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THE CURRENT: 60 years later, can France and Germany fulfill the ambitions of the Treaty of Élysée?

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Host: Adrianna Pita, Office of Communications, Brookings

Guests: Constanze Stelzenmüller, Senior Fellow and Director, Center on the US and Europe, Brookings

Tara Varma, Visiting Fellow, Center on the US and Europe, Brookings

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met this weekend in Paris to mark the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Élysée, a symbol of French and German friendship after the horror and destruction of two world wars. With us to discuss the role of the French and German relationship in the EU today, especially as Europe grapples with Russia's war in Ukraine, are two experts from our Center on the U.S. and Europe, Constanze Stelzenmüller, who directs the center, and Tara Varma, a new visiting fellow. Tara, Constanze, welcome. Thank you for talking to us today.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you for having us on.

VARMA: Hello. Hi.

PITA: So the Treaty of Élysée was signed back in 1963 between Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and President Charles de Gaulle. '63 is almost two decades after the end of World War Two. It's a few years into the establishment of the European Economic Community that was the building block of what eventually became today's European Union. But before we get to talking about what that treaty means for today, what did the treaty set out to do at that time? What was its significance then?

STELZENMÜLLER: So at the time, its main purpose was to establish a framework, an intergovernmental bilateral framework between France and Germany, the two key enemies in World War One and World War Two. And perhaps also to overcome something that was even less-talked about at the time and still is less-talked about, which is the memory of collaboration between the Vichy government and the Nazis during World War Two.

And the purpose was to create a network of relationships from the top, to the governmental level, to the municipal level. So everything from history commissions to Cabinet meetings to school exchanges, then, even, I think, 20 years ago, the foundation of a joint Franco-German TV channel and thousands of town and regional partnerships.

There was another political purpose that perhaps was even less talked about at the time than the sort of darker parts of Franco-German history, which was that, of course, both France's leader, de Gaulle,

and Germany's leader, Konrad Adenauer, wanted to achieve something like critical mass together against the weight of Russia and I think also the weight of America in Europe.

VARMA: Yes, absolutely. If you look at the topics that were chosen in the treaty in '63, they span actually quite a very large spectrum because it's about defense, it's about foreign affairs, but also about education and youth. And I completely second what Constanze just said, you really have the idea that the treaty is supposed to provide a framework for a unique partnership, a unique type of cooperation stemming from the very highest level of government, but also going down actually to very much people-to-people friendship and relationships. The idea was to rebuild completely the relationship politically, geopolitically, but also for the French and the German people to be able to work together. And there was, of course, an economic component to it. But the treaty itself is both very macro and also very micro. And I think this is where the vision here is very interesting, particularly if you look at everything that's happened in Franco-German history, the fact that they also wanted to tackle people-to-people friendship and relationships, I think is quite key because the idea for them was that if the people-to-people friendship and relationships didn't work, then we aren't going to be able to get to foreign affairs and defense cooperation.

STELZENMÜLLER: May I add a personal note here? I was born in Bonn, which is on the Rhine, which is the river that lies between France and Germany and Western Germany. The farther you go has really close cultural, historic, economic and political ties to France. My spinster great-aunt directed a Franco-German high school for girls in a city very close to the French border. And if you take a train there, all the train announcements are in French and in German. That just gives you an idea of how natural this is and how deep the relationships are.

VARMA: And it took a lot of political will to make that happen.

STELZENMÜLLER: Also true.

VARMA: And I think the also the plan for it is really interesting. And when you look indeed 60 years on, at what that has made. There's always room for improvement. I think French language is more taught today in Germany than the German language is in France, but they are working towards rekindling this also level of people-to-people friendship.

STELZENMÜLLER: And that's not to say there aren't a lot of problems, which I suspect is what we're going to come to now, right?

PITA: Yes, I'd say there have been a lot of big questions just in the last decade, decade and a half about what it means to be in the EU and how the big countries and the smaller countries work with each other, right. There was the eurozone crisis, there has been Brexit. The whole question of do we want to stay together or not? The rise of nationalist parties in many countries. And then there was the whole Russia invading Ukraine part. So it brought this new focus on European military cooperation, but then it also sparked an energy crisis, as all these countries that have been dependent on Russian gas are now racing to find alternatives. So talk a little bit about that French-German relationship through all of this. What has that been like? What elements have changed over time, especially from the changeover from Chancellor Merkel to the new Chancellor Scholz?

VARMA: So I think one change is that if you look at the coalition, the German coalition agreement that basically was agreed upon in December 2021, it took European sovereignty as a big framework to advance its political and geopolitical agenda. I think that, for the French, was a strong signal that there was a form of German endorsement of this French and also European idea of the capacity for Europe to become a power. I think that was a very strong message that was sent.

And we'll talk about the personal relationships very briefly if you want. But I think the Franco-German relationship goes beyond that, to be honest. When Macron arrived in power in 2017, his relationship with Merkel was not so great. There was a big expectation on her side that there would be a big Franco-German moment. That happened to be a moment where Germany was in a form of turmoil. It took six months for Germany to come up with a coalition and a government, and so France had to move forward in a way on its own. They had very different personalities. I think maybe Macron and Scholz have more similar personalities now, but it goes beyond that. The whole point of the Élysée treaty is that it's supposed to work beyond personalities. It is supposed to create this political and administrative framework that will get the administrations to know each other better and to work with each other better.

It is also true that France and Germany have quite different strategic outlooks. I think that was true before the beginning of the war in Ukraine. This is still true, and this is why these crises that we've seen, and particularly the cancellation of the Franco-German Council of Ministers last October 2022, made such a big splash because we are reminded regularly that actually on a given issue, France and Germany tend to start at the opposite end of the spectrum. And the whole point of this framework is that we are supposed to work sometimes in quite a hard manner to get to a median position that eventually becomes a European position. This is also what this framework is about, and I think this is where it's interesting is that the Franco-German relationship and tandem is often providing propositions, sometimes to the anger or frustration of other European partners. And it is true that it's not sufficient anymore, but I think it remains necessary in providing this force of initiative, force of proposition.

PITA: Constanze?

STELZENMÜLLER: So let me perhaps elaborate a little bit on what those differences are and as Tara says, they are not just personal, although those personal differences do exist. Macron is famously called a think tanker who is a French president, who is a fantastic public speaker and takes personal pride and pleasure in giving big ideas speeches, as he did at the Sorbonne, the main university in Paris, in 2017, a speech which famously, and to the irritation of Paris and Macron himself, was not given an answer by then-Chancellor Angela Merkel. That said, Merkel and he warmed to each other, got along really well, had a cordial relationship.

And then comes Scholz, who is famously taciturn, not a charmer, shall we say, whereas Macron is all about giving people hugs. And certainly the first year of Scholz's tenure saw a lot of things that were seen as rebuffs in France. For example, he gave a big Europe speech, but in Prague and Eastern Europe, which in many ways and its content was a response to Macron, but it didn't even mention France. He went to Beijing in December without taking the French along, which a lot of people had recommended. He said he was going to plan a European missile defense umbrella without including the French and the Poles, etc., etc., etc. The summation of all that is why Macron decided to cancel in October the Council of Ministers, and

then that saw Scholz himself and a lot of German ministers hopping on a plane to run to Paris to make up again. So that just gives you an idea of the tensions.

There were also fights about defense policy. There were fights about a pipeline from Spain to Central Europe. There were fights about nuclear power, etc., etc. The larger strategic issue is this: Paris has always said, we are not going to be able to be a sovereign actor of any kind if we don't deepen Europe. In other words, if we don't give Brussels more power, if we don't have a stronger executive at a supranational level. The Berlin answer to this has been, we don't think that this is acceptable to Eastern Europe. And because our location in the center of the continent, we have a responsibility towards keeping the Eastern Europeans and the Central Europeans happy, as it were, giving them a sense that we take their concerns seriously, especially in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The irony of the situation here right now is, of course, in the current context of the fight about tanks, shall we say, a German attempt to lead Europe, are somewhat in question.

VARMA: I think we should look at the differences quite strongly because they will help us overcome them, I would say. I think it tends to be underestimated in France, how central the transatlantic relationship is to German foreign and security policy. And so it's interesting because there are a lot of people in France who tend to be disappointed every time it seems like Germany is choosing the U.S. But we have, as I said, very different strategic outlooks when it comes to foreign and security policy. I think we have a lot of convergences and if we look at European sovereignty, and again, the idea for Europe to be more capable of defending itself, I think we are getting to a point of convergence.

But what we also tend to underestimate in France is that Germany's relationships with China and Russia, economic relationships were a big part, basically its two biggest assets when it came to its economic diplomacy. Today, these two relationships are what is putting Germany in a much more vulnerable position. And so Germany has already turned around in a way from its dependence on Russian gas and oil, and it has to think right now at how it puts into question its relationship to China. And these two relationships have a lot of consequence also on how Europe can be sovereign, how energy independent it can be, and how it can protect, of course, and develop further its single market. Russia and China play a big role in that.

And if you look at how the summit went on Sunday, I feel like it went beyond the symbolic. We had a lot of questions from journalists prior to the meeting saying, Do you think France and Germany are going to be able to produce something that goes beyond that? And I remember saying to a few of them, well, they don't really have a choice. I mean, neither France nor Germany can afford for this to be a symbolic gesture. There were symbols. I think the fact that they met at the Sorbonne, as Constanze said, it's where Macron that his big Europe speech in September 2017, sent a strong symbolic message.

There were meeting of ministers at a number of levels in Paris. There was a defense, actually, a council of ministers, where they decided a number of issues, particularly to pursue the future combat air system, the tank system as well. And they discussed, and I found that really interesting in the communique that was published today, the fact that there were going to be trilateral military exercises between France, Germany and regional partners in the Indo-Pacific. And the communique ends on that. So, I think it also shows a willingness on both countries' side not only to reinforce and to strengthen the EU, but also to think about how Europe projects its power elsewhere. And I think that's quite important. They need to deliver on

that. But the fact that this level of ambition was portrayed, I think to me is relatively positive. Let's see how we go from there.

STELZENMÜLLER: May I inject a note of skepticism?

PITA: Please.

STELZENMÜLLER: So everything that Tara just said is right, of course. But let me sort of take a step back and address what perhaps listeners who aren't as steeped in the ins and outs of policy in Europe as we are might think. And that is very simple. With a Europe, a European Union of nearly 30 members – 27 right now without the Brits – a Franco-German motor that Paris and Berlin thought they had, saw themselves as for the European Union, just doesn't work anymore. Right? We, Paris and Berlin, do not have the strength, the leadership capabilities, the persuasive power, the soft power, to just assume that other countries in Europe will fall in line. That's not to say, as some have now suggested, that the political center of gravity is shifting to Eastern Europe. I'm not sure about that because I'm not sure who will be the leader of that, frankly. But at the very least, the other countries of Europe have enormous blocking power. And if they are not convinced by positions that Paris and Berlin take, there will be no European union. So it is up to Paris and Berlin to make sure that they can persuade rather than make assumptions. And here I think the bottom line is, if we don't help solve problems, if we in fact are the problems, if we create problems, either because of our national domestic political weaknesses that hamper us or because we pursue deliberately nationalist policies, say, on energy policy, like the Germans, then we, I think, can put to rest any dreams of European leadership, of European sovereignty or of Europe being a serious actor on the world stage. So in my view, we both, both our countries, have a lot of work to do to live up to the ambition and the hopes that we set out in that anniversary declaration.

VARMA: I fully agree. I think that it is absolutely crucial. What we've seen indeed in the past few months, I would say, is actually the materialization of a European foreign policy public space. We see a lot more member states coming up to the forefront saying that they agree or disagree or that they have a different way of looking at things. I think this is very new. It's been happening since the COVID pandemic. And I find that absolutely fascinating that economy finance ministers from different parts of Europe are publishing op-eds in the news and saying, well, we agree with this, we agree with a different view. We want debt mutualization, we're against it. And on the tanks issue, the kind of military support that Europe can provide Ukraine, that's also very interesting.

So there is a public space of discussion that is clearly arising. What isn't there yet -- and I think this is where this Franco-German motor tandem remains necessary -- is that it is used now to this administrative process where even when the two sides disagree, they have to get together and produce something. And this model doesn't exist yet elsewhere in Europe. It may be reproduced, I think that would be really interesting. And in terms actually of both deepening and strengthening and enlarging Europe, the fact that this model would be reproduced somewhere else, in the Baltic states, in Eastern Europe, in Central Europe, I think that would be very interesting and that would change fundamentally the dynamics of how Europe works.

We are not there yet. And so this is why I fully agree. I mean, there is a lot of responsibility on both our shoulders. And one of the communiques that was published after yesterday's summit was that actually

both France and Germany were going to provide unwavering support to Ukraine in political and military and humanitarian and social and cultural fields. The first three lines of the communiqués were about this, because they know that this is where expectations are quite high on them.

PITA: I want to ask you – to wrap up here – you both have talked about how the whole point of this, of the treaty, of the relationship is that it's not just the very elite leadership levels, that it's building these networks of relationships further down. And, Tara, you were just talking about the need to say like, look, we don't agree, but we have to figure out some things. We got to sit down. We got to do this. As the three of us were talking about doing this episode, Constanze, you had shared a quote from a colleague of ours at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Joseph de Weck, where he talked about those fundamentally different approaches between France and Germany to the EU, but said that even though they come from these very different perspectives, the two countries have this approach that you have to “celebrate and leverage the fake it till you make it power of myths,” until the faking till you make it, that becomes a reality. How is that going to work at that whole of society level to meet the goals that were set out from this weekend's summit and to meet the challenges that are ahead?

STELZENMÜLLER: Let me try and start on that. We've got a very concerned and emotional public opinion in Europe right now and for good reason. We are witnessing on a daily level horrific depredations committed by Russia in Ukraine, and that has immediate consequences for people's daily lives, in the form of refugees arriving in Europe, in the form of energy prices, inflation, and so on. And I think we're seeing actually citizens of Europe, including in our own countries, really stepping up and doing their part in many ways, taking in refugees, helping them find jobs, helping them find schools for their children, saying, you know what, I don't care, I'll wear a sweater if the Russians turn off the gas. All of that's good. So I'm really not that concerned about a lack of empathy or solidarity in European publics.

I am seeing, though, also, the effect of propaganda and disinformation and the efforts by the hard right across Europe and of course by external actors like Russia to amplify that. And that's where I think the responsibility of leaders really comes in, to reassure their own publics that they have a grip on the situation, that they're not forgetting their own citizens. They are grateful for their citizens' contributions to European solidarity and that they are attempting to, as they say here in this country, walk and chew gum at the same time, to address their country's domestic problems, but also deal with these immense once-in-a-generation external threats to Europe that we're seeing.

VARMA: I fully agree, and maybe just one point to add, I think what they need to do is also remind their citizens what the whole point of the European Union is, particularly at a time when the war is back on the continent. The European Union, in essence, is a peace project. And so what we're asking today of the European Union, 70 years after the end of the Second World War, is actually to become again, a power in its own right and to provide power and supports -- military, humanitarian, financial -- to a part, a future member, possibly of the European Union, but a country that is actually part of Europe.

And this very change of paradigm, I think, needs to be explained, and explicitly. What we see in the opinion polls is that actually the vast majority of the European population supports the solidarity efforts towards Ukraine. But I think it is really worth saying it over and over again, explicitly what the European Union stands for and why it is still relevant in the 21st century.

PITA: All right. Well, we'll leave it there today. Tara and Constanze, thank you very much for being with us today and talking about this.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you, it was such a pleasure.