

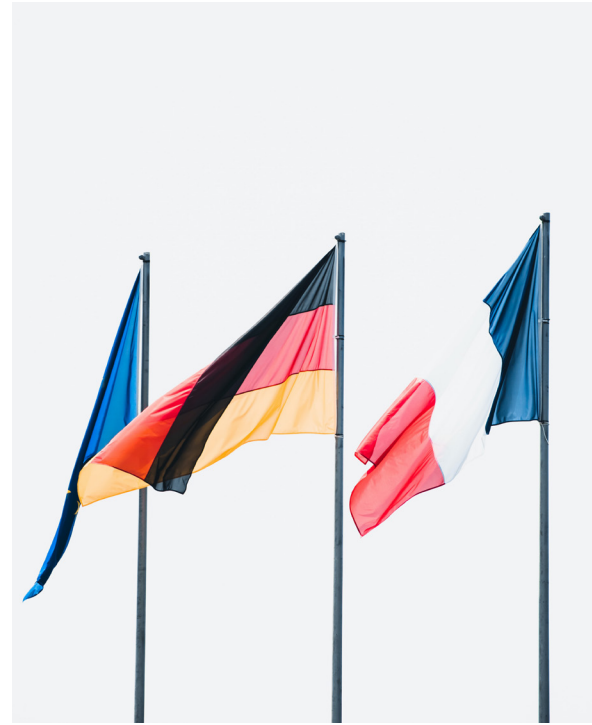
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BLOG
— POST

SERIES:
IN THE FACE OF WAR (2/4)

Whose leadership will emerge from the new European geopolitical situation?



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The war in Ukraine has had many repercussions, one of which being a new political leadership race in relation to the European Union's development. This is occurring subtly and silently in the background of the absolute common priority of saving Ukraine, but it is nevertheless real and has serious implications. **The United Kingdom, Poland and the Franco-German tandem are candidates for leadership** in a Europe which, by all accounts, will never be the same again.

Through the war, London has returned to its long-standing role: resistance, engagement, a firm democratic stand and courage. Boris Johnson was the first European leader to travel to Ukraine following the Russian invasion and Volodymyr Zelensky went to London before travelling to Paris and Brussels, following the EU-Ukraine summit of 3 February 2023. The British were also the first to accept the delivery of Challenger 2 tanks to Kyiv and to offer to train Ukrainian fighter pilots.

Supported by the Baltic States, Poland is considered to be the new geopolitical centre of the EU, as it borders on the conflict and for the last year has headed all policies to support Ukraine, be they for military or financial assistance, or support for EU enlargement. The country welcomed more than 3.5 million refugees, one million of whom enjoy EU temporary protection status. US president Joe Biden has travelled there twice in less than a year. The government decided to increase its defence expenditure to 4% of

GDP and to endow Poland with the strongest army in NATO. Warsaw is therefore staking a claim to become the location and driver of a new European leadership: it does not hesitate to point out the long-standing blindness of France and Germany, which never wanted to believe the threat from Russia and constantly strove to build an architecture of European security with Russia.

Traditionally holding the leadership role, the Franco-German tandem is experiencing a period of great uncertainty. Germany has become Europe's weakest link, through its twofold trade reliance on Russia (for gas) and China (20% of German foreign trade). The country is suffering from a major identity crisis, in that its post-war model based on pacifism and trade interdependence has been shattered by the war in Ukraine. As regards France, it has provoked criticism and distrust due to its initial position of making allowances for Russia, its recent opposition to NATO enlargement and its systematic uniqueness in relation to allies. Many believe, however, that its social situation and its failures in Africa should temper its national contentions for strategic leadership.

How will this play out? The forecasted geopolitical revolution remains illusory. The United Kingdom has no chance of using the war to restore the power (mainly blocking rights) that it once had over European construction. It may of course rehabilitate its international image but its only levers are military and can only be used as part of NATO. Yet the Atlantic Alliance has been validated by the war to the extent that it does not need the UK to receive European support. Regarding the US-UK special relationship, Europeans will always prefer US for being stronger, more credible, more reliable and above all, further away.

Poland was without doubt right about the Russian threat. Yet France was right about the response: the construction of a robust European defence was necessary, while Warsaw never wanted this project to make much headway, fearing a weakening of NATO. As regards the legitimacy of Polish leadership, due to the geopolitical shift to the East, it resembles a kind of political scam: while Poland is indeed a great champion of democracy in its foreign policy, for the last eight years in particular, it has been seriously eroding liberal democracy in its domestic policy. How could the EU accept such authoritarian leadership which runs counter to the rule of law? It is a shrewd move from Poland to attempt to rebuild its image on the back of Ukraine but Europeans would be commended for not consolidating the country's deviations from liberal democracy.

That leaves the Franco-German tandem, unsettled, unstable, uncertain, definitely disappointing, but without any other credible alternative. Together, the two Member States account for 15% of the EU population, contribute 44% of the EU budget and up to 80% of the EU's military research and development and, above all, are the two leading economic powers in the bloc (47% of euro area GDP). They are the heavyweights of Europe. This means that maintaining Franco-German unity is just as essential for the EU's future as Poland's political conversion, where parliamentary elections are scheduled for next autumn. The day that Poland will once again be a genuinely democratic country, working together with France and Germany, will be the day when Europe will no longer need any external leadership to defend its model and its interests. •

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