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# Franco-German friendship is not enough

## The new Treaty of Aachen focuses on the EU's two most powerful states to the exclusion of all others

The recent signing of the Treaty of Aachen invites us to reflect on how the Franco-German partnership's role in Europe has evolved since the two countries first adopted a bilateral friendship pact, the Élysée Treaty, in 1963.

At the heart of the Treaty of Aachen is a plan to form a European Defence Union. This is not a new idea. Similar proposals were discussed as far back as 1950, when the United States was being drawn into the Korean War. The US called for West Germany to be brought into the fold of a new European Defence Community. But in 1954, the formation of a defence union – under the Pleven Plan and the Treaty of Paris – was rejected by the French Parliament, which feared becoming too dependent on the US.

Still, during the negotiations over the Élysée Treaty less than a decade later, French President Charles de Gaulle saw an opportunity to push for more Western European independence from the US. Hence, the original text of the treaty made no mention of France or Germany's relationship to the US, the United Kingdom, NATO, or any other important international agreements. But this omission did not go unnoticed. Bowing to pressure from President John F. Kennedy, the German Bundestag added a preamble calling on France and Germany to cooperate closely with the US and the UK.

This new language frustrated de Gaulle's plans for establishing a Western European counterweight to the US, and ultimately led to discord between France and Germany. According to de Gaulle's confidant Alain Peyrefitte, the French president complained that the Germans were 'behaving like pigs. They fully subject themselves to US power. They betray the spirit of the Franco-German Treaty. And they betray Europe.' Later, de Gaulle would describe Germany's behaviour during this episode as his 'biggest disappointment.'

## A bilateral deal for multilateralists?

The concept of European 'strategic autonomy' was an essential component of Gaullism. Today, it features heavily in debates about European integration, and it is central to French President Emmanuel Macron's own vision for EU reform. France's goal today is the same as it was back in the 1960s, when it first acquired nuclear weapons: to free Germany and the European Union from America's overwhelming influence.

In the intervening decades, the seeds of Gaullist mistrust toward the Germans have been covered up by celebrating the Élysée Treaty. That pact had achieved the seemingly unattainable: friendship with the *Erbfeind* – the hereditary enemy – just a few years after the two countries had engaged in the most savage war mankind has ever known.

As a follow-up to the Élysée Treaty, the Treaty of Aachen can be touted as a symbol of Franco-German friendship. But Germans should not overlook the fact that both agreements enshrine a political strategy that is at odds with Germany's own longstanding approach of balancing the friendship with France alongside strong transatlantic relations with the US and the UK.

This is not to suggest that the two Franco-German friendship agreements are worthless. But by putting too much store in the idealistic notion that 'we can do it, together,' France and Germany could find that they have achieved a Pyrrhic victory for the European project.

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After all, there is reason to worry about how the new agreement will be perceived in other European capitals. Any Pole, Italian, Greek, Swiss, or Spanish citizen who reads the text might find it strange that the two European poster children of multilateralism would sign a bilateral deal, excluding everyone else. What ever happened to the principle of sovereignty and equality among all EU member states?

Moreover, France and Germany view the world differently. Whereas integration into the Western liberal order is enshrined in the German constitution (*Grundgesetz*), French foreign policy is guided by the country's national interests at any given time. The Treaty of Aachen, like its precursor, obscures these different outlooks with a fog of good intentions.

# We need more than the Franco-German friendship

The Élysée Treaty symbolised the end of enmity between Germany and France. But with the Treaty of Aachen, the two countries have gone beyond that. Their stated intention now is to prevent the internal splintering of the EU.

To be sure, there are deepening divisions over matters of finance and economic policymaking between north and south (and also between France and Germany). Western member states are worried about the rule of law in eastern member states, and those in the northwest want to tackle corruption, organised crime, and weak governance in the southeast. Yet it is precisely on these EU-wide challenges that the Treaty of Aachen lacks specificity.

Though the European project no doubt depends on France and Germany, that does not mean that they alone can preserve it. Without an approach that is more sensitive to their European partners, the two countries risk giving the impression that mere obedience to the Franco-German axis is all that is expected or required.

But France and Germany have distinct interests. While Germany would fully support a reversal of Brexit in order to preserve the EU's internal balance, France might see in Britain's withdrawal an opportunity to increase its own relative political, economic, and military clout within the bloc. Never mind that a more 'French Europe' without the UK would be weaker on the world stage. Even with two countries wielding nuclear arsenals, the EU is already considered by other powers to be politically irrelevant.

In a world of geopolitical carnivores, we Europeans are the last vegetarians. Without the UK, we will become vegans, and possibly prey. What really matters, then, is not 'strategic autonomy' but the preservation of European sovereignty in a rapidly changing international context. France and Germany must both commit themselves to achieving that objective. The Franco-German friendship is necessary for Europe; but it will not suffice to guarantee our place in the world.

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