



France-Germany: a place for pragmatism

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Relations internationales

Each of the partners of the Franco-German couple distrusts the other, both in terms of the capacity of its military and its control of arms exports. SAG (2S) Arnaud SAINTE-CLAIRE DEVILLE advocates pragmatism to overcome our mutual prejudices by accepting our differences.

Franco-German defence cooperation: Towards a hereditary friendship?

At the end of 2018, Mrs Ursula VON DER LEYEN, Federal Minister of Defence, was a little provocative in asking this question, referring to the Franco-German relationship in one of her speeches: "From hereditary enmity to hereditary friendship? »

As an attentive and sometimes humble observer of Franco-German defence cooperation for more than a quarter of a century, I would like in a few lines to propose some keys to understanding to the reader, but don't let me pull a ready-made solution out of the hat. Indeed, Franco-German defence cooperation is complex and sometimes even impenetrable, even incomprehensible, to the uninitiated. More generally, it is part of a Franco-German relationship that has always been complicated, with "with" and "without" phases.

If I persist in believing that the hereditary enemy was more English than German, I also believe that the objective of a hereditary friendship seems to me to be unattainable, so great are the differences between our two countries. For all that, I am convinced that the future of our two countries lies in the step-by-step pursuit of the construction of a defence relationship which, if not fusional, must above all be pragmatic: the issues that bind us together are stronger than those that separate us.

The twofold advice recently proposed at a dinner debate by the German Ambassador in Paris can be applied particularly in the area of defence, which should not be idealised. He advised "the Germans to love the French in order to understand them and the French to

understand the Germans in order to love them".

After having fought against some prejudices firmly established in the minds of people on both sides of the Rhine, it seems useful to me to dwell on a few fundamental differences that cannot be brushed aside. By fighting against the subjective while remaining realistic, we can then, based on what already exists, continue to build a solid relationship: there is no lack of opportunities; but there must be a shared willingness to seize them and exploit them!

Resolutely fighting prejudice

It is fairly easy to avoid the complicated subject of Franco-German defence cooperation by hiding behind hard-living prejudices on either side of the Rhine. These, presented as postulates, ultimately reinforce the idea that it is impossible to work with the partner as long as the gap is so great.

Here we will only analyse a few pairs of prejudices.

Two prejudices are thus cultivated symmetrically on both sides of the Rhine, particularly in higher military education. The German considers that the Frenchman does not know how to take the initiative and remains stuck within the framework of the order set by the higher echelon. The lack of reaction to the crossing of the Meuse River in May 1940 is the typical historical example that has been used again and again, regularly at the FüAk36. At the same time, the Frenchman reproached the German for his lack of responsiveness when a grain of salt disrupted planning.

It is interesting to note this reciprocal feeling when everyone knows that the "Auftragstaktik"³⁷ is at the heart of the training of German officers such as the major effect at the heart of ours; each army putting forward its intrinsic capacity to encourage initiative!

Another pair of prejudices is also interesting to mention. For the German soldier, the French army remains in some ways the one defeated in 1870 and 1940, and having narrowly escaped defeat in August 1914. It is an army for external interventions but not very credible for the "Great Patriotic War" or large-scale high-intensity operations. Behind this assertion, which will seem exaggerated to many, is a certain reservation about our planning and organizational capabilities. This so-called lack of a planning culture is echoed by the prejudice that places "Deutsche Qualität" on a pedestal that is unattainable³⁸, a fortiori by the French, not at the industrial level. To sum up, it would therefore be impossible to work with French people who are bad at planning and organization and not very rigorous in execution.

As a counterpoint, the French criticized the Germans for not committing themselves at the right level in today's operations, or in other words, a strong reluctance to "pay the price of blood. How can we prepare together if we know from the outset that we will not be engaged together in difficult theatres? All things being not equal, this feeling must be tempered: Germans who have been engaged in external operations for just over 20 years have losses that are not insignificant.³⁹

These hard-living prejudices reveal the Franco-German actors' perception of a relationship, which sometimes involves a whole range of unflattering feelings. Establishing a climate of mutual trust, free of prejudices, while having a clear perception of what can separate us, is essential.

Accept and understand differences.

Overcoming prejudices, simplistic but tenacious, does not mean denying the major differences between French and German fundamentals in the field of defence. On the contrary, it is necessary to understand them in order to better overcome them.

Germany's intimate relationship with defence remains deeply marked by the weight of the period 33-45. The hatred of war and the rejection of all forms of militarism deeply irrigate the subconscious of our partners. To question the concept of defence requires us to address the notion of interest. This word, like the word sovereignty, is approached with great caution because it is too closely linked to the idea of power. Germany prefers to talk about the concept of responsibility, which gives the impression that we are not pursuing a policy of power.

However, the lack of consensus in the political class as well as in the general public on what this concept of responsibility means in practice for Germany's security policy ambitions is today handicapping any fundamental debate that would prevent the emergence of a German strategic culture. The very strong commitment to NATO also reflects this inclination not to take responsibility in the front line while presenting itself as the best second best role within the Alliance.

On the French side, taking part in operations remains a major challenge, as demonstrated by the European Intervention Initiative (EII) launched by President MACRON. It is easy to understand why it was necessary to convince Germany to join the EII when the mere term "intervention" could appear to be a redhibitory one in its eyes.

France shares with Germany the desire to do more for the defence and strategic autonomy of Europe and to strengthen European cohesion. However, Germany still has a more institutional approach, marked by a willingness to structure but not necessarily a willingness to act. Hence the gap that needs to be managed.

German post-war pacifism is a first strong trend in German policy which makes it difficult to develop a common commitment aspect of our defence cooperation. It also influences the armaments aspect, particularly in the area of arms exports. This same aspect is also undermined by a second strong trend in German defence policy. German ordoliberalism,⁴⁰ aimed at preventing direct state intervention in the economy.

The arms export policy is conceived in France as an instrument of strategic autonomy, foreign policy and international influence, like all the other permanent members of the Security Council. The approach is very different in Germany, however, a major arms exporting country.

. First of all, behind the term "defence industry", the French hear "defence" where the Germans retain the word "industry". Where France will speak of defence industrial policy, with a strong role for the state to coordinate and guide; Germany will hide behind the policies of its industrialists, anxious under the banner of ordoliberalism not to let the state interfere. Integrating the industrial component into the definition of defence cooperation seems obvious to a French mind, much less seen from the German side.

. Secondly, the problem of arms exports remains particularly sensitive. On the German side, it is all the more acute as it is at the heart of the coalition agreement, which was difficult to obtain after long months of negotiation. On the French side, the ability to secure arms exports is considered indispensable for the development of new Franco-German programmes such as the FCAS⁴¹ or the MGCS⁴². Strongly influenced by the ideology of post-war German pacifism, the SPD (today in the coalition) and even more so

the Greens (tomorrow probably in another form of coalition) consider the French export control regime to be lax. The perception remains very strong in German public opinion that France is ready to sell to any criminal. Only the signing of agreements that are both binding and sustainable by both partners will make it possible to overcome this situation of deadlock and misunderstanding.

A few avenues to go further

Franco-German defence cooperation has been a reality for many years with tangible results on which to build⁴³. Sa Pursuit implies relentlessly developing a climate of trust and mutual respect, which is built in particular on a reciprocal knowledge of our differences and on ending certain prejudices.

Since 2014, the geopolitical environment is favourable to its strengthening.⁴⁴ Indeed, we are now in the midst of a period of significant defence policy initiatives, both at European level (development of permanent structured cooperation, establishment of the European Defence Fund, etc.) and at bilateral level (Treaty of Aachen, MGCS, FCAS). Benefiting from a strong political impetus, operational and industrial convergences are taking shape.

On the German domestic front, defence has now become an election campaign issue and is the subject of open but highly controversial discussions between the political parties. The German media landscape covers defence policy issues (procurement, exports, budget, etc.) openly and in great detail. This is an important recent development.

However, nothing can be taken for granted, as shown for example by the difficulties encountered over export licences.

In this particular context, which is both hopeful and disillusioning, a few pragmatic and concrete avenues deserve to be explored.

The development of a genuine Franco-German defence community within the political, administrative, military and industrial apparatuses requires the intensification of training activities at all levels of responsibility. Cultural interoperability is an indispensable prerequisite for more cooperation. The ability to understand issues together and explain them internally will be the best way to develop new initiatives and implement them successfully.

The operational area also offers immense opportunities if one avoids setting surrealistic objectives⁴⁵. ⁴⁵ Here again, a pragmatic approach must be favoured: the recent engagement of both French and German BFA units in Mali in the same theatre but in different settings is a good example. The intensification of exchanges in terms of operational preparation should also be developed by making the remarkable training facilities available to both sides, that can be found on either side of the Rhine.⁴⁶ The integration of a SGTIA⁴⁷ into a German battalion every two years as part of Operation LYNX⁴⁸ also contributes to improving Franco-German interoperability. Finally, at a time when Germany has no culture of intervention, it would be advisable to listen with interest and enthusiasm to the recent proposals made by the CDU Chair regarding the European aircraft carrier, which can be understood as the seed of a new strategic culture.

Following the strong announcements made in June 2017 concerning the joint development of the two structuring programmes MGCS and FCAS, the Aachen Treaty calls for defence industrial policy to be linked to the strategies of industry. This crucial aspect of defence cooperation must be based on a Franco-German community of interests between the military, politicians and industry. The success of a bilateral

programme requires a convergence of political will, operational requirements and industrial organization. These two programs represent a tremendous opportunity to materialize the reality of our defense cooperation on a dimensional but complex level. Step by step, this convergence is taking place. The success of these two programmes in particular requires the removal of obstacles in the delicate area of arms exports. The French as a whole, like the German industry, consider that the European market will not be sufficient to make the major Franco-German and European equipment projects economically efficient. The existence of credible export opportunities, based on clear and predictable rules, will be an indispensable condition for the success of the programmes mentioned, but also for the sustainability of our European defence industry.

Under pressure from German public opinion, which is highly sensitive to arms exports, and supported by political parties, one of which (the SPD) is a member of the government coalition, the spirit of the DEBRESSCHMIDT⁴⁹ agreement is today being undermined. In practice, this is reflected in the refusal to grant export licences for German components integrated into French equipment intended for export to countries in the Persian Gulf. France and Germany, as provided for in the Treaty of Aachen, must find pragmatic and responsible solutions based on mutual trust. On the French side in particular, this will require an effort to education to increase understanding of our rigorous export control system, which is often completely ignored or even decried in Germany. In the end, this must be translated in substance by updating the DEBRÉSCHMIDT spirit and in form by a legally binding agreement. This agreement must be sufficiently robust and broad to convince the French authorities that it is a sustainable partnership that is also resilient to international developments. It must also, in order to convince the German authorities, allow them to re-examine each arms export dossier on a case-by-case basis, respecting the spirit but without an automaticity clause. The current negotiations give hope of a favourable outcome.

Franco-German cooperation in the field of defence, as in other areas, is not a long, calm river. It requires us to combat well-established prejudices, to continue our mutual efforts to understand our differences, and to build the different floors of this common edifice step by step with constancy.

We must work together on concrete subjects, avoiding each time talking about each other's specificities.

The level of political ambition is present, raised to the level of Heads of State through the Treaty of Aachen. Convergent commitments have been made to ambitious capability projects, while we continue to constantly improve the interoperability of our means and our minds.

Franco-German friendship in the field of defence will never be idyllic; it is often passionate with ups and downs; above all, it is a formidable asset for a Europe that was long torn apart.

36 Führungsakademie of the Bundeswehr.

37 A command style that focuses on the achievement of results rather than on the ways and means to achieve them, the latter being left to the discretion of the commander to whom the mission has been assigned.

38 The CEO of a major German arms group explained recently that a land defence system without a German component was intrinsically deficient....

39 Over the period 1995-2019 in external operations, all causes taken into account, the French army lost more than 300 soldiers, the Bundeswehr more than 100 soldiers with an average level of commitment significantly lower than that of the French army.

40 A liberal current of thought that emerged in Germany as early as the 1930s, according to which the economic mission of the state is to create a normative framework allowing free and undistorted competition in companies. It is credited with giving rise to the social market economy system during the post-war reconstruction.

41 FCAS = Future Combat Air System, a Franco-German programme to replace the Rafale and Eurofighter.

42 MGCS = Main Ground Combat System, a Franco-German programme to replace the LECLERC and LEOPARD 2 tanks.

43 A non-exhaustive list includes the Franco-German Brigade at the operational level, the training of officer cadets at the training level and the recent creation of KNDS at the industrial level.

44 The concomitance of a trend towards the isolation of the USA and BREXIT, the resurgence of the threat of strong states, the rise of terrorism and the migration crisis places defence at the heart of the main preoccupations.

45 Like the dream of optimal interoperability of information and communication systems.

46 Like for example combat training centres in urban areas, fire training capabilities in mountainous areas, etc.

47 Inter-Arms Tactical Sub-Group.

48 Operation conducted in the framework of the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) Force, a NATO mission decided in 2017 and aimed at demonstrating the Alliance's determination to address threats on its eastern borders. France deploys a SGTIA eight months a year, alternately in Estonia within a British unit and in Lithuania within a German unit.

49 Agreement signed in 1972 by the defence ministers Michel DEBRÉ and Helmut SCHMIDT, which prohibits one of the two countries from vetoing contracts from its neighbour concerning jointly developed equipment, except "exceptionally".

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