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Tip of the iceberg: Franco-German *jumelage* at the UN Security Council

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In March and April 2019, France and Germany twinned their presidencies of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This so-called ‘jumelage’ was a priority deliverable of the Franco-German Treaty of Aachen, which seeks to deepen bilateral and EU foreign and security policy cooperation. In this policy brief, we argue that the jumelage was an important symbolic gesture that facilitated bureaucratic coordination in New York. However, its symbolic value was tainted by bilateral quarrels over UNSC reform and its political reach was limited. France and Germany should jointly address the core problem limiting the EU’s voice in New York and the world: the principle of unanimity in Brussels.

Introduction

The 30th of April marks the end of a two-month long Franco-German experiment: the twinning of presidencies of the United Nations (UN) Security Council. This so-called *jumelage* was on top of the [priority list of deliverables](#) derived from the Franco-German [Treaty of Aachen](#), signed on 22 January 2019. As a German diplomat put it, the *jumelage* is only “the tip of the iceberg” of a broader effort to intensify bilateral and EU foreign policy cooperation. This objective was already apparent in the [Meseberg Declaration](#) of June 2018, which called for new ways to deepen European Union (EU) cooperation in the UN Security Council (UNSC). The [Treaty of Aachen](#) broadened this aim by promising closer bilateral and European cooperation in all UN organs. It also committed France and Germany to “do everything” to bring about and promote common EU positions at the UN.

Although Europeans tend to agree on a large [majority](#) of UN dossiers, member state divisions have repeatedly weakened, delayed or muted the EU’s voice regarding a number of highly salient items: In 2017, Greece [reportedly](#) blocked a common EU position in the UN Human Rights Council on China. In the same year, the Europeans were [split](#) in a UN General Assembly vote on a resolution rejecting the US’ unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Furthermore, [nine EU member states](#) (EUMS) rejected, abstained or stayed away from the vote on the UN Global Compact on Migration in 2018. Such divisions impair the effectiveness and credibility of the EU as a global actor and as a stronghold of multilateralism.

In this policy brief, we review how and to what extent the Franco-German *jumelage* has enhanced bilateral and European cooperation. Based on insights from informed sources, we show that the twinning was symbolically relevant and useful in technical terms, but that its political impact was marginal. France and Germany should build on this first joint step to sustain systematic coordination in New York and address the core of the problem at home: the unanimity principle in EU foreign policy.

1 Important symbol and technical added value

Multilateralism is not in good shape. Deep divisions prevail on various issues, and collective action seems to be on the retreat. In a [joint op-ed](#), German foreign minister Heiko Maas and his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian emphasized that “European partners and the European institutions will play a key role” in reviving the multilateral system. In line with this, the Franco-German *jumelage* was [officially conceived](#) not only “to deepen European cooperation in the Security Council, but also to set an example for multilateral cooperation in international politics”.

One should not talk down the symbolic value of two once-hostile states merging their presidency of the top body of international diplomacy. From a [trilingual video message](#) by the two countries’ Permanent Representatives to the UN to numerous joint appearances in front of the press and civil society representatives, Germany and France have made use of the full spectrum of diplomatic gestures to flank the months of the *jumelage*. Most notable was the handover of the UNSC presidency by the two foreign ministers. Heiko Maas and Jean-Yves Le Drian met in New York in late March/early April for “an unusually long period of time”, according to a French diplomat.

The *jumelage* can also be considered a success from a technical perspective. Unprecedented in UNSC history, the two countries agreed on a list of five priorities in the run-up to the twin presidencies. French and German diplomats had to come up with a common position on the following five topics:

1. Peace and security in the Sahel region
2. Strengthening international humanitarian law and the protection of humanitarian personnel
3. The role of women in peace processes and their protection in conflict situations
4. The reduction of small arms and terrorist financing
5. Disarmament

All of these issues were discussed at the East River in March and April, be it informal briefings or during more informal debates among UNSC members. The most tangible outcome, however, was a jointly organised trip of the UNSC to Mali and Burkina Faso. Both German and French diplomats pointed out that this undertaking raised attention for security in the Sahel - an issue that has increasingly become a [Franco-German and European priority](#) in recent years. For the other members of the UNSC, the merger of two presidencies resulted in a practical improvement: They only had to engage with one instead of two work programmes, which was positively received by them, according to a German diplomat.

On the downside, however, the Franco-German twin presidencies have not improved any procedures to amplify the EU voice in New York. While the EU High Representative (HR) Federica Mogherini was invited to speak in the UNSC in March, she did so in the form of her annual briefing (a practice established in 2010), which she most probably would also have delivered without the *jumelage*. Neither did the twinning of presidencies enhance exchanges between EU members at the UN. Existing practices of coordination at various levels (weekly meetings of Permanent Representatives from EUMS, routine de-briefings of UNSC members to non-members and the European External Action Service etc.) continued, but were not intensified or amended as a consequence of the *jumelage*.

2 Symbolism meets realpolitik

Above all, the *jumelage* did not substantially ramp up the European voice on global affairs. Its limits as to actual political impact outweigh the symbolic and technical value of the twin presidency for three main reasons: (1) the structurally constrained role of the UNSC presidency; (2) Franco-German divergence on the question of a common EU seat in the Security Council; and (3) the continued failure to rally EU member states around common positions on major international issues.

The primary responsibility of the UNSC, according to the UN Charter, is “the maintenance of international peace and security”. Admittedly, two months of conjoint presidencies are unlikely to make a difference on this mammoth task, not least because the role of the Council chair is heavily restricted. While agenda-setting is formally a task of the presidency, UNSC meetings are widely dominated by routine procedures: The lion’s share of the agenda is filled with the recurring renewal of mandates of UN peacekeeping operations. The sessions not earmarked for UN missions are usually consumed by existing or newly erupting political crises on which the Council needs to take a stand. The French and Germany presidencies were no exception in this regard.

A second factor that overshadowed the symbolic value of the *jumelage* was the recurring debate on an EU seat in the UNSC. From a French perspective, the Treaty of Aachen had settled the issue: the joint backing of a German permanent seat was seen as a sign that Germany was giving up the long-term goal of an EU seat enshrined in the current [coalition agreement](#). However, to French discontent, the question has re-entered political discourse: CDU leader [Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer](#) and her party colleague [Wolfgang Schäuble](#) have both publicly underlined the desirability of an (additional) EU seat. Three German parties (CDU/CSU, The Green Party, and Free Democrats (FDP)) have included this postulation in their [campaign programmes](#) for the upcoming elections to the European Parliament. While the SPD as a whole has remained silent on the issue, Vice-Chancellor [Olaf Scholz](#) caused a diplomatic fallout when he challenged France to Europeanise its permanent seat during a speech at a Berlin-based university last November.

This did not go down well in the Quai d'Orsay, which was [fighting off](#) allegations by the far-right that the Aachen Treaty implied sharing its UNSC own seat. A French diplomat added that the quarrel over the EU seat impaired the legitimacy not only of the French, but also of the other European non-permanent seats in the eyes of less well-disposed third parties: In other words, it would give Russian or Chinese representatives more grounds to question European over-representation in the UNSC.

The debate on an EU seat is counterproductive for legal and political reasons: First of all, the UN Charter confers the right to sit on the Council only to full members of the UN – which is not the case for the EU. A near-term amendment of the Charter in this regard seems highly unlikely. More importantly, what would be the mandate of an EU representative at the East River? As of now, the Union remains divided on various foreign and security policy questions. It is not an exception that the EU-28, represented by the HR, are only able to issue a statement several days into a political escalation in either of the world's regions – a procedure that is inherently unfit to the high-speed environment inside the UNSC. As a consequence, the EU would run the risk of standing out as the Council member that abstains on most votes by default.

This leads us to the third reason for the limited political effect of the *jumelage*: the EU's persistent inability to speak in unison on international affairs, which is also one of the greatest deficiencies of European foreign action at large. This weakness has once again struck in recent weeks when Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army advanced towards the Libyan capital of Tripoli. Member states grappled with each other over a united stance for several days until High Representative Mogherini issued a [statement on behalf of the EU](#), which, however, merely called “on all parties to immediately cease all military operations”. [It was France](#) who lobbied against a stronger statement naming and shaming Haftar as the main aggressor. While Paris continues to push for a political solution involving the Field Marshal, Italy, at the other end of the spectrum, has tried to garner exclusive support for the UN-backed interim government of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj.

Hence, EU member states are once again divided on an issue that ranks high on the UNSC agenda. Before the EU finds itself in a position to reconcile such divergences, it cannot credibly raise its stakes in UNSC affairs. The underlying weaknesses, however, will have to be addressed in Brussels and other European capitals, not in New York.

3 Three policy options

So what could be done to reinvigorate the European voice at the East River? Three policy innovations have been put forward in the past months and years. In the following, we assess their potential impact, sustainability and feasibility.

European Security Council: what format and impact?

French and German representatives have suggested the establishment of a European Security Council, but a close look reveals different visions. Four [variations can be distinguished](#):

The European Council model: In 2016, then foreign ministers Jean-Marc Ayrault and Frank-Walter Steinmeier [proposed](#) that the European Council meets once a year as European Security Council. Prepared jointly by foreign, defence and interior ministers, these summits could raise the level of political attention dedicated to security issues. However, it would be largely disconnected from the work of the UNSC. In light of the extensive preparation, the agenda can be expected to be rather broad and could presumably not accommodate rapidly evolving issues passing through the UNSC.

The technical model: In his [electoral programme of 2017](#), Emmanuel Macron proposed a European Security Council bringing together the key military, diplomatic and intelligence officials from the member states. It remains unclear how this body would relate to the existing structures such as the Political and Security Committee. There is a risk that it would simply add another bureaucratic layer.

The UN Security Council model: In 2018, Chancellor Angela Merkel [proposed](#) a smaller European Security Council with rotating membership. Foreseen to consult closely with European UNSC members, it has been the only version with an explicit link to the UNSC. However, the French opposed this proposition due to the implicit notion of receiving ‘instructions from Brussels’. In addition, this format lacks a legal basis and the question on what basis the membership would rotate would be highly controversial.

The European Security Council Plus: In early 2019, President [Emmanuel Macron](#) was joined by [Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer](#) in proposing a European Security Council “with the UK on board”. This proposal also made it into the CDU/CSU [programme](#) for the 2019 European Parliament election. Involving the UK could facilitate broader European UNSC coordination. However, its concrete format and the specific mode of integrating the UK are still entirely unclear.

Taken together, the impact of any of the above-described models on EU foreign policy coordination and, more particularly, strengthening the European voice in the UNSC is questionable. This might also explain why these proposals have had very little repercussion outside of the Franco-German sphere.

Rotating presidency model: how sustainable?

A more sensible and more targeted path towards a stronger and more unified EU voice at the UNSC would be more systematic informal coordination. During its two-year UNSC term in 2017-8, Sweden “uploaded” the EU’s rotating Council presidency model to the UN and [launched](#) more systematic coordination between the then former, present and future European members in the

body. The so-called E8 (including, next to Sweden, France, the UK, Italy, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany) issued a range of joint statements on issues such as [Kosovo](#), [Ukraine](#), [Syria](#) or the [two-state solution](#).

These statements showcase that there is European unity on some key dossiers and that common EU positions are within the realms of possibility. A commendable and more recent example was the [joint statement](#) by the five current EU UNSC members on 26 March 2019 rejecting the US recognition of the Golan Heights as Israeli territory. Two days later, the EU's High Representative echoed the statement in a [Declaration](#) on behalf of the whole EU.

While European UNSC members should pursue this more systematic coordination effort, there are question marks regarding its sustainability and impact. According to informed sources, the informal practice has been fading away since initiator Sweden has left the UNSC. The drive behind it might well decline further if France ends up being the only EU member in the UNSC in 2021. Furthermore, close coordination among a variable group of EU members will not magically dissolve dividing lines. If coordination in New York is only the tip of the iceberg, we need to look further down the bottom, namely at policy-making in capitals and coordination in Brussels.

Extending qualified majority voting: feasible at all?

The key obstacle to a common voice in Brussels and beyond is and remains the principle of unanimity in the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In September 2018, the European Commission thus [proposed](#) a limited extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) within the confines of the EU Treaties. Three areas were in the focus: sanctions, human rights policy, and civilian missions. All of these areas are directly relevant to the work of the UNSC. A fourth relevant area would be declaratory diplomacy – the essence of *speaking* with one voice.

The key problem with the extension of QMV is its political feasibility. The EU Treaties foresee an 'emergency brake' allowing the member states to prevent a vote by qualified majority for "vital and stated reasons of national policy" (Art. 32(1) TEU). Nevertheless, smaller member states, which are more likely to be outvoted, remain sceptical. The ones having vetoed some of the recent EU foreign policy decisions such as Italy, Hungary, and Greece also stand to be convinced.

In the [Meseberg Declaration](#), France and Germany stated that they would launch a debate on the extension of QMV. German government representatives have repeatedly underlined their support. The governing parties, CDU/CSU and SPD, are also calling for an end to unanimity in their [electoral programmes](#) for the European Parliament election. French representatives, instead, have been far less vocal in their support. A French diplomat explained that the government was happy to support a German initiative in this direction, but that the extension of QMV was simply not a French priority. A concerted Franco-German push would, however, be needed if the Commission proposal were to have any repercussions. It is this qualitative change, not a debate on new institutional formats, which could truly strengthen the EU's voice in New York and the world.

Conclusion: Who, if not us? When, if not now?

France and Germany are seeking to position themselves as a motor for multilateralism, both within the EU and globally. “Who, if not us? When, if not now?” the two foreign ministers rhetorically asked in an [op-ed](#) in February 2019. The *jumelage* was a visible and concrete expression of this multilateral vision.

Visions and symbols are important at a time when the pillars of the rules-based international order are under constant attack. However, the tip of the iceberg we described in this policy brief can only be the starting point. We need more sustained efforts that allow the EU to bundle its political weight to actually influence the course of international affairs – at the UN and beyond.

Who, if not France and Germany could form the core of a coalition pushing for more efficient EU foreign policy decision-making? Being this core will require compromises on both sides. Germans should acknowledge that a direct institutional link between Brussels and New York only makes sense if Brussels gets better at speaking with one voice. France, instead, should recognise that its political weight is required on the path towards that aim. This implies greater co-leadership on the question of the extension of QMV, but also a leading role in informal EU coordination at the level of the UNSC. Leading, in this case, should not mean imposing French UN priorities in New York or Brussels, but above all listening more closely to other EU members.

Finally, the preparations for the German EU Council presidency in the second half of 2020 have just started. The looming Brexit will likely [weaken](#) the EU’s voice in the UNSC and possibly make France the only EU member state in the UNSC as of 2021. In 2022, we are also facing a difficult French presidential election. So the question is indeed: “When, if not now”?

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