

## New engine for a new era?

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### Why, in 2023, a new approach to Franco-German cooperation is needed in Europe

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“The Franco-German engine is indispensable for Europe.” This image is bound to reappear 60 years after Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer signed the Elysée Treaty. In 1963, the two heads of state paved the way for European reconciliation, peace, and prosperity in a European Community of six founding member states. Enjoying military protection provided by the US in the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

In 2023, Germany and France are still the largest member states of the European Union, which, having grown to include 27 members, is now facing a different challenge: a direct threat from revisionist Moscow. The global competition between systems, waged by Washington and Beijing, is the second threat, the third comes from within: from illiberal governments and parties undermining Europe’s foundation of values.

In this situation, the EU needs to implement reforms for making its processes more efficient and for strengthening the political will of its members to jointly adopt necessary policies.

The two largest member states of the EU are indispensable for achieving this. Especially in the anniversary year of the Elysée Treaty – the symbol of reconciliation after centuries of a “hereditary enmity”. It is hard to imagine the EU without Franco-German cooperation. However, the EU cannot and should not be reformed solely based on Franco-German proposals. The other member states would be too much worried about a “directorate”.

Since 1963, the European Economic Community (EEC) or the European Union (EU), respectively, has had several rounds of enlargement, its membership has more than quadrupled. Today, it is a multivocal apparatus bringing together various perspectives, experiences, and mentalities from all corners of Europe.

The recent crises, however, have exposed internal fault lines: while the Northern member states clashed with the Southern Europeans during the financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, Central Eastern Europe and the South are at odds over migration issues. Russia’s war against Ukraine is now shining a spotlight on the reality of the security threat Europe is facing, something that has long been understood by the Central, Eastern, and Northern member states but mostly downplayed by Germany and France.

When referring to the strength and efficiency of the EU, today’s governments in Berlin and Paris like talking about “European sovereignty”. This attitude does not go down well in Central and Eastern Europe – so soon after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Ukraine’s fight for national survival underscores the major importance that national sovereignty still has.

The Polish government is difficult to manage for Berlin and Paris: Germany and France need to support the EU in order to safeguard EU legal principles such as the rule of law and to stop the dismantling of institutions designed to protect it. At the same time, they need to treat this Polish government – or a new one starting in late 2023 –

as an equal partner and need to recognise its interests. Any lecturing from the German or French partners is not helpful in this situation.

Apart from this, 2023 must become the year of a joint European energy policy in order to safeguard the energy supply of households and industry at acceptable price levels. The energy policies pursued by Germany and France so far are not a viable solution. Germany and France have exactly opposite views on the use of nuclear power: France keeps putting its faith on this source of energy, while, in Germany, there is no political majority in sight for reversing the decision to phase it out. That is why the goal of supplying the EU with hydrogen must be vigorously pursued along with other EU members. Especially European industry needs to be supplied with green hydrogen, generated from renewable energy sources. Working toward this goal, the necessary infrastructure needs to be developed quickly and incentives must be created for the transitional use of low-emission hydrogen. For the sake of achieving a secure, competitive, and sustainable energy supply, Germany and France must set aside their differences: Berlin needs to accept the fact that France will keep using nuclear power and Paris will have to acknowledge that this is only acceptable as a temporary solution.

Finally, both countries, but especially Germany, must do more for bolstering the security of EU member states. The US are increasingly turning away from Europe, setting their sight increasingly on Asia. There is increasingly vocal criticism in the US Congress – including by the Democrats – of the massive and, until now, crucial US support provided to Ukraine.

Germany and France must overcome national perspectives and must jointly develop a European approach, involving the United Kingdom. Europe will only be perceived as an interesting partner, rather than as a cost factor, by Washington, if it develops efficient security policy capabilities. Fairer burden-sharing can preserve a long-term US commitment to Europe and can guarantee lasting security from Russia.

In 2023, Europe does not need a Franco-German engine: what is needed for preserving and strengthening the EU is more Franco-German willingness to think in European terms and to consider the interests of all EU members, from all corners of Europe – what is needed is a new European engine for a new era!

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