

From cooperation to friendship: The ‘Franco-German duo’ in action (1963–1989)

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/from_cooperation_to_friendship_the_franco_german_duo_in_action_1963_1989-en-273686ad-f8ab-4c7a-b730-9800ceecddfc.html



Last updated: 06/07/2016

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The [Élysée Treaty](#), signed on 22 January 1963 by General de Gaulle and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, officially sealed [the reconciliation](#) between France and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). It instituted regular meetings at all levels and in all areas and served as the founding instrument of close bilateral cooperation.

But following the signing of the treaty, as the new mechanisms began to be introduced, relations between France and Germany were regularly undermined by serious crises, and this new bilateralism failed to live up to expectations. The two governments had differing views on many issues, particularly defence and security, the role of NATO, relations with the United States and the USSR, and how European integration should work in practice. The only real bilateral progress was the signing of the agreement on the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO), an institution set up to promote opportunities for intercultural exchange and learning.

After Konrad Adenauer left office, General de Gaulle’s German partners were Chancellors [Ludwig Erhard](#) (1963–1966) and [Kurt Georg Kiesinger](#) (1966–1969). With the first, a staunch pro-American and free-trade advocate, there was [total disagreement](#), and relations between Bonn and Paris immediately became strained. With Kiesinger, despite intentions to develop Franco-German relations, there were [few specific achievements](#). In the mid-1960s, the European Economic Community (EEC) was also shaken by a series of [crises](#), particularly as a result of General de Gaulle’s European policy.

In 1969, General de Gaulle left office, to be replaced by [Georges Pompidou](#) (1969–1974), while in the FRG, [Willy Brandt](#) (1969–1974) became Chancellor. There followed a series of joint initiatives to [revive European unification](#) and steer the EEC out of its political and institutional deadlock. But the [monetary crisis](#) that gripped Western Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as divergent views on defence and the common agricultural policy (CAP), represented serious obstacles. Pompidou’s mistrust of Willy Brandt’s [Ostpolitik](#) also put a strain on [relations between France and Germany](#).

The year 1974 saw the advent of a new phase of bilateralism between the two countries. With the arrival of [Helmut Schmidt](#) (1974–1982) as Chancellor and [Valéry Giscard d’Estaing](#) (1974–1981) as French President, two men who knew each other well, the idea of the ‘[Franco-German duo](#)’ really began to take shape. The two leaders were keen to revive and strengthen European unification, and considered their bilateral reconciliation to be the [engine of the European integration process](#). Giscard and Schmidt laid the foundations for what would become the European Union, with the establishment of the [European Council](#), elections to the [European Parliament by universal suffrage](#) and the introduction of the [European Monetary System \(EMS\)](#). In foreign affairs, the key development was closer agreement between the two countries on relations with the United States. Although he did not embrace Atlanticism, Giscard did not condemn American hegemony, unlike his predecessors.

The arrival of [François Mitterrand](#) (1981–1995) at the Élysée Palace in 1981 caused a stir in Franco-German relations. Mitterrand briefly worked alongside Helmut Schmidt, then Schmidt’s successor as Chancellor, [Helmut Kohl](#) (1982–1998). During his first two years in office, Mitterrand tried to counterbalance France’s close links with Germany by establishing more cordial relations with the United Kingdom. But it was a Franco-German initiative at the 1984 [Fontainebleau European Council](#) that led to the revival of the European integration process. This joint action led to the signing of the [Single European Act \(SEA\)](#) in 1986.

But at the end of the 1980s, the major geopolitical upheavals in Eastern Europe and the [fall of the Berlin Wall](#) on 9 November 1989, followed by [German reunification](#) on 3 October 1990, ushered in a

new order and put Franco-German solidarity to the test.