A message of (dis)unity

The Franco-German leadership failure poses a risk to European security. In the long term, the two will have to reach a compromise

In recent years, it has become abundantly clear that the Franco-German tandem, historically a key driver of European integration, is simply not seeing eye to eye at the level of political leadership. When it comes to economic and energy policy – such as nuclear energy, free trade agreements or industrial policy – the positions of Paris and Berlin are often at odds. And although a Franco-German group of experts has presented proposals for the institutional reform of the EU, Germany and France have not yet formulated a joint political vision for the future of the European project.

In addition, Berlin and Paris have drastically failed to take a leading role in tackling the biggest security challenge for the EU since its foundation. They have neither succeeded in jointly leading European support for Ukraine, nor have they come up with a common roadmap for strengthening European defence. However, in view of the situation in Ukraine as well as the structural geopolitical shifts – such as the expected decline in US involvement in European defence – a common ambition and vision for European security and defence policy are not an end in itself, but a strategic necessity.

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The conference aimed at strengthening support for Ukraine, to which French President Emmanuel Macron had invited at the beginning of this week, once again clearly illustrated the differences between Germany and France. The conference was not an official meeting within the framework of the EU but aimed to coordinate the positions of European states, the US and Canada on the continued support of Ukraine — among other things with the aim of sending a clear message of unity.

However, with their respective media appearances, the French President and his counterpart, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, achieved the

opposite. During the press conference at the end of the conference, Macron declared that the deployment of European troops on Ukrainian soil could not be ruled out. The German reaction followed swiftly: Scholz reiterated that the previous position – no direct deployment of German or NATO troops in the conflict – remained unchanged, and German Economics Minister Robert Habeck called on France to supply more weapons. Scholz and Macron have thus clearly undermined the urgently needed message of unity that Europe wanted to convey with this conference.

Even apart from their preferences for European defence, Germany and France differ in their strategic culture.

The significant differences between Germany and France on issues of security and defence policy are not new. While France has traditionally backed a strong Europe and, above all, a strong EU, Germany has always had a more transatlantic orientation, with a greater focus on NATO than on the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This contrast was particularly evident in the public exchange of blows between Macron and then German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer ahead of the 2020 US elections. While Macron made a clear case for European strategic autonomy and called on Europeans to act more independently from the US, Kramp-Karrenbauer published an article a few days later entitled 'Europe Still Needs America' — whereupon Macron explained his argument in detail in an interview.

Even apart from their preferences for European defence, Germany and France differ in their strategic culture, where parliamentary reservation and a socially anchored scepticism towards military affairs in Germany are opposed to an intervention army on the French side, as well as the willingness to also use this army to safeguard French security interests.

Yet, these differences do not necessarily lead to paralysis at European level. Geopolitical necessity and pragmatism have already forged compromises between Germany and France in the past, for example in the various initiatives to strengthen European defence following Brexit and the election of Trump as US president. However, the key difference to the current situation appears to be the political will: While Germany and France immediately responded to the Brexit referendum with the will to push ahead with the European project, this ambition is lacking today — in a situation that is also a geopolitical stress test for the EU but

one that is incomparably more threatening.

The lack of this ambition is therefore such a challenge for the EU that leadership as such must be re-imagined within the EU — structurally and politically.

Re-thinking German-Franco-EU leadership

In structural terms, Franco-German projects have the great advantage that, metaphorically speaking, the engine for Franco-German cooperation still exists and could start up at any time. Anyone who characterises Franco-German relations as being 'broken' across the board is not doing justice to the reality at the working level, where Franco-German coordination is still almost a reflex. However, even the potential of the best engine cannot be seized if there is no common destination. With their individual and sometimes opposing approaches, Germany and France are therefore currently not only preventing the utilisation of a huge amount of potential for the EU but are also causing European collateral damage.

As a result of this vacuum in Franco-German leadership, European defence leadership needs to be re-imagined. In terms of European support for Ukraine, other players in the EU have already proven that this is possible: the joint procurement of ammunition by the EU is based on an initiative by Estonia, and even if deliveries are currently falling short of ambitions, the measure is important for concrete support for Ukraine and for strengthening Europe as a security policy player in the long term. Poland is also likely to play a more important role in the future: Warsaw is not only one of the most resolute supporters of Ukraine, but with its new pro-European government, it also has great potential to play a constructive and proactive role in Brussels. The Weimar Triangle format, which the foreign ministers of Germany, France and Poland have recently revived with great enthusiasm, could possibly also be an option for bridging the Franco-German differences and, at the same time, for a more geographically balanced leadership.

In the long term, there is no alternative to a Franco-German compromise for the future of the EU as a security policy player, not least because decisions in

The EU Commission, in particular, has played a central role in managing the European collateral damage caused by the weakness of the Franco-German leadership. By using EU instruments such as the European Peace Facility to finance military support for Ukraine or the European defence industry reinforcement through

the CSDP and on potential changes to the EU treaties require unanimity.

common procurement act (EDIRPA), the EU Commission has proven that central initiatives do not always have to come from Paris or Berlin but that Brussels can also play a stronger role.

The possibility of using the EU budget for joint defence, as was the case for the procurement of vaccines or gas, as recently mentioned by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, would also be a key step towards more European defence 'made in Brussels'.

In the long term, however, there is no alternative to a Franco-German compromise for the future of the EU as a security policy player, not least because decisions in the CSDP and on potential changes to the EU treaties require unanimity. If Germany and France do not succeed in agreeing on common positions on key issues like the financing of military support for Ukraine and a strategy for the European defence industry, as well as strategic matters such as the EU's geopolitical self-sufficiency, they risk causing more than just collateral damage to European defence.



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