

Note from Egon Bahr on Franco-German relations (9 October 1969)

Caption: On 9 October 1969, Egon Bahr, Head of the Policy Planning Staff in the Foreign Ministry of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), forwards to the Foreign Minister, Willy Brandt, a note in which he gives a summary of a meeting with the French Ambassador, François Seydoux, concerning future relations between France and Germany. Bahr outlines to Brandt, who is to be elected Chancellor on 21 October, France's temporarily uncertain position and suggests that he should propose to the French President that cooperation be enhanced between the two countries by moving from 'exemplary cooperation' to 'preferential cooperation'.

Source: Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn. Depositum Egon Bahr. Box 441.

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Memo by Egon Bahr concerning Franco-German relations (9 October 1969)

Confidential!

Bonn, 9 October 1969

For the Minister's eyes only

Re: Conversation with the French Ambassador, Seydoux, on 8 October 1969

The conversation left me with the impression that the Federal Government with Brandt as Chancellor would at the outset be in a stronger position vis-à-vis France than the present government. France's stance seems to be determined by the expectation of strong German pressure in favour of UK accession. There is also, on the French side, a very sharp focus on the assertion of financial interests in connection with completion of the agricultural market, where a successful outcome depends on agreement with the Federal Republic. France's stance can thus be described at the present time as uncertain, wait-and-see and prone to compromise.

Full use must be made of this window of opportunity, which will be open for only a limited period of time.

The following points in particular are worthy of record:

S. asked what the future held for the relationship between our two countries. When I answered that the basis for that relationship was a Treaty which we had with no other State and which no-one was proposing to touch, his relief was manifest. He had 'hoped for' (as opposed to 'expected') an answer along these lines.

From a brief survey of policies on Eastern Europe, it emerged that in this area the French have positive expectations of the new Federal Government.

S. foresaw difficulties in respect of policy on Europe. The French Government was aware that, as Chancellor, Brandt would push much harder in this direction than the present German Head of Government. This factor was built into their calculations, my impression being that in Paris it is viewed as a fixed quantity.

I confirmed this understanding of the present Foreign Minister's position and added that for Britain to come on board seemed to me to go with the tide of history. Nor did I see how it was possible to talk of a major role for Europe on the global political scene if it was de facto limited to the six-Member Community. I then repeated to him some passages from my conversation with Léo Hamon, regarding in particular Europe's relationship with the United States.

S. stressed that for France the really vital thing was to arrive at a situation in which Germany and France could no longer be manoeuvred apart or played one against the other. Then would be the time to talk about Britain. The Community way of thinking was still foreign to the British and they would certainly be astonished at how the Ministers speak to each other in the Council of Ministers of the Community.

In my reply I agreed that bringing the United Kingdom into the Community would certainly be a long process. And it was by no means clear when, or indeed whether, that process would meet with success. But a start had to be made on it.

Taking my cue from S.'s point concerning the close relationship between France and Germany, I raised with him an idea which had come to me in the course of the conversation, namely that a fruitful approach might be to step back from 'coopération exemplaire' to 'coopération préférentielle' and at the same time launch the accession negotiations with the United Kingdom. This would create a situation in which the two countries go as partners into negotiations on Community enlargement which they know will be difficult and protracted.

S. replied that he too could speak in a personal capacity only. The idea I had mooted seemed to him a highly interesting one, and he was unable at that point in time to say whether the qualifier 'préférentielle' had been abandoned on the French side for reasons to do with the relationship with third States.

S. observed in another connection how exceptionally difficult and complex the summit meeting was likely to be. In his personal view, it would be very worthwhile and very useful indeed if a high-level, discreet Franco-German exchange of views could be arranged prior to the conference.

He stressed, finally, that the new government was awaited with a sense of great expectancy in Paris, where esteem for Willy Brandt and regard for him as a person had grown steadily over the years. He asked me to convey to him his warmest greetings.

Following further reflection, I remain convinced that we will be working from a position of strength if, at a time when an uncertain Paris, beset by worries, is adopting a wait-and-see stance, we propose closer cooperation and tie this to the opening of accession negotiations. What for Paris would be likely to tip the balance would be the conviction that the Common Market had reached the point of no return. The European cause would receive quite a boost if a date could be set for the beginning of the accession negotiations. The British too could not turn down negotiations conducted under the banner of Franco-German cooperation on which the French, to maintain their own room for manoeuvre, are unlikely to wish to impose too narrow and formal a framework.

I would like to suggest that an informal discussion be arranged in Paris prior to the Summit and following the government statement.

The sections of the government statement dealing with France and Europe will need to be formulated with due regard for France's current stance and for the relatively strong position we enjoy for a limited period of time.

Bahr