

Club of the Willing

How France, Italy and Germany are arranging Europe's future

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First came the Treaty of Aachen between Germany and France, then the so-called Quirinale Treaty between France and Italy, and finally closer cooperation between Germany and Italy. A new bilateralism at the heart of the European Union offers opportunities - but also poses risks. The Centres for European Policy Network provides a geostrategic interpretation.

Key Propositions

- ▶ France, Germany and Italy - supported by new bilateral treaties - want to collaborate more closely in many areas.
- ▶ This new bilateralism at the centre of the EU is surprising because the Member States already make up a common internal market and, in that context, are committed to closer regulatory and political cooperation.
- ▶ Both treaties clearly point to a lack of political leadership and inadequate governance in the European Union. The two treaties are each a bilateral attempt to fill a gap which obviously cannot be filled by existing EU mechanisms, as otherwise they would not be necessary.
- ▶ Against the backdrop of geopolitical power struggles, particularly between the USA and China as well as Russia, it is crucial for Europe to strengthen its strategic sovereignty and geo-economic autonomy (not autarchy!). France, Italy and Germany have a particular responsibility in this regard. As the so-called Club of the Willing, these states may engender a new and urgently needed dynamism.
- ▶ Political disengagement and increased diverging forces potentially give rise to the fault lines associated with axis formation in Europe. It is essential, therefore, that a Club of the Willing be accompanied by efforts to achieve a basic consensus within the EU. This concerns, above all, eastern European Member States such as Poland and Hungary, where EU-scepticism and neonationalism go hand in hand.
- ▶ Both treaties concentrate the political will of Germany, Italy and especially France, to further develop the European Union and to strengthen its strategic autonomy. They may be looking ahead to the elections in France and Italy this year when the ambitions declared in the treaties will manifest themselves politically.

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1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) is at a turning point in its development. Externally, it is struggling for strategic sovereignty because, in the West, the transatlantic alliance with the USA will not regain the confidence and resilience it once had, even under Joe Biden, and in the East the influence of China and Russia is becoming an increasing threat. Internally, neo-nationalism and a push for independence, as in Poland and Hungary, not to mention right-wing populist movements in France and Italy, are putting pressure on the unity of the European Union. Thus trapped between the two sides, the European Union finds itself in a state of paralysis, waiting almost lethargically for rescue.

In recent years - almost unnoticed by the wider public - two bilateral treaties have been concluded: the Treaty of Aachen between Germany and France, and the Quirinale Treaty between France and Italy. Just recently, Germany and Italy have also announced that they are going to expand their collaboration by way of regular consultations in various policy areas. This is noteworthy because such new bilateralism within Europe raises two important questions: Why are these treaties being concluded at this particular point in time and what do they mean for the further development of the European Union. Are they an expression of a growing political desire to make up for the lack of strong leadership in Europe or do they reveal a governance deficit that cannot be filled by the European Union itself. Is this emerging new bilateralism at the heart of the European Union an historic chance to overcome European lethargy, or does it ultimately threaten the unity of the European Union and increase the already powerful diverging forces.

2 External challenges and internal conflicts of the European Union

The existing world order is evidently crumbling and currently undergoing an historic transition towards a new one whose boundaries are as yet unclear. One thing is certain: the world will become multi-polar. This marks the end of a chapter of globalisation that has been characterised by a multilateral approach and the realisation of mutual trading gains. The crisis in multilateralism that has been in the offing for several years, is apparent in the new bilateral treaties and in a regionalisation of geopolitical spheres of influence. Charles Kindleberger has looked at the history of such transitions,¹ concluding that they often involve severe, prolonged antagonisms and conflicts because what is at stake is nothing less than a new global order and a resulting redistribution of power. This is the sort of geopolitical scenario in which the European Union currently finds itself: to the West, the transatlantic alliance with the USA, to the East its relations with Russia and China and their influence in Eastern Europe.

On a geopolitical level, Europe has been closely allied with the USA since the end of the Second World War and with the founding of NATO and the Bretton Woods Organisations. Tensions, however, are growing. This was indicated recently in the "AUKUS Deal" of 15 September 2021 between the USA, Britain and Australia. This deal ultimately scammed France out of a contract for the sale of fifty submarines worth billions of euros. It is proof that new alliances are possible in spite of the existing structures and that they do not have to include Europe. In this context, France has often tried to accelerate European integration on the basis of geographical sovereignty. The hope that, with US President Joe Biden, the transatlantic alliance would recover following the Trump era, has not come to fruition. Biden too primarily represents American interests, the effects of which have been felt by Europe and Germany e.g. in relation to Nordstream 2.

¹ Charles P. Kindleberger (1996), *World Economic Primacy 1500 – 1990*, Oxford University Press

As far as China and Russia are concerned, their rapprochement is clearly based on shared geopolitical interests in opposition to the USA. It was no accident, therefore, that Biden warned Russia against invading Ukraine whilst almost simultaneously announcing a diplomatic boycott of the Chinese Winter Olympics.² The subject of Taiwan is still the “elephant in the room”. Thus, from a US perspective, the battle lines are clearly drawn. But again Europe wavers. As a result of close economic ties to Beijing, most EU Member States are refusing to follow the US boycott whilst, in terms of security policy, Europe is barely standing on its own two feet. It is also unclear whether Europe would be capable of a coherent reaction to a Russian invasion of Ukraine. In addition, there are completely different foreign policy interests. China is Germany's second most important export partner. Russia will be supplying Germany with more gas in future via the Baltic pipeline Nordstream 2. Both are a long way from French interests.

These major conflicts of interest make the creation of a close geostrategic collaboration within the Union complicated, if not virtually impossible. Poland and Hungary want to take their own nationalistically styled path and are thus increasingly distancing themselves from the EU. Thus, Poland refused to allow the European borders agency Frontex to be deployed at the border with Belarus, in order to contain the migration crisis being fuelled by Minsk. As regards finance and economic policy, northern and southern Europe are drifting further apart. The still divergent interests and national preferences of the EU Member States, exemplified recently between France and Germany on the issue of the green taxonomy, are currently making political progress in the EU very difficult under the existing governance. By contrast, the Treaties of Rome and Aachen establish a de facto Club of the Willing between Germany, France and Italy. The three Member States together generate almost seventy percent of the Eurozone's gross domestic product (GDP) and more than fifty percent of the GDP of the EU.³ Collateral damage from the new bilateralism leading to a trilateralism between D, F and I, could however upset the existing multilateral foundation of the EU. “Small countries” such as Austria or Finland, could feel excluded. “Medium-sized countries” such as Spain or the Netherlands, may take it as a blow to their self-esteem. On the other hand, multilateral processes within the EU have always begun with initiatives by the two strongest EU Member States, France and Germany. With Italy involved, a third country is now stepping up to bolster Europe.

3 Content and objectives of the Treaty of Aachen and the Quirinale Treaty of Rome

3.1 Treaty of Aachen

The Treaty of Aachen⁴ between France and Germany was signed on 19 January 2019. It aims to deepen Franco-German relations in order to “prepare for the challenges that the two countries face in the 21st century” [p. 2]. It is modelled on the famous Elysée Treaty of 22 January 1963 which achieved the historic reconciliation - and even friendship - between France and Germany after the Second World War.

² Allie Malloy, Kate Sullivan, [White House announces US diplomatic boycott of 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing](https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/06/politics/white-house-boycott-olympics/index.html), cnn.com, 6.12.2021.

³ [Europäische Union: Bruttoinlandsprodukt \(BIP\) in den Mitgliedstaaten der EU im Jahr 2020](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1092447/eu-gdp-2020/), Statista.de, 8.9.2021.

⁴ Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the French Republic on Franco-German Cooperation and Integration, in [English](#) and [French](#), 19 January 2019.

Both sides undertake to hold regular government consultations “prior to major European meetings” [Art. 2] to establish common positions. Meetings between the Governments of the two countries must take place at least once a year [Art. 23]. At least once per quarter, a member of the Government of one of the two countries must attend a cabinet meeting of the other country on a rotating basis [Art. 24].

With regard to the areas of cooperation, the Treaty provides for a deepening of cooperation in four different categories: foreign and defence policy [Chapter 2], culture, education, research and mobility [Chapter 3], economic policy, technology, climate and the environment [Chapter 5] as well as regional and cross-border cooperation [Chapter 4].

3.1.1 New Franco-German institutions and programmes in the area of foreign and defence policy

A Franco-German Defence and Security Council will be set up as a “political steering body”. It will monitor cooperation within NATO, the expansion of the European defence capability and the development of “common defence programmes” [Art. 4]. The Treaty will implement exchange programmes for ranking personnel in the United Nations, NATO and the EU [Art. 5].

Within the United Nations, German and French positions will be closely coordinated. One focus of the Treaty is to make “the admission of the Federal Republic of Germany as a permanent member of the Security Council [...] a priority of Franco-German diplomacy [Art. 8].

3.1.2 New Franco-German institutions and programmes for cross-border cooperation and economic convergence

A cross-border cooperation committee will be established. It will comprise national, regional and local authorities, parliaments and cross-border

entities such as eurodistricts and, where necessary, the euroregions concerned. It will coordinate all aspects of Franco-German cross-border observation and draw up a common strategy for identifying priority projects [Art. 14].

A Franco-German economic area with common rules will be introduced. The Franco-German Financial and Economic Council will promote bilateral legal harmonisation and foster convergence between the two economic systems. A Council of Economic Experts, composed of ten independent experts, will be set up with the aim of submitting recommendations to the Governments of the two countries [Art. 20]. This will give rise to a Franco-German economic area with common rules.

3.2 The Quirinale Treaty

The Quirinale Treaty between Italy and France was signed on 26 November 2021⁵ in order to achieve “stronger bilateral cooperation” between the two countries as part of a shared destiny “based on the fundamental principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter and the Treaty on European Union” [p. 1]. According to French President Emmanuel Macron, Italy and France will create with the Treaty “a shared geopolitical vision”.⁶

In concrete terms, Italy and France undertake from now on to hold regular consultations - including prior to each European Council meeting. The aim is to “establish common positions and to act in a concerted manner on all decisions which touch upon common interests” [Art. 1.1.]. It is also laid down that a member of the government of each country will attend “the Council of Ministers of the other country at least once per quarter on a rotating basis” [Art. 11.3.].

The Treaty establishes a broad range of bilateral topics on which Italy and France will establish a joint decision-making process. Its twelve articles particularly concern European and international policy [Art. 1 and 3]. Particular focus is given to the main topics which are regarded as fundamental for the strategic interests of both countries: Defence and security [Art. 2], migration policy and justice [Art. 4], economy and industry [Art. 5], environmental change, industrial and digital cooperation [Art. 5 and 6], aerospace [Art. 7].

3.2.1 Cross-border cooperation and shared policy on security and migration

Italy and France have undertaken to support a European policy on migration, asylum and integration “based on principles of shared responsibility and solidarity between the Member States which take full account of the particular characteristics of the migratory flows towards their respective sea and land borders, and based on partnership with the countries of origin and transit countries of these migratory flows [Art. 4.2.]. For this purpose, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs will establish a mechanism for closer consultation with regular meetings on the subject of asylum and migration in order to counteract the exploitation of irregular migration and combat organised crime and terrorism.”

3.2.2 Economic, industrial and digital cooperation

The Treaty introduces new forms of economic, industrial and digital cooperation between Italy and France focussing on energy, technology, research and innovation. It particularly refers to cooperation between the two countries in the context of the EU's strategic autonomy in many areas such as cyber-security and artificial intelligence, and reinforces the joint commitment to better regulation at European level and international governance of the digital sector and cyberspace [Art. 5]. Special mention is given to bilateral cooperation in the development of the European aerospace sector, which is defined as “a key dimension of European strategic autonomy and economic development” and for which Italy and France intend “to strengthen the European aerospace strategy and consolidate the competitiveness and integration of the aerospace industry in both countries” [Art. 7].

⁵ Treaty between the Italian Republic and the French Republic on stronger bilateral cooperation, in Italian and French, 26 November 2021.

⁶ [Trattato Italia-Francia, Macron: "Creeremo una visione geopolitica comune"](#), ANSA, 26.11.2021.

4 Old axes or new alliances: What do the Treaties mean for the development of the EU?

4.1 Club of the Willing: Chance for more political dynamism and strategic sovereignty

Historically as well as in terms of economic strength and size, Germany, France and Italy may be said to form the core of the European Union. Closer cooperation between them may fill the leadership vacuum in Europe. A stronger central trio also offers the chance to strengthen Europe in major areas such as defence policy and turn it into a more authoritative player in geopolitical terms. From a French perspective, this is precisely the underlying intention, as France's forthcoming Presidency of the EU clearly indicates. During a press conference on 9 December 2021⁷, in which Macron presented his programme for the France's Presidency, he argued that Europe had to seek greater geostrategic influence. The French President set out a range of measures aimed at achieving this: (1) reform of the Schengen area in order to react more quickly to possible migration crises, (2) strengthening the European agency Frontex for better protection of the EU's external borders, (3) reform of Europe's management of migratory flows. Macron also advocated (4) the expansion of European defence efforts to secure European strategic sovereignty without calling into question the commitment to NATO of most of the EU Member States. According to Macron, this new geostrategic power in Europe will also be backed up by economic policy. He therefore proposed that a European growth plan should be drafted with (5) joint investment in strategic sectors, (6) the deployment of European "champions" and (7) the aim of full employment within the EU because "a Europe of unemployment is a Europe of war". Finally, European integration of financial markets should be accompanied by (8) enhanced banking union and capital markets union.⁸ On this basis, the latest treaties between Germany, France and Italy can certainly be interpreted as a signal to a Club of the Willing that wants to overcome the leadership vacuum and lack of governance.

4.2 Europe fractured: Risks of economic disintegration and political disengagement

Running counter to the chance of greater dynamism and strategic sovereignty in the EU is the risk of economic disintegration and political disengagement. In its current state, this is certainly an existential danger to the EU. In recent years, maintaining inner stability and balance through consensus and compromise, thereby keeping the EU together during major crises, has been the European policy strategy of the German government under Angela Merkel. However much one may criticise the European policy hesitancy, particularly towards Macron, one must recognise that, even under huge pressure, diverging forces have not pulled the EU apart. On this basis, the action of the three core states, Germany, France and Italy, risks unintentionally triggering further diverging forces. The sensitivity to nationalistic tendencies in many EU countries is illustrated by the sanctions which have been imposed on Poland and which have intensified anti-European feelings in some sections of the population there. A creeping, and now as a result of the new treaties, possibly accelerating, crack within the European Union may prove costly in historic terms. As much as stronger leadership is required in the EU, it is equally important to ensure that the European Union does not collapse in on

⁷ [Présentation de la Présidence française du Conseil de l'Union européenne](#), 09.12.2021.

⁸ [Emmanuel Macron expose les très grandes ambitions de la France à la présidence de l'UE](#), France24, 9.12.2021.

itself. In addition to short-term opportunities, long-term relationships are also always important for historic developments.

5 Assessment and outlook

The recent bilateral treaties between France, Germany and Italy, and the potential basis for a new trilateralism in the EU which they suggest, give rise to the question of why they are being concluded at this particular point in time and what do they mean for the further development of the European Union. They may be interpreted as a reaction to the lack of strong leadership or an expression of a governance deficit. Possible effects are, on the one hand, a strengthening of political dynamism and strategic sovereignty, on the other, a degradation of the cohesion and unity of the European Union. The dilemma for the European Union is that, externally, due to shifts in the geopolitical landscape, more sovereignty is urgently needed; internally, due to increasing political renationalisation, unity of the Union is coming under huge diverging pressure. The ultimately trilateral initiative of France, Italy and Germany must cleverly balance these two dynamics.

It is clear, however, that the current state of the European Union leaves a lot to be desired - both externally and internally. It is time to change this. The new bilateralism can be used to maintain or reinstate the EU's capacity to act. Despite the risks involved, this could be the trigger for reform of the EU treaties. Only the willing can initiate such a reform. Europe has been crippled for years by the unanimity rule. It stands for regression. Countries like Poland and Hungary exploit this for their own ends. The unanimity rule does not therefore produce symmetry of influence but an asymmetry of ambition. This may result in the willing being squeezed out. The fact that they are now combining their dynamism and political will means there is a chance to overcome the EU's prolonged paralysis.

With these treaties, it may be that France, Italy and Germany are preparing what is to become a political reality in the years to come. In its coalition agreement, the new German government talks of a "federal European state" and a "right of initiative for the European Parliament". France has long pursued very ambitious aims which will be particularly apparent during its Presidency of the EU this year. In Emmanuel Macron and Mario Draghi, the presidential elections in France and parliamentary elections in Italy this year could affirm two ambitious European politicians with a desire to achieve great things during their periods in office. This may be the opening of an historic window of opportunity for the development of the EU. Political courage, but above all insight and balance, will be required in this regard.



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