

Carine Germond, France, Germany and Britain's Second Application to the European Community (1966-1969)

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France, Germany and Britain's Second Application to the European Community (1966-1969)

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The failure of the United Kingdom's first application to the European Communities (EC) had a lasting effect on Franco–German relations. The preamble to the Franco–German cooperation treaty — the Élysée treaty — was signed a week after Charles de Gaulle's fateful press conference of 14 January 1963 — bore the marks of Franco–German disagreements on this issue. The election in October 1964 of a Labour government for whom accession to the EC was not a priority, had eliminated, albeit only temporarily, a source of disputes between Paris and Bonn. From summer 1966 however, it became clear that Prime Minister Harold Wilson was considering a second bid to join the EC. Given the traditional French and German position on enlargement, a second British membership application, inevitably followed by that of other members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), was a likely cause of additional tension for an already strained bilateral relationship.

In the winter of 1966, the replacement of the Erhard–Schröder government by a grand coalition formed by Christian Democrats (CDU) and Social Democrats positively altered the dynamics of Franco–German relations. Hopes subsequently rose that a revitalised Franco–German entente could help overcome European stagnation and achieve both the deepening and widening of the EC.

France and Germany played a key role in the British application issue, which resulted from different factors. Their close political cooperation, legally underpinned by the Élysée treaty, was a determining element since the treaty provided for regular consultations at all levels of the political and diplomatic hierarchy in order to harmonise their positions in key foreign policy areas. Furthermore, the fact that France represented both the main obstacle and the key to British entry conferred pivotal influence on the German government. The British government thus attempted to use the grand coalition as an advocate of British interests as well as a lever to rally or pressure the French in favour of enlargement. This gave the grand coalition a dual role as mediators between France and England on the one hand, and France and the 'anglophile Four' (Italy and the Benelux countries) on the other.

Charles de Gaulle, the grand coalition and the British application (December 1966–December 1967)

The composition of the grand coalition was indicative of its foreign policy orientation. Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger (CDU), who had served as the Federal Government representative for Franco–German cooperation, clearly stood for reanimating and improving relations with Paris. Foreign Minister and Vice-Chancellor Willy Brandt (SPD) symbolised the will to develop détente and relations with the East. Kiesinger's inaugural address strongly underlined these two objectives, although it reaffirmed the commitment to further develop and enlarge the EC. ⁽¹⁾ Thus, the new Federal Government was still in favour of British EC membership but its leaders were not willing to provoke a showdown with General de Gaulle over the British question. ⁽²⁾

Consequently, at the first bilateral meeting in Paris in January 1967, both Kiesinger and Brandt adopted a low profile on the British issue. Confronted with de Gaulle's old arguments that British membership would radically transform the EC, the Germans avoided any further confrontation and agreed to await further developments.

These developments crystallized and accelerated during the spring of 1967. Encouraged by the positive outcome of Wilson's information tour in Europe, the British Government submitted its application to the EC on 11 May 1967. Until then, the French had adopted a simple delaying tactic during the regular Franco–German consultations, but de Gaulle's press conference on 16 May 1967 was the first public demonstration of the tougher line taken by the French president. Indeed, he made it clear that he did not want to discuss British accession to the EC at this point. De Gaulle's 'velvet veto' meant that, holding their first summit meeting since 1961 in Rome two weeks after the press conference, the Six talked around the problem. ⁽³⁾ With memories of the 1965 'empty chair crisis' still vivid, none of France's partners was willing to provoke

a confrontation with Paris. ⁽⁴⁾ During the summer, the grand coalition embarked on a mediating mission to disarm French opposition. However Kiesinger and Brandt wanted at all costs ‘to eschew the temptation to confront France as a united five-member bloc,’ ⁽⁵⁾ which they knew would only strengthen de Gaulle in his opposition and possibly jeopardize the EC’s cohesion. Moreover, they also agreed that they should act as a negotiator rather than a mediator (*Makler*). This course promised to be difficult. Pressured by Wilson’s government to press the case of the British application and unable to lift de Gaulle’s reservations, the grand coalition faced a seemingly unsolvable dilemma: cooperation with France or enlargement of the EC.

The largely positive report for the opening of accession negotiations with the applicant countries, which the European Commission published on 29 September 1967, put the French Government in a delicate position. It could either accept the recommendation of the Commission and, therefore, the opening of negotiations, or refuse them and face the likely unanimous reproach of having rejected the applications without even discussing the problems. The French seemed to have lost a battle but they had not lost the war. On the contrary, they decided to exploit the Commission’s report to delay the final decision on the opening of negotiations with the applicants. The French negotiating tactic for the forthcoming EC Council of 23 October 1967 thus consisted chiefly in ensuring further delays without risking international opprobrium with another veto. Informed of the French stand on reflections, German diplomats were forced to amend their initial optimism. Kiesinger in particular worried about what he interpreted as a stiffening of the French attitude and reiterated to French Ambassador François Seydoux that his government would continue its mediatory policy. ⁽⁶⁾ Hence, ‘the French based their tactical decision for the 23 October Community Council on the knowledge that the Germans would not force a breach. (...) Germany’s attitude enabled the French to slip between the twin objectives of Britain’s tactic neither forced into saying “yes” nor exposed by saying “no”.’ ⁽⁷⁾

However, the tough tone of French Foreign Minister Maurice Couve de Murville’s intervention at the EC Council of Ministers surprised the Germans. Although Couve de Murville stated that his government had no fundamental objection to enlargement, this affirmation was substantially contradicted by a far-reaching list of specific prerequisites for the opening of negotiations. France’s partners were forced to admit that Couve de Murville’s stance looked a lot like a veto. This impression was confirmed by de Gaulle’s press conference on 27 November 1967. He listed therein the radical transformations that Britain would have to undergo before joining the EC and concluded that it was impossible ‘to let Britain enter today the Common Market as it exists’. ⁽⁸⁾

Though taken aback by this unwelcome development, the grand coalition felt that its position was quite strong as de Gaulle’s press conference had provoked understandable outrage in London and in the five other capitals, as well as underscoring France’s isolation in the EC. But it did not give up on Franco–German dialogue altogether. Still hoping to thwart a negative outcome of the next EC Council of Ministers meeting and an EC crisis, Brandt met his counterpart and tried to persuade him to accept the opening of negotiations. Couve de Murville could not be convinced.

The collision was inevitable. The Council of Ministers of 19 December 1967 revealed the deep rift between France and Germany on the one hand, and France and the Five on the other. Brandt took up the lead of the Five to demand the opening of negotiations independently of Britain’s economic recovery. Couve de Murville’s tepid compromise attempt met with the Five’s staunch resistance. Brandt recollected the impassioned and tough debate between him and his French counterpart. ⁽⁹⁾ The communiqué issued following the Council mirrored the divergent positions but confirmed that all applications remained on the EC agenda. ⁽¹⁰⁾ Once again the British issue had thrown France and Germany into opposite camps and threatened to jeopardize the bilateral rapprochement that had been initiated by the grand coalition since its coming to power.

A solution to the deadlock? The Franco–German trade arrangement (January 1968–April 1969)

After de Gaulle’s second veto and the failure of the December 1967 EC Council of Ministers, impasse on the British application seemed total but, contrary to what had happened in 1963, the *question anglaise* did not disappear. Instead the debate went on among the Six and in 1968 several initiatives attempted to bypass

French opposition. Some proposed to develop cooperation between the United Kingdom (UK) and the Six in areas that were not, or only partially, covered by the treaties of Rome; others suggested establishing a more or less explicit link between transitional arrangements and the final adhesion, as did the Franco–German proposal for a trade arrangement. The common factor in these initiatives was that they intended to promote greater cooperation prior to British adhesion and/or to facilitate the UK’s entry into the EC.

The idea of a commercial or trade arrangement as an interim solution to the British application had been brought up by de Gaulle himself in earlier press conferences — in particular, in January 1963 and in May and November 1967. ⁽¹¹⁾ The Germans were particularly interested in a trade arrangement scheme as they believed it would maintain both a concrete perspective for later adhesion of the UK and the cohesion of the Community.

Franco–German consultations on the alternative of a trade arrangement confirmed that the French were disposed to discuss it. That Paris was relatively well disposed towards the trade arrangement was understandable, given the proposed reunion of the Western European Union (WEU), which the Benelux countries promoted as a place to deepen and strengthen contacts between the Six and Great Britain until the latter joined the EC. Afraid of being sidelined or, worse, completely isolated, the French government estimated that it was necessary to play along with the Germans to avoid their defection.

The February 1968 Franco–German summit meeting was thus dedicated to the enlargement issue. With some difficulty, agreement was reached on a communiqué that reflected both the extent and limits of the accord. It echoed familiar French prerequisites, such as the necessity for Britain to be in a position to enter the EC. Besides this, the German concern that the future arrangement should be a first step toward full membership was not alleviated, although they managed to impose the idea of a parallel development of the Common Market. Moreover, from a German viewpoint, the trade arrangement did not represent a substitute for full membership — which remained the final objective — nor an association, which was precisely what de Gaulle recommended. The Franco–German declaration that was published on 16 February 1968 thus expressed a lame compromise between the French and German positions but did not solve any of the fundamental disagreements.

Based on the Franco–German declaration, the *Auswärtiges Amt* quickly elaborated ‘proposals for the cooperation between the Six and the would-be members in the trade and the technological field.’ ⁽¹²⁾ Far from meeting with approval in Paris, the French demonstrated not only a restrictive interpretation of the Franco–German declaration but they also adopted an obstructive attitude. Couve de Murville adroitly managed to conjure away Franco–German divergences during the Council of Ministers meeting early in March but he made it doubtful that France would go beyond a minimalist arrangement. The second Commission report, presented on 2 April, did not help solve the problems. On the contrary, its list of ‘technical problems’ raised by the German proposals was likely to provide the arrangement’s opponents with new arguments. By spring 1968, the German trade arrangement scheme was thus in trouble. The recalcitrant attitude of Paris accounted for most of it, though dislike of the Commission and of the four other EC partners also contributed to the impasse.

German attempts at compromise over the spring did not reduce any of the Franco–German disagreements on both the substance and the extent of the trade arrangement. As much irritated at the obstructive and inflexible French position as they were worried about a resulting EC crisis, Kiesinger and Brandt nevertheless decided to transpose the Franco–German February declaration into a concrete arrangement. In late May, the Germans eventually obtained France’s half-hearted ‘agreement’ on a text, but at the cost of a major step back in their own conceptions. This progress was short-lived though, as the May events in France disrupted any further discussions on the arrangement.

After the summer, the Germans resumed studies for a new European initiative that linked enlargement with internal deepening of the Community. Moreover, the replacement of Couve de Murville by the more anglophile Michel Debré seemed a good omen for enlargement. The new German initiative was motivated by the recognition that enlargement would further hinder progress towards integration in the EC. Furthermore, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops in August 1968 had demonstrated the need to

strengthen the EC through further progress towards integration and to end the economic divide between the EC and EFTA.

The German government, which wanted to present its new set of proposals at the EC Council meeting on 27 September, was anxious to obtain a minimum of French support first. Three weeks before the summit, Debré and Brandt met in Paris but the French minister declined Brandt's arguments in favour of enlargement. Predictably, Brandt's *Aktionsprogramm*, which was submitted at the EC Council in late September, received little support from Debré. The French Foreign Minister reaffirmed the traditional, i.e. negative, French arguments while the other partners rallied behind Brandt's proposals as the lowest common denominator. But, by explicitly linking enlargement with specific proposals in favour of the internal development of the EC, i.e. between widening and deepening, Bonn was sending a twofold message to its EC partners. To Paris, it suggested that they would not obtain reinforcement of cooperation in areas such as agriculture and monetary coordination that were essential for France, should the deadlock over enlargement persist. To the other Four, it proved that Bonn was not the puppet of the French, but was acting for the benefit of the EC. As evidence of its good faith, the German proposals suggested broadening consultations between the EC's institutions and the applicant countries — something that was likely to please the Benelux countries and Italy. A few days after the Council, Debré declared to journalists in a threatening tone that he saw one last chance for Germany to join France; otherwise, he warned, 'it could definitively lead to the Common Market's becoming frozen.'

In spite of the French attitude, Brandt held on to his 'Initiative 1968' and the idea of an interim solution for the applicant countries. It was clear that the deadlock would endure as long as the French persisted in its obstruction, but the Germans were unwilling to make any further concessions to 'sell' their proposals. On the contrary, they expected Paris to move first. This Debré did in a letter to Brandt dated 24 October 1968. Even though the *Auswärtiges Amt* acknowledged that the French minister had made a few compromises, these remained limited enough to suggest that the French position had not significantly evolved and that the basic Franco-German disagreements remained. At the EC Council meeting on 5 November 1968, the French delegation made another conciliatory move and presented a series of concrete suggestions for a commercial arrangement and technological cooperation. Although the French proposals were much more limited than the German plan, this new French attempt at conciliation represented progress, albeit motivated by ulterior motives. In fact it was partly designed to alleviate France's isolation at a time when the country needed the support of its EC partners to recover from the monetary and economic difficulties that had followed the social turmoil of spring 1968. In the following months, bilateral and multilateral discussions focused on the substance of the arrangement but the underlying divergences could re-emerge at any time.

Early in 1969, de Gaulle's foreign policy showed obvious signs of reorientation. The first indication was a clumsy attempt at rapprochement with the United Kingdom. During a discussion, General de Gaulle proposed holding Anglo-French talks on the British application to the EC to the British Ambassador in Paris, Christopher Soames. The controversial 'Soames affair' was both a reaction against France's isolation and a proof of de Gaulle's inability to bully his five partners into adopting his views, as he had done in previous years.⁽¹³⁾ His attempt to resume dialogue with the British government was in part motivated by growing French anxiety concerning Germany's increased economic and monetary power in Europe. Domestically weakened and internationally isolated, de Gaulle strove to get closer to London so as to counterbalance the German partner in Europe. Wilson's decision to disclose to Kiesinger, whom he was visiting, the contents of the de Gaulle-Soames talks, put the Federal Government in an awkward position. Kiesinger was well aware that the French would be infuriated that presumably secret discussions had been revealed in such a way. Moreover the account given by Wilson outlined de Gaulle's apparent disloyalty to the EC and destabilized the Chancellor. While de Gaulle had often reiterated that enlargement would challenge the character and the nature of the EC, he had never said it should disappear. Wilson's indiscretions therefore fulfilled their objective, namely to push the Germans towards greater support for British membership and to drive a substantial wedge between Paris and Bonn.

Disclosures from the Quai d'Orsay about a new European initiative towards enhanced political cooperation also signalled a shift in French foreign policy. Although this initiative clearly aimed at overcoming both current European stagnation and the deadlock over enlargement, another incentive was certainly to counter

political cooperation between the five EC partners and the UK in the WEU, which France had decided to boycott. Bonn's cautious reaction to these indications highlighted the scars left by the Soames affair and the on-going WEU crisis: although willing to endorse the French proposals, Bonn expressly linked all enhanced political cooperation among the Six to parallel intensification of collaboration among the Seven, i.e. the Six plus Britain. Moreover, the *Auswärtiges Amt* remained sceptical about the affirmation by Paris that the trade arrangement scheme was still 'valid'. Only Chancellor Kiesinger, eager to exploit the evident improvements in Franco–German relations since the bilateral summit of March 1969, seemed willing to support the French overture, in which he saw a chance to promote his own idea of a *Kerneuropa*.⁽¹⁴⁾ De Gaulle's unexpected resignation disrupted any further French initiative in Europe and eventually opened the way towards a resolution of the Community deadlock and of the muddled crisis at the Hague conference.

Conclusion

The second British bid for EC membership posed a multidimensional challenge for the Franco–German relationship in the second half of the 1960s. Both countries had many motives for rejecting or promoting it. Although de Gaulle mostly resorted to economic arguments, it was obvious that he opposed the British application because it represented a political threat to French influence and interests in Europe. Moreover, the arrival of the francophile grand coalition had revived hopes in Paris that the Élysée treaty might be more than just a cooperation framework and could eventually embody the nucleus of the *Europe européenne* that de Gaulle had envisaged. Economic motives also supported the French opposition. France was counted among the countries that had benefited the most from the common agricultural policy (CAP). Although the French victory after the empty chair crisis had weakened the sense that the CAP might still be vulnerable, occasional protests from France's partners and, in particular, from Germany — the biggest net contributor to the EC budget — about its growing costs fed French angst that enlargement might provide the CAP's opponents with a new strength that France alone would not be able to counter. Economic and political motives also played a role in Germany's favourable position towards enlargement. Bonn expected that enlargement, by suppressing tariff barriers with many of its EFTA clients — about 30 % of German exports — would boost its economy and trade as well as reduce its contribution to the CAP's budget. The Germans also saw in enlargement a means by which to strengthen the EC and 'an alternative to the unpredictable and at times uncomfortable relationship with the French.'⁽¹⁵⁾

If, on the surface, France's and Germany's positions appeared far apart or even irreconcilable, evidence suggests on the contrary that both Foreign Ministries had a relatively similar analysis of Britain's economic and monetary state. Nonetheless, they drew completely opposite conclusions. While the French insisted that Britain should first put some order into its economy and finances before accession negotiations could start — as a proof of its commitment to join the Community — the Germans estimated that Britain's accession would help it tackle its economic and financial challenges, and compared the UK's situation with that of France in 1958, when France's participation in the Common Market had been a powerful factor of economic modernisation.

The confrontation over the British application for membership not only blocked the EC's integration agenda but took its toll on the Franco–German relationship too. The initially promising rapprochement initiated by the grand coalition soon faded away.⁽¹⁶⁾ Kiesinger's pro-French attitude certainly represented the guarantee that Bonn would not confront Paris too directly. In fact, the more Brandt grew tired of French obstructiveness and chose to assert German interests, the more Kiesinger tried to accommodate the recalcitrant French partner and act as a mediator. But the Federal Chancellor received little recognition for his dedication to the French cause. To his 'open door policy', the French responded with delaying and obstructive tactics. Kiesinger not only failed to bring de Gaulle around, but his willingness to compromise probably encouraged the French president in his policy.

The Franco–German trade arrangement scheme was thus a test for Kiesinger's pro-French policy. At first, it seemed a promising initiative. The French co-sponsored the idea but then rejected subsequent German efforts to turn the proposal into anything more concrete. Brandt's subsequent proposals were a worthy effort to satisfy the French, the British and the anglophile European partners but, given their maximalist attitude, his plan was almost doomed to failure as it could never have pleased everyone. But, even when the Franco–

German entente did produce constructive outcomes such as the bilateral declaration of February 1968, it met with suspicion from the EC partners and institutions, which feared being confronted by a Franco–German *fait accompli*. Bonn’s uncomfortable mediating role therefore never achieved its objectives. Charles de Gaulle had succeeded in delaying enlargement but at the cost of France’s almost complete isolation in Europe and a further cooling of relations with Bonn.

Notes:

- (1) Published in *Europa-Archiv*, 22 (1967), p. D. 17.
- (2) Piers Ludlow, *The European Community and the Crisis of the 1960s*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2006, p. 137.
- (3) See R. Lahr, *Zeuge von Fall und Aufstieg. Private Briefe (1934-1974)*, Hamburg, Albrecht Knaus Verlag, 1981, p. 469.
- (4) See C. Germond, ‘Le couple franco-allemand et la crise de la chaise vide’, in K. Rücker, L. Warlouzet (eds.), *Which Europe(s)? New Approaches to the History of European Integration*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2006, pp. 79-95.
- (5) W. Brandt, *People and Politics. The Years (1960-1975)*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co, 1976, p. 159.
- (6) *Akten zur auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 1967, Bd. III, Dok. 348, *Gespräch des Bundeskanzler Kiesingers mit dem französischen Botschafter Seydoux*, p. 1372.
- (7) H. Paar, *Britain’s Policy towards the European Community. Harold Wilson and Britain’s World Role (1964-1967)*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2006, pp. 167-168.
- (8) C. de Gaulle, *Discours et Messages [DM]. Vers le terme (1966-1969)*, t. V, Paris, Plon, 1970, p. 244.
- (9) W. Brandt, *People and Politics*, p. 162.
- (10) *Europa-Archiv*, 22 (1967), p. D 42-D 43.
- (11) C. de Gaulle, *DM. Pour l’effort (1962-1965)*, Paris, Plon, 1970, p.70. Gaulle, DM V, p. 174 and pp. 244-245.
- (12) Published in *Europa-Archiv*, 23 (1968), pp. D 141-D 145.
- (13) For more details about the Soames affair, see M. Pine, ‘British Personal Diplomacy and Public Policy : The Soames Affair’, in *Journal of European Integration History*, 10/2, 2004, pp. 59-74.
- (14) See H. Türk, ‘Kurt Georg Kiesingers Kerneuropakonzept — War der Bundeskanzler der Grossen Koalition seiner Zeit voraus?’ in W. Loth (ed.), *Europäische Gesellschaft – Grundlagen und Perspektiven*, Wiesbaden, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005, pp. 230-244.
- (15) Quoted in P. Ludlow, *European Community*, p. 163.
- (16) See F. Seydoux, *Dans l’intimité franco-allemande. Une mission diplomatique*, Paris, Ed. Albatros, 1977, pp. 106-109.

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