

FRANCO-GERMAN LEADERSHIP IN EUROPEAN SECURITY

ENGINE IN REVERSE GEAR?

Iro Särkkä & Minna Ålander



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- Germany and France led the European response to Russia’s first war in Ukraine following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The legacy of the failed Minsk process weighed on their ability to change course in 2022, as the required response went beyond economic sanctions and diplomatic negotiations.
- In both the French and the German case, there is a mismatch between self-perception and external expectations. France lacks the economic and military resources to substantiate its great-power identity, while Germany’s selective leadership is not on a par with its economic weight. As a result, neither French President Emmanuel Macron nor German Chancellor Olaf Scholz were able to provide convincing leadership in the initial stages of Russia’s second war in Ukraine in 2022.
- While the Franco–German reconciliation has historically constituted the core of European integration, their response to Russia’s war of aggression and its wider implications in Europe has made it clear that the Franco–German engine is struggling to provide coherent and effective wartime leadership.
- The two countries should not only acknowledge the enduring central role of the transatlantic link for European security, but also enhance cooperation with groups of smaller countries – and consider following their lead, too.



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INTRODUCTION

In early 2022, before and after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, France and Germany attempted to de-escalate Russia's violent intentions diplomatically. The attempt failed, and it became clear that the situation required a different response than in 2014 when Russia first invaded Ukraine and illegally annexed Crimea. As Russia attempted to take Kyiv, leadership was expected from France and Germany, based on their role as mediators in the Normandy format since 2014. However, the fact that the format and the negotiations in the Minsk process had failed to stop Russia from attacking Ukraine again also weighed on the two countries' leadership credibility after February 2022.

The objective of this Briefing Paper is to identify factors impacting Franco–German strategic leadership in the context of Russia's first and second war against Ukraine. In the paper, we define strategic leadership as political leaders' capacity to shape and steer international politics and order based on credibility and resources. We focus on studying French and German leadership at the highest political level, namely that of the head of state, the President (France) and head of government, the Federal Chancellor (Germany), as well as the bilateral Franco–German relationship.

The paper argues that despite repeated efforts by both France and Germany to establish reliable leadership, they have lost some credibility amongst other European nations and the transatlantic community. This is the result of a twofold failure: first, the two countries were unable to prevent Russia's second invasion of Ukraine in their roles as mediators in the Minsk process since 2014. Second, they also subsequently mismanaged their initial response to Russia's full-scale war in 2022. The paper suggests that rather than seeking to approach the question of leadership from individual national perspectives, France and Germany should expand their understanding of strategic interests vis-à-vis the transatlantic community.

FRANCO–GERMAN ORIGINS: FROM A HISTORY OF WAR TO MODERN MILITARY POWER

Franco–German bilateral relations were formally established in 1963 in the Élysée Treaty and have since formed the historical core of European integration, symbolizing the quest to overcome war in Europe. The origin of the story of reconciliation between the two archenemies is deeply engrained in the French and German understanding and self-perception of their position and power in Europe.

Both domestic and foreign policy factors impact the way different roles are perceived in Europe. In France, the prestige of power and status is largely conveyed through the presidential leadership. As one of the few European countries with a semi-presidential system, the French president possesses a greater degree of power than many of their counterparts. Each individual president shapes French foreign policy according to their vision. In the German political system, on the other hand, power is decentralized both horizontally and vertically in the federal state. In addition, the chancellor is usually constrained by coalition politics. The chancellor has, however, *de facto* considerable power enshrined in the *Richtlinienkompetenz*, the chancellor's authority to set the overall direction of government policy and to overrule other ministers if necessary.

Whereas Germany's power and leadership evolved to a large extent within the framework of European integration and economic leadership, France has advocated a stronger leadership role for itself. Particularly in the field of security and defence, France aspires to be seen as a global military power. This has provided a convenient division of labour: France, with less historical baggage regarding military power than Germany, actively seeks leadership in European foreign and security policy, while trade and economic integration offers Germany, the world's fourth-largest economy, a natural avenue for economic leadership in Europe.

The foreign policy role perceptions of France and Germany are thus fundamentally different. France, an old imperial power, has a long tradition of claiming great-power status based on President Charles de Gaulle's understanding of France's role in the world.

Despite its declining global power, typical features of the French conception of national greatness continue to include strong ambitions in its old African colonies and strategic independence, fortified by independent nuclear forces and a nuclear deterrence policy, primarily built to safeguard French national sovereignty.¹ Concurrently, building European strategic autonomy, involving a greater degree of independence and reducing reliance on the United States, is an established objective of French foreign policy. France's quest for greater strategic autonomy for Europe is based on lingering political distrust of the transatlantic project and NATO, although France returned to the Alliance's command structure in 2009 after four decades of absence.

In contrast, the idea of German strategic leadership in Europe is relatively new, due to Germany's history as the World War aggressor. During the Cold War era of Germany's division, West Germany formed the backbone of NATO, with a considerable conventional force, and hosted US bases and nuclear weapons – but strictly under US/Allied leadership, and with little agency of its own in military matters. German reunification after the end of the Cold War still prompted fears of German dominance in Europe among neighbours and partners. As a result of the reunification, the armed forces of the new Federal Republic of Germany were significantly scaled down. West Germany, of which the current Federal Republic is largely a continuation, was therefore in many ways conditioned out of strategic thinking and leadership aspirations.

MISMANAGEMENT OF RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE SINCE 2014

France's and Germany's reactions to Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014 have displayed varying degrees of alignment. After Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, the reactions in Paris and Berlin were largely aligned. Together, France and Germany took a leadership role in Europe's political and economic response. Chancellor Merkel played a particularly important part in scraping together EU economic sanctions against Russia. On the diplomatic front, France and Germany mediated in the so-called Normandy format between Ukraine and Russia to implement the Minsk agreement – with little success, as the process helped Russia consolidate its position in Eastern Ukraine and failed to prevent the Russian full-scale invasion in 2022. Both

Germany and France still tended to regard Russia's stated security concerns as real and legitimate, thereby acknowledging the existence of a Russian sphere of influence in Ukraine and Russia's wider neighbourhood.

In terms of NATO's collective defence, the two countries' responses differed. France contributed a relatively small number of some 300 soldiers to NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) troops in the Baltic states and another contingent of some 750 soldiers to Romania later in 2022. Germany, in turn, has been the lead nation of the eFP battlegroup in Lithuania, pledging in June 2023 to deploy a permanent brigade of 4,000 troops to Lithuania. In the French case, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine coincided with a redistribution of military capabilities and assets from Africa-based counter-insurgency operations to European soil, with the French president terminating the eight-year-long Operation Barkhane in the Sahel region. It was therefore not so much a direct reaction to Russia's aggression, but rather a result of France's failed intervention policy in Africa that led France to withdraw its troops from Africa.

Germany's military support for Ukraine got off to a slow start, but Germany has now become Ukraine's second-largest donor of military equipment in absolute terms. France keeps the details regarding its weapons deliveries under wraps, but the net worth of its military support is estimated at around 0.5 billion euros, making it the 15th largest donor in absolute terms – falling far behind the much smaller Nordic countries, for instance, according to the Kiel Institute tracker. French officials recently pushed back on the Kiel Institute's figures, putting French aid to Ukraine at 3.2 billion euros – still far less than Germany and the UK. France, along with other European nations, has taken the lead in providing some key new systems, such as AMX-10 RC armed combat vehicles in January 2023 and SCALP missiles in July 2023. However, a country of France's size and ambition can be expected to provide more substantial military support.²

French and German threat perceptions differed in terms of the big picture, but aligned regarding Russia prior to 2022. Terrorism has constituted a major threat for France for decades, and as a result, France's military focus has been on interventions in African crises and conflicts. The Russian menace was simply not on France's list of priorities after 2014. Only Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine served to alter the French

1 Horovitz, Liviu and Lydia Wachs (2023) "France's nuclear weapons and Europe. Options for a better coordinated deterrence policy". *SWP Comment* 2023/C 15. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C15>.

2 Kiel Institute for the World Economy: Ukraine Support Tracker, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>; Kayali, Laura (2023) "Don't trust the data: France insists it's pulling its weight on arms to Ukraine". *Politico*, 8 November 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/dont-trust-data-france-military-aid-ukraine/>.



German military support for Ukraine has included MARS multiple launch rocket systems.
Photo: Bundeswehr/Mario Bähr

focus of strategic balance in global politics. This change in policy line was clearly outlined in the 2022 *Revue Nationale Stratégique* (RNS)³ and finally broke the French president's long-term strategy to pursue an active dialogue with Russia.

Similarly, Russia was not viewed as a tangible threat by Germany either – but in post-Cold War Germany, the unthinkability of war in Europe was generally internalized to such a degree that Germany did not see any serious, direct threats to its national security in recent decades. Germany is currently in the process of catching up with the dramatically changed European security environment. This has been reflected in the country's first ever national security strategy, published in June 2023, in which Russia is identified as the greatest threat to Euro-Atlantic security in the foreseeable future.⁴ The new defence policy guidelines from November 2023 are also remarkably self-critical when it comes to the scaling down of armed forces in past decades.

FRANCO-GERMAN LEADERSHIP: EXPECTATIONS VERSUS REALITY

In power since 2017, President Macron has actively sought the role of a European leader and based his political leadership on a sense of enlightened reformation, breaking away from the failures of his predecessor François Hollande's weak *quinquennat* (five-year-long presidential term).⁵ While emphasizing European leadership, there has also been a strong attempt to restore France's global status. Furthermore, by continuing to advocate President Nicolas Sarkozy's ideal of military interventions as prestige projects, such as in the 2011 Libyan crisis,⁶ President Macron took the decision to launch several crisis management operations in *Françafrique* and the Middle East. The goal was to demonstrate that France is willing and able to act in an area where it considers that it has interests and responsibilities. However, due to the deep-seated idea of Russia as one of Europe's great powers with its own interests, Macron did not apply the same approach to Ukraine.

Since reunification in 1991, Germany has evolved from being viewed as a suspicious potential threat to its neighbours in the aftermath of the Cold War, to

3 *Revue nationale stratégique* 2022, <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/revue-nationale-strategique-2022>; *Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale* 2017, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2017-revue_strategique_dsn_cle4b3beb.pdf.

4 Federal Government of Germany (2023) "Wehrhaft. Resilient. Nachhaltig. Integrierte Sicherheit für Deutschland". *Nationale Sicherheitsstrategie*, 22.

5 Gheciu, Alexandra (2020) "Remembering France's glory, securing Europe in the age of Trump". *European Journal of International Security*, 5, 32.

6 Davidson, Jason W. (2013) "France, Britain and the intervention in Libya: an integrated analysis". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26: 2, 316–319.

becoming a trusted leader in the EU. Germany's power is based on its economic weight, and reunified Germany has laid strong emphasis on its identity as a civilian power (*Zivilmacht*). Therefore, taking the lead in the post-Crimea crisis management suited Germany well, as the Western response to Russia's first invasion of Ukraine was strictly non-military and consisted mainly of economic sanctions. The sanctions hit Germany hard, as it had the largest trade volume with Russia in the EU pre-2014. The fact that Merkel nevertheless pushed forward with the sanctions gave Germany's position credibility. Merkel did, however, keep the existing and extensive energy relations with Russia largely outside the EU sanctions and went on to build the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which increased Germany's dependence on Russian natural gas to 55% of its gas imports.

The lack of strategic foresight in Germany's energy relations with Russia, combined with the severe scaling down of its armed forces in past decades, reduced Germany's credibility as a crisis manager and leader in 2022. Furthermore, the expectation of leadership in a war that required a military response, even if only in the form of arms supplies to the defender, caused an identity crisis for Germany as a civilian power. It also indicated that the reconception of Germany's role, ongoing as an elite-driven process since 2014, is thus far incomplete.⁷

Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine underlined the need to re-examine both France's and Germany's relationship with Russia. President Macron initially resorted to the traditional French approach of conversing directly with Russia⁸ and acting as a mediator between the East (Russia) and the West. However, this approach did not translate into concrete results, and the frequent phone calls with Putin led many to question the real motives of such action. The Baltic states and Poland in particular were alienated by the reconciliatory rhetoric with Russia. Macron's initial proposals were that Russia should not be humiliated, that Putin should be offered an off-ramp after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and that a new European security architecture should give security guarantees to Russia rather than Ukraine. Moreover, Macron's attempts to stop the Russian aggression by unilaterally reaching out to global players, such as China, did not lead to any tangible results.

For Germany, the challenge posed by Russia's second invasion of Ukraine and the response it required cannot be overstated. All three pillars of Germany's post-Cold War foreign policy were shaken. Before the invasion, the principle of "diplomacy first" failed, as Putin remained unimpressed by German and French efforts to de-escalate diplomatically. Subsequently, the promise of "never again war" was shattered, as Russia proceeded to invade Ukraine all the way to the capital Kyiv. Finally, the principle of "not going it alone" was contested when Germany's partners and allies expected the federal government to take the initiative on military assistance to Ukraine.

Both France and Germany remained trapped in their own history, drawing a parallel with World War I and the humiliation of Germany in the Versailles Treaty, which paved the way for World War II. What Macron and Scholz initially failed to perceive was that the worst-case scenario was not to be prevented but already unfolding, as Russian troops were marching to Kyiv. Both also seemed to believe that leaving the door open for reconciliation with Russia would be the right approach, as it had worked in the case of France and Germany. However, the conditions of the Franco-German reconciliation were radically different: Germany's military defeat, occupation, and division. Today, none of this is considered an option, as Russia is a nuclear power. In Germany, President Putin's nuclear sabre-rattling invoked memories of the Cold War, as Germany would have been the main theatre for a third (nuclear) world war. Macron, in turn, was unable to respond to the threats in a convincing manner due to France's nuclear doctrine, which reserves French nuclear deterrence for France's national security.

A WAY FORWARD FOR THE FRANCO-GERMAN TANDEM

Domestically constrained by the 2022 elections and subsequent political crises, President Macron has been unable to offer convincing leadership in the European response to Russia's war of aggression. Although Macron had a concept of leadership (mediation between Ukraine and Russia in continuation of the post-2014 approach), he miscalculated the prevailing mood in Europe after Russia's full-scale invasion and failed to gain support. The repeated failures of strategic communication with France's most crucial partners

7 See Siddi, Marco (2020) "A Contested Hegemon? Germany's Leadership in EU Relations with Russia", and Koenig, Nicole (2020) "Leading Beyond Civilian Power: Germany's Role Re-conception in European Crisis management". In *German Politics*, Vol 29 No 1, March 2020, 97-114 and 79-96.

8 Newton, Julie M. (2003) *Russia, France, and the Idea of Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, New York.

and allies in the EU have further decreased France's credibility.⁹

Whereas President Macron has exhibited a somewhat misplaced expectation to assume a leadership role, Chancellor Scholz initially took the opposite approach. Given his predecessor Merkel's central role in the Western response to Russia's first invasion of Ukraine, there was a natural expectation that Germany would continue to shoulder leadership responsibilities in 2022 as well. In particular, Germany's like-minded partners in Northern and Central Europe, who tend to be sceptical of French notions of "European strategic autonomy", initially directed their expectations towards Germany after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Chancellor Scholz himself also fuelled expectations by announcing an ambitious change of course, the so-called *Zeitenwende*, but has failed to implement it in an appropriately speedy manner. Hence, Scholz's subsequent offers of leadership, as formulated in his speech on Europe¹⁰ at the Charles University in Prague in August 2022 and also repeated by other leading German ministers, have not been convincing.

Although both France and Germany have notably changed their positions on how to deal with Russia and have ramped up their support for Ukraine, both should show willingness to fundamentally adapt to the new reality in Europe to regain lost credibility. It has been said that "Germany needed France to disguise its strength and France needed Germany to disguise its weakness".¹¹ But it is time for both to realistically assess their leadership resources: France has neither the economic nor the military capacity to back up its great power identity, while Germany should start bearing the responsibility for European security that comes with its economic weight, and make credible long-term investments in its new role to prove its commitment.

9 Weber, Gesine (2023) "How to save French credibility from Macron". *War on the Rocks*, 16 May 2023. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/how-to-save-french-credibility-from-macron/>.

10 Scholz, Olaf (2022) *Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz an der Karls-Universität am 29. August 2022 in Prag*, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/rede-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-an-der-karls-universitaet-am-29-august-2022-in-prag-2079534>.

11 Paterson, William E. (2011) "The Reluctant Hegemon? Germany Moves Centre Stage in the European Union". *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49: 1, Special Issue: The JCMS Annual Review of the European Union in 2010, 57-75.

CONCLUSIONS

Going forward, new thinking is needed on the concept of leadership in Europe. While the Franco-German reconciliation historically constituted the core of European integration, Russia's second war in Ukraine has clearly shown that the Franco-German engine is struggling to provide coherent and effective wartime leadership. The two should therefore enhance cooperation with (groups of) smaller countries – and consider following their lead as well. Furthermore, the United Kingdom has been a reliable partner in the war. It is a more important security partner for many northeastern European countries than France or Germany, which the Franco-German tandem should acknowledge, and continue to engage constructively with the UK in security matters.

In 2014, US President Barack Obama left it to Merkel to coordinate the European (non-military) response to Russia's first war in Ukraine. In marked contrast, in 2022, it was US President Joe Biden's leadership that proved decisive for the West's collective reaction. However, the commitment to supporting Ukraine is becoming more conditional, especially among some US Republicans, and Europe must be prepared to take more responsibility for the continent's security. This means that Germany's economic weight and defence industry will need to play a central role when push comes to shove. France, for its part, cannot expect to convince others of the benefits of French leadership if it is not willing to reconsider its defence industrial strategy, which is almost exclusively focused on national interests.

For Franco-German leadership to succeed, President Macron needs to adapt his concept of European strategic autonomy to be more accommodating towards the transatlantic link. Chancellor Scholz, for his part, must learn to dare to take steps with European partners, instead of relying too heavily on US leadership to provide military aid to Ukraine. The transatlantic partnership remains essential for European security, regardless of who wins the US presidential election next year. This should be acknowledged in Paris and Berlin and taken into consideration in wider European policy planning. /