

## Introduction

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On 22 January 2013, French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Élysée Treaty. The signing of this Franco-German Treaty of Cooperation and Friendship by General de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer at the Élysée Palace on 22 January 1963 was an act of historic importance that paved the way for reconciliation and rapprochement between two countries that had long been enemies. The treaty opened a new chapter in relations between France and West Germany, allowing them to act together as a driving force for European integration. The rapport between the two countries has always been marked by ups and downs, by periods of tension and revival. The Franco-German rapprochement that began in the early years after the Second World War was to follow a unique path.

In 1945, Europe was facing numerous challenges. The continent was drained, in ruins, and looking for a way to pick itself up. Western Germany and France were soon at the centre of various projects to create a new European order. But reconciliation between the two countries seemed a distant prospect, and it was hard to imagine that one day these former enemies would stand side by side in a joint European organisation. France continued to be preoccupied by the threat of Germany and its quest for economic prosperity. The question of the Saar and Ruhr coalfields, a bastion of German industrial and military might, became a serious obstacle to relations between the two countries. Despite increasingly vocal protests from Germany, France obtained exclusive access to these coal and steel resources which it knew were vital for its post-war reconstruction.

At the same time, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, determined to restore West Germany's territorial sovereignty, made several public statements advocating a Franco-German union. In November 1949, he even proposed a plan for a Franco-German union for heavy industry and approved the establishment of an international authority to control the mining and industrial regions of Germany, Belgium and France.

It was French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, keen to break the deadlock and recognising that divisions could become catalysts for unity, who, on 9 May 1950, took the historic initiative of proposing reconciliation between France and Germany within a Europe-wide organisation. Inspired by Jean Monnet, Schuman offered the fledgling Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) full and equal membership in a supranational European community, initially limited to the coal and steel sector, that would be open to other countries. The plan led to the signing of the Treaty of Paris establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) on 18 April 1951. Just five years after the end of the Second World War, the desire for peace in Europe was overwhelming. This marked a major turning point in French policy: distrust of its long-standing enemy had developed into reconciliation and partnership for European integration. The 'Franco-German duo' of today would never have come into being without this first step of post-war reconciliation.

Seven years later, General de Gaulle, who had returned to French politics in 1958, set out to restore

France's place in the world by pursuing a policy of independence and grandeur. He was in favour of a Europe with France and Germany as its pillars, but he refused to relinquish any significant degree of sovereignty to a supranational authority. It was with this mindset that de Gaulle sought to give new impetus to the European integration process, and in September 1958 he invited German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to his private residence in Colombey-les-Deux-Églises to reflect on the basis of a possible agreement.

On 22 January 1963, in Paris, the two Heads of State finally signed the Élysée Treaty, a major milestone which strengthened Franco-German cooperation in the fields of defence, economic affairs and culture. This treaty became the symbol of reconciliation between the two countries and provided a more formal framework for regular meetings and high-level consultations. The success of this bilateral cooperation has often depended on the relationship between the French Head of State and German Chancellor in power, as well as on national issues and the prevailing geopolitical climate, which over the years has been shaped by the Cold War, the formation of the European Community, the Ostpolitik, German reunification, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic and financial crises from 2008 onwards.

After more than 50 years of close bilateral relations characterised by moments of failure and progress, many commentators have coined the term 'Franco-German duo', or 'Franco-German tandem', as the Germans prefer to say. As the decades have passed, several 'pairs' of French and German leaders have left their imprint on these bilateral relations. Thanks to the joint action of duos Konrad Adenauer–Charles de Gaulle, Helmut Schmidt–Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, François Mitterrand–Helmut Kohl, Jacques Chirac–Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel–Nicolas Sarkozy (or most recently François Hollande), the 'Franco-German engine' has very often had a decisive impact on the destiny of Europe.