

Franco-German Friendship in the 1970s (Retrospective Account, 1996)

Abstract

In the following excerpt from his memoirs, former chancellor Helmut Schmidt emphasizes the joint interests of France and Germany in promoting European integration and recapitulates the achievements of his close collaboration with French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. These include the European monetary system and direct elections to the European Parliament.

Source

[...] Whoever heads the government of France feels himself obliged to analyze the long-term strategic-political interests of his country. France's interest in Germany lay and still lies in a close integration of the Germans into a larger (Western) European alliance and thus in a close cooperation between French and German politics. This has been the cardinal motive for France's European integration policy since Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman—and not, for instance, a general “Europe idealism,” which also exists alongside it. This cardinal motive has continued to gain momentum since German unification, because Germany's population now exceeds France's by almost 50 percent. As long as Germany does not make any extraordinary mistakes, every French president will pursue this strategic motive for France. This is likely to be the case for Jacques Chirac as well.

But close cooperation with France and German self-integration also lie in our own cardinal interest. Germany's political class agrees with France's political class on this vital point. Anyone who looks back over the last two centuries and over the four wars between the French and the Germans—from Napoleon to Hitler—has to acknowledge that maintaining this agreement is the guarantor of peace between the two nations.

Nonetheless, there will always be differences of opinion between Paris and Bonn, or then Berlin, on important issues. They may concern relations with the United States or Russia or the conflicts in the Balkans. There will be differences regarding the EU's “southern policy,” and the weight given to Italy, Spain, and Portugal—which are more important trading partners for France than for us—and regarding Mediterranean policy. On the other hand, because of our geographic proximity, we Germans have a far greater interest in integrating Poland and the Czech Republic into the EU. Also, tensions will invariably arise over the institutions, the financing of the EU, and agricultural policy. But if the Germans and the French keep their common interests in mind, we will be able to bridge these differences.^[1]

[...]

My closest French friend by far remains, of course, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. From the outset, we largely agreed not only on economics, but also in our two-pronged strategy toward the Soviet Union—on the one hand, to demonstrate the will and capacity for a common defense, but, on the other hand, to show our willingness for negotiations and détente at the same time. Above all, we agreed from the very beginning—that is, from May 1974, when both of us first assumed leadership positions in our respective countries—on the strategic rationality of our cooperation, which is based on the overriding interests of our two nations, and on the steady, mutual rapprochement between Germany and France, and also on the integration of both countries into the European Community (today: European Union).

For both of us, the sum of the historical experiences of both nations with each other was the decisive factor in recognizing this vital interest of our two nations. From the French perspective, they had to reckon that Germany—which was still divided at the time—would develop into Europe’s dominant power, industrially, financially, and monetarily, in not too long a time. That this would later develop into a German will to dominate politically, as well, had to be inferred from the traditional suspicion toward Germany harbored by many, many French people since the second half of the nineteenth century. After all, between 1870 and 1945 German troops had invaded France three times and occupied large parts of the country. In both world wars, France was decisively dependent on its cooperation with America, England, and Russia/the Soviet Union, so that it would at least be on the side of the victors at the end of the war. Should the addition of a fourth act to this three-act Franco-German tragedy be avoided in the future, then the French interest demanded the political and economic integration of Germany. Of course, strategically minded French people knew that a lasting integration of Germany could only be achieved if France also integrated itself in the same way. This is what Jean Monnet assumed. Charles de Gaulle finally accepted it, albeit very reluctantly at first. For Giscard d’Estaing, on the other hand, it was self-evident.

[...]

Valéry and I were very averse to visionary or radically new plans—and especially to any rhetorical explanations of them. Instead, we generally preferred a step-by-step, practical approach. In this way, we were able to contribute to or initiate a number of important advances—which even caused the other governments in Europe to speak somewhat sardonically of the Paris-Bonn axis.

[...]

The emphasis of joint policies by Valéry Giscard and by me lay within the European Community. Thus, Valéry and I were able to win over our colleagues in the governments of the other member countries and establish—in addition to the growing multitude of sessions of the EC Council of Ministers—the European Council of the heads of government. By now, all decisive directives come from the European Council, which at first greatly limited the importance of the administration in Brussels and the national bureaucracies. The European Council, though, as with the world economic summits, has unfortunately been watered down again by the preliminary participation of both Brussels and the national bureaucracies and by the excessive proximity of television reporters.

Giscard and I have also been able to convince our colleagues of the need to give the EC parliament real democratic legitimacy by having its representatives elected by direct vote instead of being delegated by the national parliaments, as has been the practice to date. But it will be a few more years before this parliament learns to take full advantage of its political control functions.

Our most difficult joint project was the creation of the European Monetary System (EMS).^[2] It served several purposes at once. For one thing, it was clear that a common market with a dozen different currencies and several dozen frequently changing exchange rates between the various currencies of the EC countries was limited in its ability to facilitate the major advantages in economics and prosperity that could be expected of a single market. Second, it was clear to us that the majority of the European currencies, when left to their own devices, could not withstand the turbulence of the world economy, the global monetary confusion, and in particular the weakness of the US dollar. And third, we considered the later creation of a common European currency as an indispensable necessity for the internal consolidation of the European Community (today EU).

[...]

NOTES

[1] I have already reported extensively on Mitterrand in *Die Deutschen und ihre Nachbarn*. Berlin: Siedler, 1990.

[2] I have already reported extensively on this in my book *Die Deutschen und ihre Nachbarn* [*The Germans and Their Neighbors*].

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