

'Inside Aachen Cathedral', from Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (29 September 1978)


Caption: On 29 September 1978, the German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung welcomes the cordial relations between the German Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, and the French President, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Eick, Jürgen; Welter, Erich; Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Deschamps, Bruno; Fest, Joachim; Reißmüller, Johann Georg. 29.09.1978, Nr. 214. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Im Aachener Dom", auteur:Gillesen, Günther , p. 1.

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Inside Aachen Cathedral

By Günther Gillessen

Helmut Schmidt and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing at the tomb of Charlemagne in Aachen Cathedral — a gesture that was meant to touch people's hearts and did exactly that. Both politicians were cautious enough to suggest merely through their silence that, behind the project of a European Monetary System, there is also political aspect, a new community of interest, based on changes in the relationship of both countries towards the United States.

Franco-German relations were able to improve because Mr Giscard d'Estaing, since his election as President, no longer needs America as a source of friction for French Nationalism. He very quietly improved France's relationship with NATO. At the same time, Paris also renounced further attempts at establishing a special relationship with the Soviet Union. These subtle measures were taken neither quickly nor systematically. There were setbacks, too, especially during the disagreements between Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Jacques Chirac. The National Assembly elections in spring 1978, the defeat of the National Front alliance and the weakening of the Gaullists all contributed to strengthening Mr Giscard's position and enabled him to feel less restricted.

By developing its relations with the United States and NATO, France also managed to improve its relationship with the Federal Republic of Germany. Unlike under Presidents de Gaulle and Pompidou, current French policy no longer expects the Federal Republic to make the impossible choice between France and America. This had paralysed Franco-German relations from the outset. It is only now that they can thrive.

Relations between Germany and the United States have also changed. Bonn has felt the need — and the Chancellor the power — to press for a stronger defence of German interests in the relationship with the Western superpower ever since Jimmy Carter's policy began disappointing certain German expectations towards Washington. There have been frictions with regards to non-military nuclear policy, misunderstandings about the right way to admonish the Soviet Union on its human rights observance and omissions in clarifying the neutron bomb issue. The American Administration's annoyingly passive stance in defending the external value of the dollar was another point that eventually led Bonn to draw the conclusion that it would be more beneficial for its relationship with the United States if Germany acted with more independence. This relationship continues to be of utmost importance for Bonn.

Thirdly, France's self-esteem vis-à-vis the Federal Republic has also changed. Georges Pompidou still believed that he had to lift President de Gaulle's veto against British accession to the European Community so that he might establish a balance of power with Great Britain against the Federal Republic. Such an attitude is now outdated. This may be because Great Britain's cantankerous membership is little suited to the achievement of such a balance, because France's self-esteem as a nuclear power, as a protecting power in Berlin and as an intervention force in Africa, albeit with limited authority, has grown — or because France, despite last autumn's torrential outbreak of fear of the Germans among French left-wing circles, has now increased its trust in the reliability of the German neighbour. The theatrical performance in Aachen, symbol of the beginning of the European currency project, proves that, under President Giscard d'Estaing, France no longer shuns a closer relationship with the Federal Republic under Chancellor Schmidt. Paris no longer regards and uses the Federal Republic merely as a firewall for security policy — Mr Giscard feels perfectly at ease taking up help from Bonn without fearing that some kind of dependence might result therefrom. The transition towards a market economy creates even more common ground between the neighbours.

There are, obviously, still uncertainties. The French inflation rate can be slowed down with market policy measures only if the unions do not create difficulties. Even the new feeling of neighbourliness is not built on such safe ground that it could not crumble at any moment. The anti-American standpoint of Gaullism was, after all, not only a temporary attitude of a few French politicians but part of one of France's political traditions.

Finally, the effect of Franco-German cooperation on the Community of the Nine also has to be considered. Although the currency project immediately received the approval of the smaller partners, it inherently bears the danger of a Europe of the two Big Nations — or of the economically faster ones. The project will not be consistent with Community borders, given that certain Member States, such as Great Britain, will not participate while some non-member countries — such as Norway, Austria and Switzerland — are to join in.

Will all these issues provide a new impetus for European integration? Not directly, to be sure. Institutionally, there are some inconsistencies. However, the European integration process has often benefited most, albeit sometimes only by a roundabout route, from urgent short-term requirements. Helmut Schmidt was no enthusiastic European when he drafted his first government statement. And he is still no enthusiast today. But he has found a congenial partner in Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. If they are to advance European cooperation, they will do it with means in which they believe: not with the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament or the Commission, but with the European Council, which they invented. They want to govern, not be governed. Their gesture at Aachen Cathedral may have been too grand; but it is obviously not meaningless.