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Aachen Treaty: A Second Look

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On 22 January, exactly 56 years after the signing of the Élysée Treaty, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron signed a new bilateral cooperation treaty: the Treaty of Aachen. It sets the stage for the next 56 years of Franco-German relations. It is thus not surprising that it is heavier on symbols and lighter on concrete ways forward. However, the Franco-German friendship faces a crucial test in the next two to three years. We thus need pragmatic and immediate action that takes us beyond symbols, across divergence, and towards ambitious aims. This policy position takes a second look at the Treaty and the [list of 15 priority projects](#) and shows what this means for three key issues: security policy, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and the link to parliaments.

Security policy: from symbols to pragmatism

When it comes to security policy, the Treaty falls short of making substantive new proposals and prioritises bilateral over EU-level cooperation. It states that France and Germany will “set up” a Franco-German Defence and Security Council as a political steering body for mutual commitments. Some [observers](#) have praised the establishment of this supposedly new organ. In reality, it already [exists](#) since 1988. A mere look at its antiquated [homepage](#) indicates that an update and upgrade is necessary. Institutional adjustments will, however, not magically resolve the bones of contention that have divided Paris and Berlin in the past months. One of them is the difference in arms exportation policy that stands in the way of ambitious bilateral defence capability development projects such as the joint fighter jet. The Treaty states the *intention* to agree on a common approach. Yet, the fact that reaching an agreement is not part of the priority projects is as telling as it is deplorable.

Another issue that grabbed the headlines is the joint commitment to a German permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Berlin thus dropped its long-term goal of a joint EU seat enshrined in the government’s [coalition agreement](#). In any case, this aim was faced with formal and political [obstacles](#). France itself has long since been opposed to an EU seat, which it views as a threat to its own seat. However, a German seat may be equally difficult to attain as many in the UN oppose yet another permanent seat going to a European country. Finally, the first of the priority projects is a more pragmatic way forward: Paris and Berlin want to coordinate positions in the UN Security Council through a “twin chairmanship” in spring 2019. This could be an important test case for informal sovereignty-sharing in the multilateral context. Systematic coordination should, however, go beyond the two months of chairmanship and be [extended](#) to other non-permanent EU members.

Artificial Intelligence: ambitious next steps needed

The mere fact that cooperation on AI and disruptive innovation are mentioned in the Treaty is good news, but ambitious next steps have to follow. France and Germany are lagging behind other countries such as the US, China, Canada, Israel and the United Kingdom in key aspects of AI

development such as investment or technology adoption. Without deeper cooperation, regulatory alignment and a pooling of resources, both countries risk getting further left behind.

The question is to what extent the concrete cooperation projects will help the two countries catch up. One priority project is that France and Germany want to interlink existing research facilities from both countries in a joint “virtual centre”. This might sound like an ambitious goal, but it is still unclear how the “virtual centre” will function. The added value will depend on whether it will have sufficient funding, how exactly it will generate the much needed technology spill-over to companies, and what its overall purpose will be. A more ambitious approach would imply combining a network of Franco-German research institutes on AI with a joint approach on [mission-oriented disruptive innovation](#) (which is specifically mentioned in the Treaty, but not in the project list). That way both countries could task joint research teams with specific missions, for example related to energy efficiency or public transport.

Parliaments: towards pragmatic interlocking

One important accomplishment at the margins of the Franco-German governments’ reboot is cooperation between the national parliaments: The Treaty of Aachen is complemented by a separate [Franco-German parliamentary agreement](#) between the Assemblée nationale and the German Bundestag. It was drafted by an all-party working group of MPs from both countries and presented on 14 November 2018. It includes pragmatic steps towards deepening German-French relations at the parliamentary level. Above all, it foresees the creation of a Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly with 100 members (50 MPs from each country) whose two meetings per year create a bridge between parliamentarians. The Treaty also contains provisions for reinforcing cooperation between the two chambers at the presidential level and the committee level, as well as when it comes to enacting EU legislation, pursuing the subsidiarity check in the EU’s early warning mechanism, and implementing EU directives.

Once the Assembly’s 100 members are appointed, the provisions will have to be filled with life: There is a risk that it might turn out to be just another interparliamentary body, but beyond symbolism it has the potential to become the nucleus for mainstreaming Franco-German relations into each and every domestic policy area. Parliaments and governments will have to act hand-in-hand for a successful restart of the Franco-German couple. The absence of any direct links between the new Assembly and the governments in the Treaty of Aachen show that this will not be easy. But legislative-executive relations can build on the reporting requirement that the parliamentary agreement imposes on the governments and on the evaluation clause that they have written into Article 25 of the Treaty of Aachen.

Conclusion

Overall, the Aachen Treaty lays the foundation for deeper Franco-German cooperation. The coming months and years should be used to fill fissures and build on this foundation. This will entail spelling out and concretising ambitious policy objectives, providing the necessary resources, allowing for a higher degree of sovereignty-sharing, and extending bilateral projects to other EU partners. The necessary political willingness to go beyond symbols must be sustained and continuously renewed by the executives and legislatures on both sides of the Rhine.