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THE GERMAN-FRENCH TREATY: SIGN OF STRENGTH OR OF WEAKNESS?

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On January 22, 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel signed a bilateral document called the “Treaty of Aachen” (available in German <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2178596/fe6f6dd0ab3f06740e9c693849b72077/190118-download-aachenervertrag-data.pdf>, and in French <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/allemande/relations-bilaterales/traité-de-coopération-franco-allemand-d-aix-la-chapelle/>).

The treaty’s text contains interesting information on the will to cooperate expressed by the two countries, which have the most political-diplomatic-economic influence in the European Union. However, the document also shows how far the two governments are from creating a concrete common policy to tackle the shared problems lying at the heart of Europe.

The original ambition of the document is evidenced by the will to update the historic “Elysée Treaty”, signed by Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer on January 22, 1963. The German chancellor, at the end of his mandate, wanted to complete the rehabilitation process of his country in the international community, something that the French – and in particular Foreign Minister

Schuman – had made possible with the generous offer to include Germany in the nascent European Economic Community project. Adenauer, who at the time was politically weakened, had to deal with the resistance from the so-called “Atlanticists”, primarily with his successor in the chancellery Ludwig Erhard, who would have preferred to cultivate relations of friendship and close cooperation with the United States. The Atlanticist position was, in fact, reflected in the text of the Treaty, in the introduction, which, among other things, envisaged the entry of Britain into the European Economic Community established by the Treaty of Rome. De Gaulle had opposed involving London in the European project. With the Elysée Treaty the French president intended to create a critical mass that would have resisted what he considered to be excessive influence that Washington and London were exercising on French interests. As we see, today Europe still bears some traces of the strategic problems of that period. Since 1963 both countries have given importance to commemorating the Elysée Treaty.

With a significant ebb in pro-European sentiments, or *Europaverdrossenheit*, as it is called in Berlin, France and Germany have decided to start from the original motivations behind the first Treaty and from some of the chapters of the 1963 agreement in order to strengthen their joint commitment and to respond to the growing nationalism in Europe, which both leaders have denounced during the treaty’s signing ceremony at Aachen. The brief summary that follows is taken from the presentation on the website of Berlin’s Foreign Ministry:

- 1) The pooling of the rules and of the security apparatus. Both countries will develop their military capabilities and their forces will work more closely together. The two countries agree on common rules in the field of arms exports. A bilateral defense and security council will serve as an orientation. The objective is to develop a presence in Africa through aid to the private sector.
- 2) Germany and France want to develop a common position within the framework of the United Nations and commit themselves to a reform of the UN Security Council. (In this context, the joint declaration states that the allocation of a permanent seat to Germany is a priority for Paris).
- 3) A cooperation program intends to develop exchange between young people of the two countries. A special committee, the “Laboratory for the future”, composed of sociologists,

scientists and intellectuals, is established to evaluate the needs for change in the two societies.

- 4) Special attention is paid to the border areas, a theater of continuous fighting in the past. A regime of bilingualism and of traffic route development, starting with railways and highways, will be introduced. In addition, a special regime facilitating enterprise should reduce the bureaucratic obstacles to the integration of the border regions. Also in this case a special committee will be established to produce cost-effective solutions for cross-border integration.

As can be seen from this brief summary, the treaty is a platform of strong bilateral character that does not represent an attempt to pre-determine other decisions on a European scale. On the contrary, the absence of European issues, intentional or not, is extraordinarily conspicuous if we think of the motivations of the original initiative. In September 2017 President Macron preannounced the Franco-German initiative during an important declaration at the Sorbonne University in Paris with the explicit ambition of “re-founding Europe”. The French president thought he could announce a new Franco-German treaty already in January 2018, but it was not possible, mainly because of the difficulties that Berlin encountered in the formation of the new government after the vote of September 2017. At the end of that year, negotiations for the formation of the so-called “Jamaica” government composed of Chancellor Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the liberal party and the Greens failed. More months were needed for the formation in May 2018 of the current Great Coalition government between the CDU and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In November 2018, the French president participated in a session at the Bundestag (the German Parliament) with an emphatic declaration on the affinity between the two countries: “Even when you do not fully understand our words, you need to know that we love you.”

The results do not measure up to the intentions. The difficulties of a common expression in Franco-German politics reveal a predominance of domestic policy agendas over the international ones in all European countries. The political capital of all the European governments seems to be quite limited and therefore cannot be spent on initiatives of international scope that do not correspond, at least in the most common perception, to the limited and short-term interests of the majority of the electorate. Communication of the importance of international issues is so problematic that it is identified with the political fate of the national leaders. On the day following the summit, the

German newspaper with the largest circulation, “Bild”, ran a revelatory headline: “Merkel and Macron strengthen *their* friendship” (italics of the author).

Even if we limit ourselves to the content of the Treaty of Aachen document, we will notice some weak points. As regards the chapter on security, in recent years it has been impossible not to see the difficulty in policy coordination between Berlin and Paris. German parliamentary procedures make it very difficult to delegate to others the decisions on the use of military emergency forces, even in the context of the Franco-German brigade. In fact, the text approved at Aachen speaks of efforts and the alignment of cultures and collaboration in general terms.

A substantive, though maybe surprising, chapter is dedicated to cooperation in the field of arms exports. In fact, according to the French emissaries who prepared the document, Berlin is not contributing to the formulation of common rules on arms exports as was desired. From the German side, however, it can be seen that different views have emerged recently, particularly with respect to exports to Saudi Arabia after the revelations of the killing in Turkey of a dissident journalist.

Perhaps even more important is the lack of harmony on the use of common forces in third countries, especially for fighting terrorism. That which seems to be a crucial test for the affirmation of a decisive role for the Franco-German brigade is instead revealing all the difficulties of policy coordination between the two parliaments. Germany’s specific political culture in matters of military intervention does not correspond not only to the rhythms of the French, but also to the criteria of efficiency and timeliness, which should dictate government decisions in such a delicate field. We can see this when within the executive branch of the Grand Coalition led by Angela Merkel the positions of Defense Minister Ursula Van der Leyen (CDU) and those of the Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (SPD) prove to be irreconcilable. The different sensitivities of the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats regarding the use of armed forces are simultaneously rooted in the German political debate and difficult to communicate to the French partners.

The complexity of coordination inevitably leads to the creation of bodies that can gradually shorten the cultural distance between the two countries. Thus, Paris and Berlin will launch the bi-national Parliamentary Assembly, composed of 50 French and German members, which will be responsible

for the multi-annual planning of common initiatives and which will determine the Franco-German agenda every six months on the occasion of its convocation.

As regards the Council of Economic Experts, which will bring together the two countries' economists, it is important to note that it was not mandated to discuss European issues. As is well known, in the past, 14 economists from the two countries tried to direct the reform of the entire euro-area with proposals that were particularly difficult for Italy. On the contrary, as much as we can understand from the text, the experts from the new council will be responsible above all for the integration of the neighboring regions, within the framework of a common economic space.

The last "reductive" element of the Treaty is also perhaps the most symbolic: the common position on Germany's seat in the UN Security Council. The text rejects the possibility, which was actually advanced during the negotiation, of having the two countries share the French seat. Paris's motivation is typically "German", that is, the UN Charter recognizes the entitlement of the seats only to individual nations. Nevertheless, the Treaty of Aachen establishes a joint commitment (with hardly any chance of success, however) to reform the UN Charter and classifies the assignment of a seat to Germany as one of the priorities of French diplomacy.

What the Treaty tells us, above all, is that even among the most homogeneous countries of the European Union the size of their ambition is now much reduced. In fact, it does not seem that a critical mass of countries and political will is converging around France and Germany, one that would be sufficient to influence European decisions. It is even possible that the most important political issue that will emerge from the European Parliamentary Elections at the end of May will not concern the ideological conflict between sovereignists and Europeanists, but whether after the vote a political barycenter can still be built around Berlin and Paris or other groups of countries opposing each other on the basis of different interests will consolidate their positions in the European Union. The biggest novelty in the European context is, in fact, Germany's smaller political centrality. In 2014, in an attempt to make the result of the European Parliament Elections more understandable for citizens, common institutions proposed to associate each family of parties – the popular, social-democratic, and so on – with a candidate for the leadership of the EU Commission. The system was given a German name, *Spitzenkandidaten*, which no one thought to translate. In those years German

influence on European choices was such that it seemed obvious that the new leadership of the Commission was to be baptized in German.

In the course of the last five years, however, Germany's centrality has been reduced dramatically for different reasons: the first is the decline of the European institutional reforms that Berlin's strong position inspired in previous years due to the financial emergency; the second is the withdrawal from the European scene of Wolfgang Schäuble, who today is president of the Bundestag, and the potential withdrawal of Angela Merkel, something that would leave a very palpable personality vacuum; and the third is the hostility of US President Donald Trump, who identifies Merkel with the globalist agenda of Hillary Clinton. Not surprisingly, the pressure on the chancellor was so heavy last autumn that Merkel considered leaving German politics with the aspiration to lead the EU Commission. In fact, Merkel has resigned from the leadership of her party, but her European appointment remains a question mark, depending on future coalition agreements in the EU Parliament and Washington's opposition.

The second novelty is that a new balance was formed in the meantime. In fact, Germany no longer represents the countries of the new "Hanseatic League". The two different positions of the Netherlands, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden, taken in 2018, have opened a fault between the new front of rigorists-minimalists and those who want more European integration. The eight countries' first letter was published two days after the Italian elections. The second in the middle of July, in response to the "Meseberg Declaration" with which France and Germany proposed closer integration. The motivation of the Hanseatics is not only ideological; rather, it is the desire to preserve the tax privileges that have guaranteed many of these countries' income levels, which are above the European average. To do so, they must curb the fiscal integration and the common base for taxation of companies in Europe, issues that are instead part of the Meseberg Declaration and that as a watermark also appear in the Treaty of Aachen, which envisages a common economic space between France and Germany.

The third novelty is that the generational change in politics creates doubt in Berlin similar to that of the "Hanseatics", not in terms of nationalism, but in terms of a "liberalist" distrust in the capability of politics to pursue large common projects. Chancellor Merkel's party is split in two and Schäuble, absorbing the defeat of Friedrich Merz, his candidate for CDU leadership, is repositioning his troops

to the right in view of a new political equilibrium, knowing that the current coalition government with the Social Democrats no longer has a majority.

The fourth element is a broader reflection on the alliances around the Franco-German axis. The complex systems of double majority voting in the EU are considered to be a brake on joint initiatives considering the difference in policies among the 28 countries, something that is aggravated by the positions of the Visegrad countries, which are sometimes supported by the Italian government. The two countries have a common interest to weigh more on a global level. German industry is alarmed by the power of the Chinese and French industry is affected by American power. The idea of European sovereignty is to be reconstructed, however, around a new equilibrium. In mid-January, EU Commissioner Pierre Moscovici proposed the gradual abolition of unanimity in European decisions on tax matters that gave the Hanseatics the power of veto. In the meantime, Paris and Berlin have been agreeing on the top positions in the European institutions. In particular, Jens Weidmann will be renewed as the head of the Bundesbank and will have to give up his ambitions for the ECB, therefore strengthening and balancing the chances of a German to head the Commission. In this regard, Merkel has intensified relations with countries that so far are not central in her strategy, including Greece and Spain. While the Italian government is considered unpredictable, Madrid is seen as a country that is part of the hard core of countries that are more integrated, according to a reading, which, significantly, is reminiscent of the plans that Schäuble made in 1994.

The fifth element in Berlin is the void of ideas on Brexit. However, whatever the outcome, the door will be kept open for cooperation with Britain: a sort of “Norwegian model” that can evolve over time. Recently a German minister has predicted a bilateral relationship between Germany and Great Britain, considering the common interests. From the viewpoint of Brussels, it means that the external borders, between being inside or outside the EU, will become more porous. For this reason, the relationship with the Eastern European countries, which continue to absorb a large part of EU aid but have assumed non-cooperative policies, can also change. The new architecture can, therefore, evolve towards a stronger European core or towards an unravelling of the Union. Much will depend on Merkel’s residual chances to lead the Commission.