

The Franco-German relationship in the European Union

A short overview

SUMMARY

With Franco-German relations following the Second World War being at the very origins of the European Union, their bilateral cooperation has often been seen as the 'engine' of EU integration. Regular bilateral cooperation between the two countries was institutionalised with the 1963 Elysée Treaty and culminated in joint cabinet meetings and sectorial meetings at the highest political level to coordinate their positions particularly on the eve of European Council meetings.

In this context, there has been criticism that such bilateral meetings pre-determine decision-making within the European Council leaving little scope for further negotiations and leaving other Member States and supranational actors as mere bystanders. However, the importance of Franco-German cooperation in breaking deadlocks in negotiations at EU level and in identifying solutions to common challenges is widely recognised.

The Franco-German relationship is a longstanding and multifaceted process. This briefing does not aim at a full analysis of its complex nature but seeks to give a general overview ahead of the visit to the European Parliament of Chancellor Angela Merkel and President François Hollande on 7 October.



Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President François Mitterrand with EP President, Enrique Barón Crespo, 1989.

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At the origins of the European Union

Since the [Schuman declaration](#) of 9 May 1950 proposing to place Franco-German production of coal and steel as a whole under a common higher authority, Franco-German relations have been constituent for the common European project. But their importance not only for the creation of the then European Communities but also for future advances in integration open to other countries was already inherent in the Schuman declaration:

The coming together of the nations of Europe requires the elimination of the age-old opposition of France and Germany. Any action taken must in the first place concern these two countries.

The reconciliation of the French and German peoples thus became a cornerstone of further European integration. In January 1963, France and the Federal Republic of Germany signed a bilateral treaty ([the Elysée Treaty](#)), which formally sealed their special relationship, undertaking to coordinate their policies in foreign, security, youth and cultural matters. German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, and French President, Charles de Gaulle, stated that one of the goals of the two nations is to establish a 'united Europe'.

Institutionalised bilateral cooperation

The Elysée Treaty institutionalised Franco-German cooperation through governmental summits, which gradually expanded and were replaced in 2003 by **joint cabinet meetings**. The joint cabinet meetings not only enable coordination at the highest political level but also concrete political decision-making in view of establishing common positions during working sessions among ministers of specific portfolios,¹ as for instance within the framework of the Franco-German Financial and Economic Council that was put in place in 1988.² These joint council of ministers meetings are held twice a year, once in France and once in Germany. Each government has designated a commissioner for French-German cooperation (the French Minister for European Affairs and the German Minister of State for Europe) who coordinates the preparation, implementation and follow-up of decisions taken by the joint ministerial councils.

Franco-German intergovernmental cooperation was further deepened in order to better coordinate their positions within the EU framework. The need for these increasing informal consultations at the top political level became clear in the course of the negotiations on the Treaty of Nice, when France and Germany had divergent

Milestones in the Franco-German relationship

9 May 1950: Schuman declaration

22 January 1963: Elysée Treaty

22 September 1984: In Verdun, President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl jointly commemorate French and German soldiers who died in the two world wars.

1988-1989: On the 25th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty, the Franco-German Financial and Economic Council, the Defence and Security Council and the Environmental Council are launched.

9 November 1989: Fall of the Berlin Wall

22 November 1989: Speeches of President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl to the EP in Strasbourg on the situation in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall.

3 October 1990: German reunification

29 August 1991: First meeting of the French, German and Polish Foreign Ministers in Weimar ('Weimar Triangle').

29 November 1999: Chancellor Schröder is the first German chancellor to speak to the French Assemblée nationale.

22 January 2003: 40th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty; joint session of the French Assemblée nationale and German Bundestag. Franco-German summits are replaced by joint cabinet meetings.

4 February 2010: Franco-German Agenda 2020 to meet challenges related to the financial and economic crisis, environment and security and defence.

positions on important questions, such as weighting of votes in the Council of the EU. French President, Jacques Chirac, and German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, decided therefore to hold their regular meetings more frequently (about once every two months) and to clear any disagreements before formal negotiations take place within the European Council ('[Blaesheim process](#)').

Such bilateral meetings, particularly on the eve of European Council meetings, are seen critically by some, claiming that the representatives of the other Member States are sometimes presented with a *fait accompli*, limiting from the outset the scope for negotiation.³ Most commentators agree, however, that a Franco-German pre-understanding has a positive effect on the negotiating approach of other Heads of State or Government and contributes to efficient and solution-oriented decision-making.⁴

Pressing ahead in European integration

The Franco-German 'engine'

Franco-German cooperation – besides other groupings of Member States, which have played an important role in shaping the European Union, such as the Benelux countries and the Weimar Triangle (France, Germany and Poland) – has been crucial for many of the advances in European integration, leading many to believe that a dysfunctional relationship between the two biggest EU Member States leads to standstill and even regression in the EU.⁵ Indeed, Franco-German political deals have often broken deadlocks in the negotiations between Member States and provided political leadership when the EU was facing major challenges. Despite the number of Member States doubling in the past decade, Franco-German cooperation has remained at the heart of the Union.

Some of the bilateral initiatives launched by France and Germany have built a base for future EU projects, particularly in the field of a **common defence policy**, with the Franco-German Brigade established by the Franco-German Defence and Security Council in 1989 being the forerunner of the Eurocorps and later of the European Rapid Reaction Force and EU battle groups.⁶ In general, the coordination between Germany and France at ministerial and civil-servant level in these fields is seen as the pattern on which the later **Common European Foreign and Security Policy** was based, at least in its intergovernmental (multilateral) origins.⁷

Franco-German cooperation has been particularly relevant in advance of negotiations on the different EU Treaties. The Mitterrand-Kohl plan of 1991 for instance gained a significant place in the Maastricht Treaty, including for the first time a role for the EU in security policy and advances on European economic and monetary union. Indeed the Franco-German tandem, in the guise of President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, played a significant role in the establishment of the European Monetary System that laid the path to the later introduction of the euro.

The Amsterdam Treaty was significantly pre-shaped by a Franco-German agreement too, which President Chirac and Chancellor Kohl expressed in a [joint letter](#) to the Council Presidency in December 1995, on the eve of the intergovernmental conference leading to the signing of the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997. In that, Germany and France advocated the possibility of **enhanced cooperation within the EU framework** for those Member States in favour of closer cooperation in specific policy areas. Whilst many assessed this initiative as a necessary instrument of differentiated integration in view of

the increasing difference in interests among EU Member States, concerns have been voiced since then about possible developments towards 'two-speed' and 'core Europe'.⁸

In the context of the **economic and financial crisis**, Franco-German coordination intensified further and was embedded in another layer of multilateral coordination, with the French and German leaders meeting together with the Presidents of the European Council, the Commission, and the European Central Bank and the managing Director of the International Monetary Fund. Franco-German leadership faced significant criticism however after the 2010 Deauville agreement between Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel on the eurozone bailout, including an agreement on the participation of private creditors in debt restructuring of eurozone Member States, and (non-automatic) sanctions against governments failing to comply with budgetary discipline rules. Whilst the agreement as such was much criticised by many [commentators and political actors](#), it has also been seen as an important demonstration of the political leadership necessary to set the pace for future instruments of EU economic governance, and particularly for the establishment of the permanent lending facility, the European Stability Mechanism, despite the, at times, fundamentally different positions of France and Germany regarding fiscal policy discretion or stricter budgetary discipline rules.⁹

In August 2011, Chancellor Merkel and President Sarkozy sealed their commitment to find a common position on large-scale challenges for the EU by sending a [joint letter](#) to the then President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, announcing their intention to engage in a new stage of economic convergence between the two countries and outlining their proposals to strengthen the governance of the eurozone. In this respect, the French Minister for the Economy, Emmanuel Macron, and German Vice-Chancellor, Sigmar Gabriel, recently [called](#) for deeper integration of the eurozone Member States, including a eurozone budget and a proper Monetary Fund based on the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). On **foreign affairs**, President Hollande and Chancellor Merkel have taken a [common stance](#) on the Ukrainian crisis.

Bilateralism vs Community method?

Bilateral cooperation between France and Germany in the EU context has not always been welcomed. Scholars have warned against the adverse effect of the Franco-German tandem on the authority of supranational actors as well as on supranational EU decision-making as such.¹⁰

Franco-German pre-shaping of political negotiations in the EU has, however, a functional aspect, which goes beyond the importance of a smooth relationship between the two biggest Member States. Their cooperation is not characterised by automatic agreement on all issues. On the contrary, the very justification for Franco-German initiatives to negotiate on controversial issues on the margins of formal EU decision-making is precisely the fact that they often represent the different currents in the European Council: an intergovernmental vs integrationist approach, a stronger role for the European Parliament vs stronger involvement of national parliaments, austerity vs growth policies, etc. Therefore, agreement between France and Germany on major political issues is often portrayed as an important step towards negotiations between those representing different stances in the European Council.¹¹

Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande in Parliament

Chancellor Angela Merkel and President François Hollande will make a statement in the plenary session on 7 October on the 'Current situation in the European Union'. The last time French and German leaders addressed the European Parliament in the same session was in 1989, when both President François Mitterrand and Chancellor Helmut Kohl participated in the debate on the situation in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall.¹² At the time, France chaired the Council of the EU.

Since then, French and German leaders have addressed Parliament on numerous occasions, both in their role as members of the European Council and as Council Presidents. Chancellor Merkel's last address to Parliament (in Brussels) was in 2012, whilst President Hollande spoke to the plenary in Strasbourg in February 2013.

The speech of the two leaders comes at a time when the EU is facing an unprecedented migratory challenge. In this regard, both Member States have [pushed](#), in a common effort, for solutions based on solidarity among Member States, including binding quotas for the relocation of asylum-seekers from frontline Member States, such as Italy and Greece.

Statements of members of the European Council in the European Parliament

Parliament's Rules of Procedure provide for the possibility for any Head of State or Government, i.e. member of the European Council, to request the agreement of Parliament's President to make a statement in plenary ([Rule 123](#)). The President decides when the statement may be made and whether it is to be followed by a full debate or by 30 minutes of questions from Members. When placing a statement with debate on its agenda, Parliament also decides whether or not to wind up the debate with a resolution.

Main references

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Endnotes

- ¹ J. Germain, 'Le conseil des ministres franco-allemand, une institution en voie d'affirmation', *La Revue Administrative* no. 364, 2008, p. 417.
- ² Further sector-specific councils are the Franco-German Defence and Security Council and the Environmental Council.
- ³ Christian Joerges, Carola Glinski, *The European Crisis and the Transformation of Transnational Governance: authoritarian managerialism versus democratic governance*, Oxford, 2014, p. 260.
- ⁴ K. Hänsch, *Maximum des Erreichbaren-Minimum des Notwendigen? Die Ergebnisse von Nizza*, *Integration* 2/2001.
- ⁵ See for instance N. Sarkozy, [The Franco-German friendship is vital for Europe](#), Robert Schuman Foundation, *European issues* n° 305, March 2014.
- ⁶ A. Cole, *Franco-German relations*, Oxford 2001, pp. 115, 116.
- ⁷ R. Francia, M.A. Medina Abellan, *Striving for a Common Foreign Policy*, *European Foreign Policy: from rhetoric to reality?*, D. Mahncke, A. Ambos, C. Reynolds (eds.), Peter Lang, 2004, p. 122.
- ⁸ See for a comprehensive overview over differentiated integration S. Blockmans (ed.), [Differentiated integration in the EU: from the inside looking out](#), CEPS, Brussels 2014.
- ⁹ U. Krotz, J. Schild, *Shaping Europe: France, Germany, and embedded bilateralism. From the Elysée Treaty to Twenty-Century Politics*, Oxford 2013, pp. 201-211.
- ¹⁰ A. Cole, *Franco-German relations*, op. cit., p. 62.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 60.
- ¹² See on the debates in plenary, [Le Parlement européen et l'unification de l'Allemagne](#), Centre Arxivistique et Documentaire (CARDOC), European Parliament, November 2009.

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