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The United States and the Franco-German Couple

Cornelia Woll

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Almost all observers agree: diplomatic relations between the United States, France and Germany are in crisis. Awkward political maneuvering and faux pas on both sides have aggravated what has now clearly a fundamental rift. While the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* maintains a dossier on “the German-American crisis”, *Le Monde* analyses the reasons for the Paris-Washington “rupture.”

Ambiguous Franco-American Relations

Yet, at least for France, this is nothing new. There have already been numerous occasions in the past where observers have said that American-French relations were at an all-time low. Throughout history, Franco-American relations have been very ambiguous. It is true that the French have helped to get the British out of the new colonies in 1781. Likewise, the US fought alongside the French in WWI – where General John J. Pershing famously greeted the French with the words “*Lafayette, nous voilà!*” – and helped liberate France in WWII. Already in 1797, however, France and the US were close to entering into a war over the “XYZ Affair” and relations did not get any better when France supported the Confederacy during the American Civil War. The French government, and above all Charles de Gaulle, kept a deeply rooted animosity against the US, who had preferred another leader for the post-war France, Henri Giraud. US financial aid for France’s Indochina War none withstanding, France took very personally US opposition to Franco-British plans of seizing the Suez Canal in 1956 and to pressure France into granting Algeria its colony freedom before 1962. In the course of on-going tensions, France pulled out of the military command of NATO in 1966 and spoke firmly against involvement in Vietnam in the late 1960s.

Within France, anti-Americanism has been a reoccurring theme of all extreme parties, be they right or left. On the left, Marxian thought and the Communist party have always maintained a general mistrust of the US way of life, while the extreme right parties wanted to reestablish France as a strong and independent country with “neither MacDonald’s nor mosques,” as Bruno Mégret put it.

It comes as no surprise that Jacques Chirac, a Gaullist, tries reassert an anti-American position reminiscent of Charles de Gaulle. Comparisons between the two, although somewhat mockingly, have become frequent in France. Especially recent African visits by the president and Dominique de Villepin reminded French commentators of Charles de Gaulle during colonial rule.

Despite mutual respect, the history of support and opposition between France and the US is at best a love-hate relationship. Both countries are proud of their political, economic, and cultural achievements and each defend their visions of their uniqueness. Especially politically, both are convinced to have instituted the best possible political system, which the rest of the world should adopt. “*L’exception française*” and “American exceptionalism” have been discussed in popular

debates as well as academic writings. Historically consistent as it may be, this confrontational pride seems to be a reason for despair to many proponents of multilateral problem solving.

Founding Europe

However, what is often forgotten today, is that it were precisely these sentiments that have led France to invest in European integration. The initial European project would have never gotten off the ground without France's support. Having paid the highest toll of all allies in WWII, France had initially been disposed to making Germany pay considerable reparations and to disarm the country completely. As time passed, the East-West front hardened and diplomatic relations evolved between the two former enemies France and Germany. Pooling the Coal and Steel Industries of the two countries paved the way for further co-operation famously proposed by French foreign minister Robert Schuman, a native of the Lorraine region educated in pre-WWI Germany. When Charles de Gaulle came into power in 1958, he supported these advances, but for a very precise geo-political reason that is not often remembered. For him, the most immediate motivation was to build a Europe able to protect against Russia and defy Anglo-Saxon domination. Charles de Gaulle made no secret of these reasons, asking,

What is the purpose of Europe? It should be to allow us to escape the domination of the Americans and the Russians. The six of us ought to be able to do just as well as either of the superpowers. [...] Europe is a means for France to regain the stature she has lacked since Waterloo, as the first among the world's nations.¹

Many steps in the building of a European community bare proof of this stance. Internally, de Gaulle has always mistrusted Jean Monnet, a European federalist, who he considered "*a true American*" because of Monnet's working experience on Wall Street and close connection to American statesmen such as Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles. He consequently opposed all designs ceding unnecessary power to European institutions. More importantly, de Gaulle's mistrust of close British-American connections led to his resolute opposition to British membership to the European Community throughout the 1960s. For de Gaulle, Europe was a means to greater power, which he wanted to exploit and strengthen against the outside – even through a European Defense Community proposed in 1950 – while maintaining sovereignty within it.

The Franco-German Couple

Against the Anglo-Saxons, France turned towards West Germany to form an alliance representing continental Europe. The Elysée Treaty between Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer in 1963 laid the foundations for this cooperation, but Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt and later François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl extended it. For the European Union's internal development, the success of this tandem has been fundamental, testified most recently by the advent of the Euro.

In continuation of this alliance, it might have been Gerhard Schröder's clumsy affirmations against a war in Irak that comforted Jacques Chirac's opposition to it. Aware of the German position, France knew that it would speak up as part of the Franco-German couple. Again, the underlying motivation was well summarized by a subscript to a recent photo of Jacques Chirac

¹ Charles de Gaulle, quoted in Alain Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, (Paris: Fayard, 1994), p. 159.

and Gerhard Schröder at a Franco-German press conference, “by themselves only two medium powers, together a world power.”

The situation is paradoxical. While most observers argue that the Franco-German position has driven a wedge into Europe, there is a sense within these two countries that the opposite is the case. Despite the personal dislikes between Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder, the crisis has proven that the Franco-German couple continues to work. Throughout the history of the EU, progress has been made as long as the tandem was going into the same direction, in spite of opposition from other countries, first and foremost Great Britain.

Interestingly, the only issue splitting the Franco-German couple through the post-war period had been defense, most notably on the issue of the transatlantic alliance, which Germany has always considered essential to the progress of Europe. This has led to the defeat of the European Defense Community in 1954 and hampered considerably the integration of foreign policy and defense issues within the EU. As the German opposition party continues to insist on today, Europe cannot exist without the transatlantic alliance and Germany had always been eager to moderate the more independently minded France.

To some European observers, the sudden Franco-German agreement countering the US position promises further deepening of European integration and establishes Europe as a pole in world politics. This development then seems much more important than the current “wedge” separating the Franco-German couple from Great Britain, the Iberic peninsula and many accession countries. Because of this paradox, Anglo-Saxons and the „old European“ core do not understand each other anymore when they try to evaluate the extent of the crisis. In a recent conversation, Robert Kagan accused Europe of a lack of a common position, arguing that Europe needs to ask itself what it is today and what it wants to be tomorrow. “That’s exactly what we are doing right now,” Daniel Cohn-Bendit countered. “We are building Europe. We have to take responsibility in a multi-polar world.”² Similarly, the French historian Emmanuel Todd – author of *After the Empire: Decomposition of American System* – does not consider the rift within Europe to be fundamental. “European difference will pass,” he says. “What is more important is that the brutality of Bush’s foreign policy has reinvigorated that tired Franco-German couple. A new pole in the world is in the making.”³

So far, this pride in the Franco-German stance comes from people that are not quite representative of the old German establishment. A different government would have most probably made different choices. But in these times of transatlantic crisis, it does seem comforting to continental Europeans that at least one alliance remains intact. In the past and today, opposition has helped to create positive and constructive energy within Europe – even if it is regrettable that the opposition is against the US.

² *Spiegel*, No. 12, 17 March 2003, p. 78.

³ *Spiegel*, No. 12, 17 March 2003, p. 128.