FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 28.03.2023 | Landry Charrier

The Franco-German bone of contention

The war in Ukraine has become a divisive issue for Germany and France. Both countries are aware that they have different answers to global challenges

No sooner was the ink dry on the Franco-German joint declaration, when issues started up again. The two countries had agreed on a formulation that was supposed to settle the conflict that had been growing since the taxonomy debate. Whether it was through the use of renewable energies or nuclear power, Germany and France were to accept their differences in hydrogen production and work together to build a European hydrogen market.

But the consensus of 22 January did not last long. A few days later, the dispute flared up again, this time in the context of negotiations on the Renewable Energy Directive RED II. France formed a coalition of 11 member states and went on the offensive. All indications are that the upcoming discussions between the member states, the Commission and the EU Parliament will further escalate the dispute. This is because in the end, it's not just about amounts running into the billions – it's also about the question of leadership in Europe. And in this case, it is clear that France wants to decide this in its own favour.

The war in Ukraine may have welded the transatlantic alliance together, but for Germany and France, it has become a divisive issue. Both countries have long been aware that they have different answers to global challenges. Now they know that their visions are largely incompatible. Gone are the days when they worked out compromises that they could then sell to the rest of Europe. A new era is dawning: one of open confrontations. And Emmanuel Macron knows how to stage them masterfully. When the German chancellor rushed to Paris after the postponement of the Franco-German Council of Ministers in October to have a one-on-one meeting with the French president, the president kept him waiting for several minutes outside the gates of the Élysée Palace – an affront intended to show him who calls the shots. And something similar occurred at the Munich Security Conference in

February when Olaf Scholz spoke at 2:15 p.m. and Macron, who was to take the floor a little later at 2:45 p.m., did not appear.

Germany's problematic US dependence

It is obvious that for now, the French president does not see himself in the role of a spectator. He wants to be on the stage where history is being made. Nothing will go past him. Already on 9 February, at the reception of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Élysée Palace, he had shown who is in charge in Europe. Scholz was there – but only as a guest and by the grace of Macron. And then there was Munich, the place from which a signal of unity is usually sent. Macron decided otherwise. In the end, his speech was nothing more than a contentious examination of Chancellor Scholz's course and his European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI).

What bothers President Macron is not only that Germany is sidelining France and presuming to take the lead in an area where its neighbour has traditionally been ahead. Macron sees the German project as a rejection of Europe as an armaments location. According to Macron, with the procurement of air defence systems from Israel (Arrow 3) and America (Patriot), the EU would not only be giving priority to the most expensive option, but it would miss a unique opportunity to strengthen its industrial and technological defence base.

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'No European development solution that doesn't deliver in the end. (.⊠.⊠.) There is everything we need on the market' – these are the remarks made by the former Inspector General of the German Armed Forces, Eberhard Zorn, at the debate on the National Security Strategy in September 2022, which had already caused a great stir in Paris. At the NATO defence ministers' meeting in Brussels four weeks later, Germany got down to business and signed a declaration of intent to implement the ESSI together with 15 European countries, including the accession candidate Finland. For France, which suddenly found itself isolated, this was an unacceptable situation. Now Macron is extending an invitation to a big conference in Paris. A clever move, because in the end, the host determines not only the agenda but also who is invited. And this is where the President unequivocally stated that the conference should be open to all EU

members and industrialists only. Non-Europeans are not welcome.

Macron's brash approach may appear to be an outgrowth of French arrogance. But in substance, the French president is right. Scholz's fixation on Biden is viewed with suspicion not only in Paris but also in the US – and not just in the Republican camp. The upcoming presidential election campaign should boost this trend even further. This also holds true for the dramatically increasing tensions between the US and China, as Henry Olsen's recent piece in the *Washington Post* made clear in early March: 'The United States cannot afford to provide the bulk of conventional defence forces while also containing a burgeoning threat from China… The Pacific is too important to US strategic interests for Biden to prioritise Europe. Germany must step up – and quickly.' In this context, the switch to Europe will be only an interlude. That much is clear to everyone. From the French point of view, Chancellor Scholz is pursuing a strategy that will make Europe dependent on the United States and ultimately jeopardise its own ability to act. Hence the harshness that Macron is showing towards Germany.

France's new self-conception

The French president's approach has often been interpreted one-dimensionally, namely as an expression of concern that the war in Ukraine could lead to Germany gaining further power. While that is certainly true, at the same time it is too short-sighted. Macron is convinced that the war is part of a hybrid conflict of global proportions. The necessary response can, therefore, only be global. Consequently, his urge to act is producing strategies as though on an assembly line. Anyone who closely examines this will notice that France is still struggling to find a clear positioning in the new geopolitical landscape. The method, on the other hand, is clear: it only works with partners. In recent months, France has had to acknowledge that in a world full of great power ambitions, it is no longer possible to assert oneself with the resources of a medium-sized power. For such a self-confident country, this was a painful realisation and a turning point of historical significance.

The fact that Macron, when presenting the National Strategic Review (Toulon, 9 November 2022), greatly emphasised the role of the US as a guarantor of European security caused many to wince. Rightly so: it was a surprising gesture. But it must not be understood as submission. On the contrary, it is rather an expression of a new self-image that sees both countries as the key to equilibrium. The 'strategic shift' that the President spoke of in Toulon has thus become more clearly defined. Charles de Gaulle himself went through a comparable experience in his day. After he

had sought rapprochement with the Soviet Union (in vain), it became apparent: 'so, at the end of the road which de Gaulle had originally designed to make America dispensable and which America had hoped would integrate France more fully into NATO, cooperation between these two long time friendly adversaries – something like America's special relationship with Great Britain – has emerged as a key to equilibrium [...]' (from Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*).

Despite considerable divergences, there are now numerous policy overlaps between France and the US. This is often overlooked in Germany, which has always considered itself to be the better partner of the US. The statement made by Biden and Macron during the French president's visit to Washington in early December is impressive proof of this. The chapter on deepening cooperation in the field of civilian nuclear power alone should have persuaded Berlin to react. But the fear of offending the United States is too great for Berlin to be willing to speak clearly.

The future European security architecture is a matter for everyone.However, it will not come about without a determined Franco-German cooperation.

The search for partners is now in full swing. China's increasingly aggressive approach is likely to accelerate the process of rapprochement with Australia that began in January. Macron has also announced that he wants to improve relations with India, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. In addition, 'a new partnership model' is now to be implemented with Africa, which according to Macron is to be characterised by 'deep humility'. This will be a formidable challenge in view of the colonial legacy and the growing influence of Russia and China on the continent.

In Europe, the French president has long since created *faits accomplis* and concluded agreements with Greece (27 September 2021), Italy (25 November 2021) and Spain (19 January 2023) that are intended to raise bilateral relations to a new level. The '*détentecordiale*' (in the words of Mathieu Droin) that was agreed upon with Great Britain on 10 March fits into the same logic. But if you look closely, you will notice that the puzzle is not complete. The East is left out. Macron knows that the willingness to follow is much less pronounced there than in Western Europe. The reason is obvious. There, both before and during the war, France suffered a loss of confidence that is now difficult to repair.

With the European Political Community (EPG), the French president has initiated a forum that has great potential but currently seems to be

going nowhere. So far, Germany has given it only marginal support. But there is no way around it. The distrust of both countries is too strong in Eastern Europe for them to be able to go it alone. In the end, they will not be able to shape it alone anyway. Indeed, the future European security architecture is a matter for everyone. However, it will not come about without a determined Franco-German cooperation.



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