during the 2009 global economic crisis, European politicians and citizens alike saw that Angela Merkel was the one coming up with initiatives and solutions.

As a result, differences between both parties grew over time in many aspects, especially when it comes to [security and defence](#) matters. These disagreements become acute about European deliberations on fiscal rules. France has called for the EU to take a [lax attitude](#) and ease rules regarding member states' budget deficits and debt-to-GDP levels, whereas Germany has ordinarily opposed any laxation of the rules intended to curb deficits and debt.

Moreover, as German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck argues, Franco-German differences are particularly important as it relates to the future of national sovereignty within the Union. [According](#) to him: "Due to its strong dependence on intra-European trade, Germany gives the utmost importance to all member countries following the same economic rules. This presupposes a European legal order overseen by an independent supranational court of justice which limits state intervention in cross-border markets to a minimum. Thus, political decisions must become legal decisions, and the technocrats of the European Central Bank (ECB) replace national governments as often as possible.

In contrast, sovereignty in the French conception rests primarily on national military and political power. This translates to the ability to make France's will prevail over that of other States. This sovereignty, Paris does not intend to renounce it. The only European sovereignty to which Paris can consent to must be built on French sovereignty, giving France a hegemonic position within the future integrated Europe. Therefore, Berlin's abrupt update of its strategy and the prompt quest to become a military powerhouse puts the French vision completely out of sync with the new realities.

A Clash of Systems and Styles

There are also issues pertaining to different political systems and leadership styles. Like some of his predecessors, Macron has taken several foreign and security policy decisions that have surprised or annoyed Berlin. Many experts think that Macron's [diplomatic gaffes](#) facilitated Moscow's path to the war against Ukraine. During the Trump presidency, Macron spent considerable time [wooing](#) Putin. In 2017, Macron deployed the greatest honours while welcoming the Russian President in Versailles. Between 2017 and 2022, Macron hosted Putin thrice and travelled to Moscow twice. Such diplomatic outreach was designed to bring Russia closer to the EU's orbit and enhance relations so that existing conflicts would disappear by themselves.

This line of thinking led Macron to prioritise the Kremlin's views over the concerns of some other European countries, including those bordering Russia. Ahead of the 2019 G7 Summit, Macron invited Putin to [discuss](#) a 'reinvention of the architecture of security and trust between Europe and Russia,' without coordinating in advance with [Germany](#) or the other EU partners. Worse, he criticised the civil servants within the French ministry of foreign affairs, accusing these officials of representing '[deep-state](#)' resistance to Russia. At one stage, Macron went to the extent of [labelling](#) NATO "brain-dead", which sounds ludicrous nowadays. Furthermore, Macron gave in to the Kremlin's demands on Ukraine. During the re-negotiation of the Minsk agreements in 2019, the French President was among Putin's most prominent appeasers in Europe, constantly requesting Ukraine to make concessions.

Moreover, Macron spoke with Putin 11 times in February 2022 — in one instance twice on the same day — hoping to stop the war with no results. The Kremlin gave little consideration to Macron's diplomatic moves before attacking Ukraine. In fact, Putin [humiliated](#) Macron in his February 20th visit, breaking [protocol](#) rules and [ridiculing](#) him. This situation explains why the French President has been try-



The Rafale fighter of the French Air Force prepares to perform a demonstration flight during the Indo Defence 2022 Expo & Forum defense industry exhibition at the Halim Perdana Kusumah Airbase in Jakarta, Indonesia, on 4 November 2022. (Eko Siswono Toyudho - Anadolu Agency)

ing to mitigate his previous position lately. Professor James Shields [described](#) Macron's style as "an activist, interventionist leadership style which can lead him to behave impetuously and to show a lack of political experience." Shields also linked the French President's determination to play a key role in the Ukraine crisis to a "naivety born of over-optimism about his own powers of persuasion."

Thus, a clash of personalities also underpins the current France-Germany tensions. Macron comes out as extroverted and impetuous, whereas Scholz embodies a more introverted personality who is more result-oriented and does not like to talk a lot. While Macron and Merkel texted each other many times daily, the communication pattern between Macron and Scholz is more formal and stern. Lars Haider, the editor-in-chief of *Hamburger Abendblatt*, wrote a [book](#) on Scholz in German. He described the Chancellor as a decisive leader. Haider [says](#) that Scholz "has clear goals, and he puts things in place in order to achieve them." This leader focuses on achieving his agenda and putting his nation's interests first. Thus, he has no time to waste on petty politics. This standpoint was clear in his [Zeitenwende speech](#) on 27 February 2022, which came after Russia's war on Ukraine. "Zeitenwende" means a turning point in German, and Scholz's speech felt like the start of a new era, ushering in a complete overhaul of Germany's security and defence policy.

Furthermore, the political systems of the two countries are very different. France has a presidential system in which the President is the central figure. On the other hand, the German system is federal, with elections happening all the time, in which parties are often obliged to build coalitions to govern. Scholz had to strike many compromises with his allies from the far left and the Greens. These elements play the role of kingmakers within the current political equation in Germany and have a major impact on Germany's policies regarding public spending, foreign affairs, and defence. Paradoxically, the French President is wooing the far right, which has a completely different agenda.

Moving Forward

Since the problems between both parties became public, some issues between France and Germany will probably be managed in the short term. For example, Macron had been pushing for the Future Combat Air System (FCAS). Berlin was not really convinced, especially since the country is facing urgent security problems in the East. FCAS, a joint project with Germany and Spain to manufacture the next-generation fighter jet, will only enter service by 2040. Problems have been plaguing this project, which has become another irritant between Macron and the German leaders. After October's mini-diplomatic squabble, things start to [move](#) again for FCAS, and a deal is in the pipeline for about €3.8bn for a phase that has already suffered a delay of one year.

The two countries still have to address other issues, whether linked to the French-backed proposal for an EU-wide cap on gas prices, the energy pipelines linking Spain and Germany via France, or the emergency aid fund to alleviate the energy crisis. The list is rather long, and some compromises could be found in many of them, as Paris can make life very difficult for Berlin through its lobbies in the EU.

Even so, the changing global strategic outlook increased great power rivalry between the US and China, in addition to challenges posed by Russia in Eastern Europe, which cannot be downplayed. Similarly, the balance of power is changing within the EU. When the German Chancellor visited Beijing on 4 November 2022, he did so without coordinating with Macron. The French President had [proposed](#) to the German Chancellor they go together to Beijing to send a signal of EU unity, but the latter declined the offer. Scholz aims to strike major business deals that would boost the German economy as the latter creaks under the burden of the Ukraine War.

The visit generated [criticism](#) from different quarters. Scholz's visit was [deemed](#) 'poorly timed' after Xi Jinping immediately after the Chinese President re-consolidated his rule at the 20th Party Congress. Others hinted that he prioritises German corporate interests over EU/US strategic priorities. However, this visit shows that Scholz aims to defend his national interests first and foremost.

For decades, the European vessel relied on two powerful economic engines, Germany and France, even if their agendas and motivations differed. Given the French latent decline geopolitically and economically, Germany is not expected to carry the entire EU project alone without renegotiating the terms and conditions. In light of the French leaders' hubris, that strategic juncture could well represent a make-or-break situation for the European project.