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Franco-German “twin engine” must go on

By Sanja Vujačić

Introduction

By virtue of their state structure: central state on one side, federal state on the other, and their different cultural practices in almost all areas, one would be tempted to say that France and Germany are two European countries that are least destined to work closely together.

The idea of power distributed over several levels and of a consensus necessary to make a decision articulate work and communication in Germany in a very different way from that in France. The French idea is that of pyramidal state power, the pattern of which is often

used by companies and is reflected in the way of working, communicating and making decisions in France. These differences structure the Franco-German antagonist dialogue in politics, as well as in business. They are at the origin of Franco-German couple - the only one in Europe to be identified as a “twin engine” which must not break down but must move in the same direction and at the same speed. Indeed, to combine one thing and its opposite nourishes the permanent contradictory debate, productive in a hyper-complex organizational structure of governance like the European

Union is. By drawing on their differences in a democratic environment - favorable for the debate and negotiation - Franco-German couple can serve as an engine for the development of the EU. That way, over the last sixty years, the bilateral relationship developed by the Franco-German couple has changed profoundly. Formed in such a way as to have the capacity to reinvent and adapt, then to impose itself, to last and to preserve its legitimacy in Europe, the Franco-German couple evolved under the watchful eye of the American superpower - whose advent is due to the European discord before the two wars. Acting as an authoritarian external regulator of the European Union, the United States stimulated the creation of the “twin engine” by stimulating among the French and the Germans their capacity to have dialogue and negotiate almost on a daily basis, by involving national officials and a part of civil society. As Germaine Tillon argues, this is how the “policy of conversation with the other” emerged, which is the main feature of the Franco-German relationship. The networks of economic, political, social and cultural exchange thus created have established and strengthened confidence – what is essential for the development of international relations. While in the decades after the war mutual momentum was based on the dynamics of reconciliation, today it is based on the networks of cooperation and integration created between France and Germany, in such a way that the proper functioning of the European Union depends on this main channel of European cooperation.

European “twin engine” sputters and stops

In the post-war period, the main objective was to find a “mode of reliance” between ex-belligerents, and to create a linking system between Europeans corresponding to the, as Edgar Morin called it, a “dialogical idea” allowing to link antagonistic themes, which seems contradictory. Concretely, these two logics - two principles must be united for the duality to get lost in this unity. It can be said that this was the idea of the thinking heads of the European Union who’s “twin engine” will be the Franco-German couple - with its complementary opposites. Therefore, to understand the nature of the Franco-German relationship, punctuated by the periods of peaceful and conflictual cooperation - but always cooperation, it must be observed by abandoning the Hegelian dialectics in which thesis and antithesis always give a correct synthesis for overcoming the contradictions. In fact, one must imagine the Franco-German relations as a permanent dialogical interaction, caught in an irreducible antagonism and at the same time in a situation of complementarity.

Striving to find a common position within the EU has become the appropriate behavior for each of the two countries.

First tool of that dialogical interaction was a “cooperation standard” with the partner country, which results from the Elysée Treaty of 1963, obliges the two governments to consult each other regularly “on all important questions of foreign policy and in the first place on matters of common interest, with a view to reaching, as far as possible, a similar position.” As a result, striving to find a common position within the EU has become the appropriate behavior for each of the two countries and a joint Council of Ministers was created in 2003. The acts of this Franco-German Council of Ministers oblige the concerned ministries to implement in their internal law what has been jointly decided, which requires an enormous effort of internal monitoring of the initiatives that have been taken and of preparation of the following Council.

Second tool is Franco-German bilateralism defined as the strategic starting point of the European policy of each of the two countries. This means that any unilateral European initiative taken by one of the two partners provokes a strong instinctive reaction from the other. And, the most meteoric reactions - the most expected systemic risks in this relationship are the frustrations related to the issues of colonial empires (Germany) and economic rivalries (France) - present both in the historical memory of the French and Germans (partially), as well as in the memory of their systems of governance and those of the higher order (wholly).

For “the return of France to Europe” Europeans had to wait for the election of Emmanuel Macron.

Thus, when the idea of the Mediterranean Union saw the light of day, proposed by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007, it was reiterated immediately because it deeply displeased the German partner who deplored “a return of France to Europe” by unilateral actions guided by national interests. However, it is a fact that Germany is not a Mediterranean country, as well as that Chancellor Angela Merkel does not hesitate to call her south neighbors with contempt as “Club Med countries”. For “the return of France to Europe” Europeans had to wait for the election of Emmanuel Macron. A rather shattering return because the French president sought to get the Europeans out of their passivity in relation to the role that he thinks they should have played in the world and the reforms of the EU and NATO that would be necessary if they want to stop the weakening of their influence in the world.

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Meanwhile, guided by national interests, Germany has managed to forge privileged relations with its close neighborhood, which

has fostered the success of its economy: low-cost relocations of its industrial segments to European countries, considered as low-cost but high-quality workforce tank. Gradually, from 1989, the gap widened between two economic partners who, at the start, were each other's primary trading partners. Germany remained France's most important trading partner worldwide, while France became Germany's second largest trading partner at European level and number four behind China, the Netherlands and the United States globally. According to figures published by the German DESTATIS (Federal Statistical Office), Franco-German trade amounted to 172 billion euros in 2019. Exports of German goods to France amounted to 106 billion euros the same year. Imports from France amounted to 66 billion euros. This means that in 2019, Germany's trade surplus vis-à-vis France increased again, by 0.9% to 41 billion euros. It means, the German economy is once again expanding and France's "will to power", as defined by Friedrich Nietzsche, is back.

Interdependence in the service of European stability

It seems that the European subcontinent is an inexhaustible tank in which the planetary "will to power" is concentrated. Each nation that populates this small territory thinks it has a civilizing mission in its near or distant

neighborhood. So, the American superpower, which is nothing else than the product of these Europeans who have demonstrated the ability to unite on a soil other than their own, decided to reinforce intra-European interdependence, as well as links between the two Atlantic shores after 1945. First, adversities should be dissolved through political reconciliation: twinning of French and German cities, school exchanges, creation of study committees and institutes, etc. Then, through the enlargement of the EU and NATO.

Today, in an EU of 27 member countries after Brexit, negotiations are multilateral, much more complex. Even if Franco-German agreement remains essential, the Franco-German bilateralism can now be considered as a myth that continues to exist to enable the EU to progress. Certainly, Germany and France are still the leading European economies representing more than a third of the GDP of the European Union and half of that of the euro area. Consequently, the disagreements in the Franco-German couple prevent the two European powers from fully realizing their individual potential on the international scene. On the other hand, the network of interdependencies binds them together and dissuades them from undertaking solo escapades. As a result, the couple often gives the image of an old couple, tired and worn out by habit. A couple who needs a new momentum.

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Thus, the revival started, but unfortunately by the use of symbols that the public on both sides of the Rhine is tired of. First step occurred on 22 January 2019 when Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron signed the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, on the anniversary of the Élysée Treaty of 1963 signed by Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer. Second step took place on 25 March 2020, the anniversary of the Treaty of Rome founding the European Union, which was chosen to inaugurate the first parliamentary assembly between the two countries. Around fifty deputies on each side for an institution that will have limited power in restoring the momentum lacking in the relationship between Paris and Berlin. Parliamentary assembly has three main missions: to transpose European directives in identical terms in both country; ensure that the objectives enshrined in the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle are achieved, in particular in the area of cross-border cooperation; apply the decisions taken each year during the Franco-German Council of Ministers. These are difficult tasks because the parliamentarians could not agree on the essential question: the way in which they will vote. Due to the differences in the voting method between the two countries,

French deputies (Macron's party) will indeed be over-represented compared to those of the CDU (Merkel's party). To ensure their influence, the latter want each decision to be first voted on separately by elected officials from each of the two countries. A process that the French do not want.

Disagreements in the Franco-German couple prevent the two European powers from fully realizing their individual potential on the international scene.

That is to say, to an already rather heavy and slow European administrative structure another was added, while the problem is much deeper. The growing complexity of the European structure without identity has reached the level of difficult operability. It limits visibility, pushing European countries to withdraw into themselves, to return to the cocoon of identity, to populism or to play solo. Germany and France are no exception to the rule. The Libyan case is representative. The conditions which led to the toppling of Gaddafi and the unilateral recognition by France of the National Transitional Council of Libya on the eve of a European Council increased the distance between Berlin and Paris - accused of wanting to play solo. The common European security policy has been affected.

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Discord surfaced also during the Brexit negotiations. Although the French and German leaders were anxious to avoid a spiral of disintegration of the Union, their view of this problem was not guided by the same sensitivity or by the same historical horizon. On the German side, there was a certain unease when discussing a clear break with the United Kingdom and in particular a hasty exit without agreement. This unease went beyond the simple economic equation and was rather linked to the reconciliation with the United Kingdom which constitutes an important aspect in the construction of the contemporary political identity of the Federal Republic, more important than the Franco-German reconciliation that was put in the foreground. Indeed, the preservation of links with Great Britain and the model of liberal democracy equals historically a preservation of political identity for the German elite - confronted with its own political crisis and the weakening of the European construction. Moreover, Brexit revealed the hierarchical nature of the balance of power in the European family that came out from Germany's unequal treatment of Grexit and Brexit.

Conclusion

The interdependencies through EU enlargement policy are in the service of European stability and, in the same time, of the 'Balkanization of European political realm'. Indeed, enlargement brings stimulation of ethnic diversification within the EU so that none of the small, weak and rival states can develop beyond a certain limit, each being trapped in a net of diplomatic and economic ties that are often opposed, but all linked to the great powers (USA, Russia, China). That is the reason why "France is back". French President Macron subsequently warned that ultra-liberal financial capitalism is unreliable, while NATO and the EU face mounting challenges. The events that followed justified his warning: social movements, populism, open conflicts of interest within NATO and the EU, as well as EU's inability to make coordinated political decisions in time. Turkey, as a member of NATO, threatens the EU's borders at sea and on land (warships and migrant invasions), which are tolerated by President Trump who at the same time puts pressure on EU countries for their bigger financial contribution to NATO and issues 'invoices as *bandwagoning* services provider', while he is withdrawing from all world battlefields opened by previous US administrations. These are reliable signs of the EU distress. Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean have revealed the deep crisis of

the Franco-German couple. While Paris was in the midst of a diplomatic standoff with President Erdoğan, searching to preserve its economic interests in the US and Turkey, Germany put the Greeks and their French allies on the same level with the Turks, calling all parties to „avoid escalation”. So persists this feeling according to which, in this couple, one of the partners prevents the other from moving forward and asserting itself on the international scene as an important economic or geopolitical player. There is an impression that while the countries of the former communist zone, which have found a place in the last wagons of this European train pulled by Franco-German locomotive, believe that they have already bought one-way ticket for the EU and that they have nothing more to do. This approach places the EU’s new member states at loggerheads with the old ones. They think that it is necessary to avoid all criticism for overcoming the contradiction and complexity. This is how the disorder in the European Union grows. Therefore, there is an urgent need

to generate the momentum as a measure to boost Franco-German partnership through the idea of a minimum strategic autonomy within NATO, stronger European diplomacy and reasonable and feasible developments in the field of European defense - which can amplify the European research and business program in the frame of a European *will to power*. To achieve this goal, the EU needs a strong heart (Germany) and a creative head (France).” Twin-engine” must go on.

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