
FRANCE AND GERMANY HOPE TO REVIVE EU WITH AACHEN TREATY

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France and Germany on Tuesday (22 January) signed a new friendship treaty to deepen their alliance at a time when Brexit and the rise of populist and nationalist forces threaten the EU, and the multilateral world order is under attack.

The 16-page treaty was signed in the German city of Aachen, the resting place of Charlemagne, who united much of western and central Europe during the early middle ages.

It marked the 56th anniversary of the Elysee treaty, a cornerstone of Franco-German reconciliation after the second world war.

"74 years, a single human lifetime, after the end of the second world war, what seems self-evident is being called into question again," German chancellor Angela Merkel warned at the ceremony.

"That's why, first of all, there needs to be a new commitment toward our responsibility within the EU, a responsibility held by Germany and France," she added.

French president Emmanuel Macron warned at the signing that those "who forget the value of Franco-German reconciliation are making themselves accomplices of the crimes of the past. Those who spread lies are hurting the same people they are pretending to defend, by seeking to repeat history."

The treaty has been heavily-criticised by far-right opponents in both countries, and portrayed as betraying national sovereignty. Alexander Gauland, a co-chief of Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, claimed Paris and Berlin were seeking to create a "super EU" within the European Union.

The signing comes as the first member state leaves the EU - dismantling the fundamental belief that EU integration is to always progress forward, and as populist and nationalist parties are expected to surge in the European elections in May, transforming the European project from within.

No ambition

The renewed pact intends to send the signal that the Franco-German motor of the EU is re-energised and that the countries want to lay the groundwork for defending and reforming the EU.

But that level of ambition of cooperation remains cautious, as the two governments have had their own disagreements, and Merkel and Macron lack the political capital for bold visions.

The political declaration sets out several policy areas where France and Germany want to intensify cooperation, but migration - a key issue in the upcoming European election for the far-right, nationalist parties - was not one of them.

They pledge stronger economic cooperation, including the creation of a Franco-German economic area, where laws on business should be harmonised. The two countries also want stronger cooperation on environmental and climate policies.

Germany and France have also pledged assistance - military assistance if needed - in the event of an armed attack or aggression on one of the two countries. A Franco-German defence and security council would be established as the political body directing this cooperation.

Both Merkel and Macron pledged earlier to start working on building what Merkel previously called a "real European army". After US president Donald Trump came to power, Merkel said in 2017 that Europeans must take their fate into their own hands, suggesting that relying on the US no longer is a given.

France also pledged to help Germany win a permanent seat in the UN's security council. They will also cooperate on artificial intelligence.

Club Europe

During the euro crisis, Merkel and then French president Nicolas Sarkozy would often hammer out an agreement and then push the other 25 countries into accepting the pre-cooked compromises.

Those days are gone, as Merkel's leadership has since weakened, other member states have become more vocal, and coalitions have been built or reinforced.

Still, without French and German consensus, not much can happen in European integration.

While Merkel and Macron might see themselves as allies against those threatening the liberal world order, yet they also deeply disagree on key issues concerning European integration.

Macron's ambitious euro area policies were watered down after Berlin voiced concern and scepticism.

With Merkel on her way out from the Berlin chancellery in 2021 - or even before - and Macron's abysmal approval ratings, it remains to be seen whether the two leaders can revitalise European integration and inspire new faith in the European project.

European Unions

The renewed alliance comes as Italy's far-right interior minister Matteo Salvini made a trip to Warsaw recently to forge a coalition with Poland's ruling nationalist Law and Justice party, calling it the Warsaw-Rome axis.

Austria's chancellor Sebastian Kurz last year talked about "axis of the willing against illegal migration" between Italy, Germany and his own country.

The Visegrad group, made up of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland, have also been vocal on migration, while demanding a continued level of EU cohesion funding for their countries.

The New Hanseatic League of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden, formed in 2018, is meanwhile uniting fiscally-conservative northern countries for a reform of the European monetary union.

The EU Council president Donald Tusk warned that Berlin and Paris should not be one of the many forming alliances within the EU that, according to him, threaten the European idea and integration.

Tusk said he would "like to believe" the new Franco-German treaty would "revive faith in the meaning of solidarity and unity".

He told the two leaders they should use their renewed alliance to boost Europe. "Today Europe needs a revival of faith in the meaning of solidarity and unity, and I want to believe that enhanced Franco-German cooperation will serve this objective," he said with a hint of scepticism.

Tusk warned that the renewed German-Franco alliance should not contribute to the further fragmentation of the EU into "clubs".

"I will put it bluntly □ today Europe needs a clear signal from Paris and from Berlin, that strengthened cooperation in small formats is not an alternative to the cooperation of all of Europe. That it is for integration, and not instead of integration," Tusk said in his speech.

Kaynak/Source: