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Facing a sobering truth: France has become one of many

BY JACQUELINE HÉNARD, SENIOR LECTURER, [SCIENCES PO PARIS](#)

On that very special night, the intellectual and political elite had gathered at the lecture hall of “Sciences Po” University. Alfred Grosser, considered to be among the nation’s best analysts of Europe in general and Germany in particular, was speaking on the latest developments in Eastern Germany and its probable consequences. Grosser is of German-Jewish descent and gifted with a particularly sharp mind. One of the participants, the historian Elisabeth du Réau, recalls that Grosser was just telling his captivated audience that all those demonstrations and civic movements going on in the GDR were probably not going to lead to much. Suddenly, the dean of “Sciences Po” University erupted in the lecture hall, slightly out of breath. “I have a most extraordinary announcement to make”, he said, “The wall is coming down!” Elisabeth du Réau, herself a specialist on European matters and foreign relations, remembers that, despite the subject of the conference, all those present immediately turned their gaze to the wall behind Grosser’s chair: Was there something wrong with the building? Maybe a terrorist attack?

France took some time to acknowledge the news that shook the continent. Its intellectual and political elite did not rejoice at the perspective of seeing Germany reunited – apart from some notable exceptions, Jacques Chirac - at the time mayor of Paris, later to become president (1995) - , immediately welcomed the changes to come. He gave a speech that is worth rereading. Jacques Delors, president of the European

Commission, did all he could to integrate a reuniting Germany into the mechanisms and the dynamics of the European Community. On the other hand, François Mitterrand, French president and considered to be close to the German chancellor Helmut Kohl, seemed reluctant to accept the inevitable. One month after the fall of the wall, Mitterrand flew to East Berlin, thus honouring a disintegrating regime with a state visit by one of the major players of the Western world. Obviously, the visit had been planned well ahead; but did it have to be maintained? Germans took notice of the gesture, and the political class of the Federal Republic was ruffled by the strange behaviour of one of its allies. For many years, French officials tried to blame the last French ambassador to GDR for giving bad advice. But isn’t that looking for the easy way out? Shouldn’t the president’s office dispose of an analytical capacity of its own?

Although French newspaper coverage was extensive and often of good analytical quality, France missed the point of what was going on at the very top of the country. There are many explanations for its difficulty in understanding what was happening on the other side of the Rhine. First, in France, 1989 had been dedicated to grand celebrations of the bicentennial of the French revolution, thereby diverting people’s attention. Then, curious as it may seem when looking at European politics from another continent, France and Germany, although sharing a border and involved in many common projects, fre-

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quently behave like strangers in the night. Unable to decode signals, language and behaviour, they instinctively mistrust each other. Decades of Franco-German reconciliation have not led to any intimacy between the two countries. Even today, the most remarkable achievements in European politics start out with a culture clash between France and Germany. France is a centralized state with a tradition of technocratic elites eager to steer both the state and the private economy; Germany is a federal state that rejects any idea of such an all-pervading technocratic elite. Despite France's national pride in the 1789 revolution that led to the public execution of the King, the French cherish an intellectual agility (esprit) that has its origins in the public life of the royal court. Germans, on the other hand, value economic success much more than intellectual playfulness; the quick, contradictory style of the French elite drives them to distraction.

In November 1989, ordinary French people were happy and deeply moved by the fall of the Wall and its consequences for the people of Germany. Freedom, after all, is the first word of the state motto *liberté, fraternité, égalité*. For them, the politics of reconciliation – after three terrible wars in less than a century, 1870/1871, 1914-1918, 1939-1945 – had proved a success. They were not worried. The intellectual and political elite, on the contrary, had their doubts and apprehensions, both rooted in the past. On one hand, their fears have proved groundless; since 1989, Germany has not turned into the unstable, aggressive, expansionist neighbour they remembered and feared from former times. On the other hand, however, the acceleration of globalisation that followed the fall of the Iron Curtain was bad news for them.

For centuries, the French elite have wielded far more influence in the world than their country's share in demographic, geographic or economic terms would suggest. Their language, culture, values, political and military power have had significant impact on other countries and continents. France's elite lived on the conviction their country carried a message to the world. With the fall

of the wall, they had to face a double challenge: Germany would not stay the political dwarf they had become accustomed to. It would discuss what it meant to be a nation, define and emphasize its own interests. And the world, starting with Europe, would simply become less French. France had no strategy with which to counter the events. An offer from the German chancellor's office shortly after 1989, to cooperate in the development of the two geographical zones that would be major challenges for either France or Germany - the Maghreb countries and Eastern Europe -, was simply left unanswered.

In the mid-nineties, instead of trying to conquer a fair share of Eastern European markets and minds, French president Jacques Chirac took several unilateral decisions that shocked France's friends. He abolished conscription without even informing the Germans, and he started a last round of nuclear tests in the Pacific. France failed to gain influence in the aftermath of 1989. The post-communist countries would have been more than willing to develop partnerships with European powers other than Germany. Bridling its own potential, France was not very welcoming, to say the least. In 2000, the French presidency of the European Union was supposed to create a new set of institutions and mechanisms that would allow for a smooth enlargement of the European Union to include the former communist countries. Lacking imagination and political will, the presidency ended with the treaty of Nice, a disappointingly poor compromise.

France and Germany had drifted far apart. Reason brought them back together. Chirac and the then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder started seeing each other on a regular basis. At the outbreak of the war in Iraq, they stood together - the sudden understanding came as such a surprise that they forgot to tell their neighbours what was going on between them and what they were planning to do together.

The resulting split of the continent in 2003 had many reasons, among them France's quasi genetic incapacity to deal with coun-

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tries smaller than itself. Politicians and technocrats alike simply did not know how to deal with the myriad of nations, governments, oppositions and histories that after 1989 claimed to be part of "Europe". France's spontaneous reaction was a posture of arrogance. When the Iraq war was about to begin, these countries were neither prepared nor could be seduced into accepting France's claim to leadership, based on a claim of moral superiority.

The 2007 presidential election promised change. Nicolas Sarkozy was a man from a different generation and from a different background. His father had come to France in 1956 as a political refugee from Hungary, and his mother's father was a survivor of Saloniki's Jewish community. In foreign policy, Sarkozy introduced two major shifts, mending the relationship with the United States and purposely establishing friendly relations with Israel. His first major initiative was the creation of a Mediterranean Union, an ambitious project that could have split the European Union in the long run, if Sarkozy and his advisors had had their way. The German chancellor took care of that, opposing the first version of the project. Well over a year after a grand first meeting in Paris, the Mediterranean Union has come to... next to nothing.

France is a country that wants to wield clout and influence in the international arena. Charles de Gaulle managed to manoeuvre it into a very special position after 1945. France is a member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power. It likes to think of itself as the "other" leader of the Western world, voluntarily cultivating a certain opposition to the United States. The most forceful expression of this ambivalence was the position France held in the western defence alliance, Nato, until 2008: being a founding member (and an ally) without participating in its most important committee. President Sarkozy acknowledged the futility of such a claim in a world that had overcome the Cold War and had to face entirely new challenges like global warming, the rise of new powers or the financial crisis.

That does not mean, however, that France finds it easy to become one of many.