

Franco-German cooperation

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Europe

By Martin Woollacott

THE REST of Europe has always been ambivalent about Franco-German cooperation, complaining of drift when the two countries have not been close and of being bossed around when they are strongly aligned.

Le Monde noted this perennial fact in commending the agreement last week between Paris and Berlin on constitutional proposals for the EU, which may be followed soon by proposals for parallel social legislation in the two countries and a degree of integration in defence policy.

The paper concluded that France and Germany must now proceed with tact in urging these ideas on their partners. But are these ideas genuinely coherent? The problem of Franco-German cooperation for Europe has usually been not a seamless unity between the two nations but a divergence of interests covered over by rhetoric and temporary deals. That is as true now as it has ever been.

France and Germany have merely postponed their differences over the proper shape of the EU by agreeing to combine one change that would strengthen the Europe of the Nations which France favours and another that would favour the federal Europe which Germany espouses. Their differences over agricultural and environmental policy were similarly put off into the future by the bargain last October in which Germany set aside for some years its hopes for a reformed European agriculture.

Their differences over Iraq are deep, and over defence policy in general deeper still. But, as in the past and despite these problems, what is shaping their relationship is political need.

Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder is, at the moment, the weakest political leader in Europe, his recent victory in general elections and his commanding performance during the emergency caused by widespread flooding a distant memory. He is down because the economy is down, with unemployment topping four million and investment falling.

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Schroeder needs something to be going on internationally which restores some of his dignity, reminds people that he is an important head of government, and distracts them at least a little from his difficulties at home. That cannot come from the US, because of the estrangement following his refusal, during the election campaign, to allow Germany to join in what he called the risky adventure of war with Iraq, nor from Britain.

In any case, the credit he has for his stand on Iraq with a certain section of the German population, and with his coalition partner, the Green party, is an asset he could not afford to hazard.

So the turn to France was natural, especially as the 40th anniversary of the Franco-German friendship treaty of 1963 signed by Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer falls on January 22. It was always going to be marked both by ceremonies and by new agreements and arrangements designed to show that the friendship flourishes.

Yet it is not so long ago that most people believed that reunited Germany was bound to become the senior partner in the Franco-German relationship, if indeed it allowed that relationship to continue in anything like the old form. For a decade, Europe waited for Germany's new weight to come fully down on the scales, and it has yet to happen, which does not of course mean that it will not happen in time.

Indeed, it can be argued that it will and it should. The Iraq crisis has had the effect of slowing the process by which Germany was becoming a more forceful international actor and a "normal" military power, although it has not stopped it, as deployments to the Balkans and Afghanistan have shown.

To put recent events into perspective, it is worth recalling that the treaty De Gaulle and Adenauer signed papered over differences more radical than those of today. The general had by 1963 failed to win over Adenauer to policies that would have stripped the European community and Nato of much of their substance.

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Differences between France and

Public sector strikes have been averted but at a high cost, suggesting that in time further tax increases will follow those that have already plunged him to the bottom of the polls. These show his party 30 per cent behind the opposition Christian Democrats, and the result in important elections next month in Lower Saxony could mean that the Christian Democrats will have the decisive say in the Upper House, a further humiliation and a further problem for the chancellor.

Jacques Chirac, by contrast, is a strong leader, even if his comfortable position is attributable to an unexpected political accident rather than to his own merits. In these circumstances, his instinct has been to take advantage of the shifting fortunes of his counterparts in other countries, especially in Germany and Britain. His position on Iraq is as pivotal as that of Britain, while he has been able to take the lead in the relationship with Germany in a way that would have been inconceivable a year or two ago.

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anxieties went in different directions. The general worried about American dominance, while the chancellor feared that Germany might suffer the consequences of an abdication of US power in Europe through a deal with the Soviet Union that would unify but neutralise his country. De Gaulle and Adenauer also worried about European institutions, but again for different reasons. The general thought them too strong and argued for their abolition or reduction, while the chancellor judged them too weak and wished them to be strengthened.

The American historian William Hitchcock, in his excellent new account of Europe since 1945, *The Struggle for Europe*, quotes Adenauer as saying: "I have completely lost confidence in General de Gaulle." By the time the friendship treaty was signed, Hitchcock writes, "Adenauer had in fact derailed De Gaulle's 'Europe of Nations'." Something of this old tension remains. In dilute form, the differences on the organisation of Europe are still there.

In security matters, the French impulse to challenge US power in normal times but to fall in behind it in moments of great emergency represents another continuity. Beneath the differences in French and American military thinking there are some similarities. Recent discussions in the French parliament on the five-year plan for the armed forces show attitudes and ideas closer to the US than to those of Germany.

And, in terms of deployable military strength, Britain remains the only obvious serious partner for France in any integration of European armed

increased spending on military forces is even less likely now than it was before the present economic troubles overwhelmed Schroeder, is much less suitable.

Europe's problems as it tries to reorganise itself politically at a time of international crisis over Iraq and perplexity over future relations with the US are not likely to be made worse or better by truly concerted

Franco-German policies
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