

ENGINE BREAKDOWN OR POWER SHORTAGE?

HOW THE FRANCO-GERMAN ENGINE IS NO LONGER DRIVING EUROPE

ARTICLE BY

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Since the outset, the ‘Franco-German engine’ has been the driving force in the European construction process. In times of upheaval, Franco-German political cohesion and solidarity has guided the process of forging a common European spirit. When the French-German duo struggles, so too does the entire European family. But what was once an asset has become a liability. Solidarity between Paris and Berlin is absent, undermining the European Union’s ability to face its accumulating crises. Imbalances in the Eurozone, threats to democracy, handling the influx of refugees – the future of Europe hinges in part on re-establishing veritable French-German solidarity.

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**MARIANNE ET
MICHEL SE FONT
LA TÊTE**

Depuis les origines, le « moteur franco-allemand » a une place particulière dans la construction européenne. Mais quand le couple va mal, c’est toute la famille européenne qui trinque.

The Franco-German couple figures prominently in all European political declarations on both sides of the Rhine, and has for a long time been a fundamental and necessary part of European construction. The choice of word ‘couple’ indicates the intrinsically human and lasting nature of the relationship, much like in the case of any bilateral diplomatic relation. At times, small glitches in understanding go unnoticed. At other times, the tensions are visible. However, the marital tension becomes palpable when a French Prime Minister – steeped in French domestic certainties – visits Munich in 2016, only to lecture the German Chancellor on refugees rather than offering support; or when German politicians and the press openly lambast the French for their social and economic rigidity rather than attempting to assist in the remedy. And it’s the whole European family that suffers.

The Franco-German engine is a special force in the European construction process. The symbolic figures of France’s Marianne and Ger-

many's Michel grew progressively close during the early days. They courted each other, building the common European house.

Perhaps it was calculated, but no matter, when François Mitterrand took Chancellor Kohl's hand during their September 22nd 1984 visit to the Douaumont ossuary in Verdun, the political emotion conjured by the image was a testament to just how much road had been travelled since the end of the war. They had moved beyond the past: the moral shock of the "Strange Defeat" of 1940; the shameful collaboration; the bitterness of being vanquished and having a master and occupier who had erstwhile been occupied. The failure in 1954 of the European Defence Community for fear of German rearmament was erased nine years later on January 22nd 1963 when de Gaulle and Adenauer signed the Elysée Treaty. Since then, French Presidents and German Chancellors have carried on the tradition of showing Europe and the world that it is possible to fight three wars in the span of a lifetime (1870-1940) – including two which caused destruction on a global scale – only to become the closest of partners.

Yet, reconciliation and cooperation are not founded solely on brotherly voluntarism: there is also the disequilibrium of the two former powers. The voluntary and imposed atrophy of German political power stood in stark contrast to the French Gaullist political grandeur. One struck the modest stance of a small country without any international ambition and without any outlook beyond its economic "miracle". Meanwhile, the other played up its position as a Great Nation with a future as glorious as its past, never mind the realities of decolonisation and the clear limits to its economic model.

This disequilibrium played out in a relatively small European Community: first, six countries, and then twelve, all of which were either smaller than Germany and France or in less of a position to make a play for leadership. Therefore, it was a natural progression for a

Franco-German ‘engine’ to be built. France, defending without hesitation its own interests, and speaking for itself or Germany – carefully avoiding doing just that for historically evident reasons – made it preferable to speak on behalf of the European Economic Community (EEC); every agreement was tinged with general European interest. Through ups and downs, in a Europe learning to mature from its crises, the Franco-German couple’s strength and political solidarity became one of the most important and reliable forces in the construction of a united Europe.

MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE AND LOVERS’ QUARRELS

Marianne and Michel’s is perhaps a marriage of convenience, yet it is a solid union, and the road travelled is a testament to that. The ties that bind on a daily basis are strong and even when the relationship is being tested the most, as presently, daily business runs smoothly between Paris, Berlin and Brussels, leading one to believe that all is well. The administrations know each other, work together, share mutual understanding and respect. Yet, despite these political appearances, the ever-present cooperation, the requests of one side or the other, the Franco-German couple is no longer a driving force of the Union. The relationship has become a bit stale and technocratic, it is ham-

strung by rituals and stripped of its political content. It is running out of the steam and the passion needed to rise to the major challenges that threaten the very existence of the European Union: Brexit, the pressure of the influx of refugees, imbalances in the Eurozone and the increase in so-called ‘illiberal democracies’ within Europe. All of this is compounded by the broken down ‘engine’ of Europe.

Perhaps a bit of historical perspective is needed to fully comprehend the worrisome weakening of this relationship. The last big test of solidarity that the couple faced was in 1989-92. With the fall of the iron curtain in 1989 and German reunification on October 3rd 1990, the European Community’s balance was thrown off. Europeans were surprised by events and had not fully contemplated the extent to which an end to the Cold War would mean a coming to terms with a history that is disquieting to the neighbours.¹

Indeed, it was the strength of the Franco-German couple that meant that 1990’s Europe could find its way in the face of a newly re-united Germany. Germany made a huge sacrifice in giving up its currency. Emblematic icon of the re-established power and symbol of the soft domination of Europe, the Deutsche Mark was pivotal in reunification, more so even than the Grundgesetz and the rule of law.

¹ Samy Cohen (Ed.) *Mitterrand et la sortie de la guerre froide*, PUF, 1998. In France debates on the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht did not actually focus on Europe but on Germany. Either surround Germany with a tight solidarity net (vote ‘yes’) or fear Germany would dominate the new European structure (vote ‘no’).

Chancellor Kohl imposed the new currency on a reluctant German people, concerned about the economic divergences with the countries of what was coming to be known as ‘Club Med’.

The scorn shown at that time foreshadowed the worst moments in the current debate. Giving up the Deutsche Mark was a magnanimous European act and the historic mark of the joint Franco-German leadership.

The irony of history would have it that the single currency did not put an end to the Deutsche Mark’s dominance or German-dominated monetary policy. On the contrary, the Euro further boosted the economic success of Germany and further exacerbated the struggles of the rest of the Eurozone and the European Union, as described by Ulrich Beck in his book *German Europe*.²

The couple’s decisive moment of weakening was precisely in its response to the 2008 financial crisis – and subsequent social and political crises – spurred by the collapse of the US banking system. Acting alone and without respect for her partners, specifically Nicolas Sarkozy’s France, who never

grasped nor accepted the importance of the couple³, Angela Merkel’s Germany abused its dominant position to impose on the EU a twofold catastrophic edict. First, that solu-

tions to the debt crisis were to be national; and second, that said decisions be in strict compliance with the common rules set at the time of the establishment of the European Economic and Monetary Union. In other words: climb the tree of your choice to escape the flames, but

too bad if you lack the agility of a monkey or the wings of a bird.

GERMAN PRIDE AND FRENCH PREJUDICE

Rejecting a European solution (e.g. eurobonds to pool debt risk) to the problem, when the very nature of a European single currency transforms each national problem into a European one, violates the very spirit of the European community, as it casts doubt on whether all the Member States are indeed equal. The technocratic and dehumanised handling of the Greek facet of the crisis was further evidence of this diminished European spirit.

THE FRANCO-GERMAN
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² Ulrich Beck, *Das deutsche Europa. Neue Machtlandschaften im Zeichen der Krise*, (Suhrkamp, 2012)

³ Sylvie Goulard, *Le Coq et la perle, 50 ans d'Europe* (Le Seuil, 2007)

HOW COULD
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The fallout of this tragic decision can be seen around Europe, above and beyond the devastating breakup of the Franco-German relationship; one that feeds mutual incomprehension. In Germany, Merkel and Schäuble refuse to account for the rigidities of the French political model. How could a French president – the Republican monarch, directly elected by the people – possibly go begging for solidarity from Berlin? Especially when that solidarity no longer comes naturally. Nothing wrong with helping Paris save face.

In France, pressure from the extreme-right is mounting. The consequences of this disagreement are pervasively felt. A new version of a “Germany will pay” rhetoric is blowing a 1930’s wind onto public opinion, not accustomed to self-criticism. Worse still, cultural and political defiance seems to be increasingly relevant. Left to its own devices, lost without any historical bearings, broken by economic competition which favours Germany, floundering in an EU which has expanded too much for its taste and which has made Berlin and Frankfurt the new epicentres, the French political class no longer understands the Franco-German couple. Just like it no longer understands Europe.

4 Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (Verso Books, 2014)

5 Guillaume Duval, *Made in Germany : Le modèle allemand au-delà des mythes* (Le Seuil, 2013)

6 Jean-Luc Mélenchon, *Le Hareng de Bismarck (Le poison allemand)*, (Plon, 2015)



This historical defiance is quite well illustrated by Jean-Luc Mélenchon's rants against Germany. Instead of the poised analytical tone of his excellent readings on Merkel's harmful policies (Ulrich Beck, Wolfgang Streeck⁴ and Guillaume Duval⁵), the French leftist-sovereignist Bonaparte-wannabe has no qualms about turning to the most basic nationalist tendencies, using all of the most German-phobic culturalist clichés while celebrating the genius of the Grande Nation.⁶

From Marine Le Pen to Frauke Petry, on both sides of the Rhine, nationalist, extreme-right, anti-European movements are impeding the ability of governments to drop this pretence and to recognise that European solidarity is struggling – and also, more specifically, that Franco-German solidarity is struggling – and to find the answers needed.

The partners could have rallied to a common cause or challenge to European polit-

ical integration, one that is not domestic and that they could share. Yet, even the threat of a Brexit did not seem to focus the minds of the Franco-German couple to move them out of their state of passive spectatorship, overcome by resigned stupor. Why is there no appeal, on behalf of the 27 Member States, to the British to stay in the EU and continue to contribute towards political union? Why are there no initiatives being taken to ensure that if the dis-United Kingdom leaves the EU, it does so alone? Why are there no new Lamers-Schäuble initiatives?⁷

EUROPEAN SENSE AND FRANCO-GERMAN SENSIBILITY

Whether we like it or not, the United Kingdom is an essential building block of the European edifice. A departure would strengthen nationalist extreme-right movements making pleas for an end to the European Union. Marine le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński and the recent showing of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria are examples of this increasing demand for 'illiberal democracy' movements and regimes abound. This is a serious subject and an existential threat to the European Union. Meanwhile, the Franco-German couple looks on awkwardly and essentially

⁷ The Lamers-Schäuble Report from 1994 proposed to the French a vision of Europe integrated around the French-German couple which was very consistent with the « engine » idea. It met the silence of the Balladu Government, the total inaction of François Mitterrand and the scepticism of the then Secretary General of the President, Hubert Védrine.

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passively. Rather than taking the pulse of the real European threat; rather than responding firmly; rather than a riposte to the increasing influence of Moscow; France and Germany prefer to maintain a domestic approach to the problem – as with the issue of debt, everyone has their own neo-fascist domestic approach.

The tragic absurdity of this passivity is that it results in the crises reinforcing each other. All of the crises are aggravated by the locking up of the Franco-German engine: refugees; the rise in populism; Brexit; the Euro. Disunited, Paris and Berlin are struggling to formulate a common security and foreign policy. Worse still, the couple's weakness on the inside is the European Union's weakness on the outside. Before it became a sordid game of haggling between a beleaguered EU and President Erdogan's authoritarian Turkey, the refugee deal was a cynical agreement hatched by the Franco-German couple. In exchange for its complete lack of solidarity with Germany on the refugee issue, Paris left Berlin to outsource the dirty work to Ankara. France – the so-called home of human rights – has obstinately failed to do its part in handling the burden of the refugee and migrant tragedy. It mirrors perfectly German deafness to the pleas for solidarity during the early phases of the Euro crisis.

Yet, when they want to, they know precisely how to rally the full clout of the European Union to weigh in on all of the partners who respond to a raw power struggle: from Riyadh to Moscow and Tehran to Ankara. The handling of the crisis in Ukraine and the Normandy format⁸ are an illustration that it can be done; it really can. The conflict in East Ukraine was hurtling towards a civil war with a whole other source of refugees coming to Europe and all of the disastrous effects of the full destabilisation of a country bordering the European Union, and Merkel and Hollande were able to contain the crisis, bringing all of Europe together to impose sanctions on Putin's Russia.

⁸ Normandy format is a diplomatic group of senior representatives of four countries (Germany, Russia, Ukraine and France) to resolve the situation in the East of Ukraine.

The conflict is still far from over of course. Nonetheless, this is an excellent example of what the EU can do in the face of a crisis if the Franco-German couple puts the engine in the driving role and not the brake slowing things down. To make this possible, the spark of political passion must be lit again in an old couple that is worn down by the daily humdrum of administrative and technocratic management. It comes down to a question of the quality of the political staff, but also of their embodiment (that old idea of a Franco-German minister who would be a part of the governments of both countries), and most importantly, an invested civil society. Franco-German cooperation in the 1950s and 1960s was nourished by twinned towns, language courses, exchanges and a will to transcend the cultural and political borders. Today, more and more, the French and Germans tend not to speak to each other in their respective languages. They increasingly communicate in English.

Free movement of peoples and open borders are threatened and the historic couple exudes lethargy, misunderstanding, and irritation.

When the Franco-German couple is strong and shows solidarity, it has proven to carry Europe very far on the path to political integration. But today, it has become a deadweight for Europe. It will have to rekindle the faith and commitment it had in the early days – and strive to save Europe from the threat of disintegration. ■



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