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The improbable Paris-Berlin-London triumvirate

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The launch of Libya military intervention has highlighted the importance of French-British diplomatic and military links that are questioning the traditional “French-German couple”. Moreover, these facts lead us to think about the nature and substance of the European Union which has not been turned into a “Europe-power”. The EU is a vast and fragile Paneuropean Commonwealth based on dynamic and mobile balancing points among its member states. The Europeans, broadly speaking the Westerners, have to respect “rules of just conduct” in order to preserve geopolitical cohesion.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, France’s diplomacy was supporting the European defense project, a hypothetical way for a “Europe-power” which would have been governed by the “French-German couple”. This goal has not been reached because Germany and the great majority of the European partners of France are not interested in it. For all of them, even for France now, the defense of Europe is first and foremost NATO’s realm. However, the French-German thematic and many talks about the European defense have obscured the increasingly closer relationship between Paris and London despite the fact that this relationship was very important for the start of the ESDP (European and Security Defense Policy). Witness the Saint-Malo Declaration (4 December 1998).

In fact, the Saint-Malo declaration rested on what has been called the “constructive ambiguity”. For the United Kingdom, the ESDP was a framework enabling to increase military capabilities in Europe in order to strengthen the European Allies’ credibility and keep the US engaged in NATO and the defense of Europe. For France, the main stake was to make a first step towards a future European defense. Beyond this common agreement, there was a veiled rivalry between Paris and London for military leadership in Europe. This “constructive ambiguity” was destroyed during the Iraq crisis that has shaken both NATO and the EU.

It is obvious that the French return to the NATO military structure paved the way for new convergences between Paris and London. In addition, Paris has de facto admitted that the European defense was a sort of intellectual constructivism – i.e. an abstract project, not in line with political, diplomatic and military realities in Europe –, and this new fact is the most important one. It is true that this standpoint is not yet fully acknowledged by the French ruling class but a “fact is a fact”, as people say. The economic crisis and its effects on France and United Kingdom’s military budgets, along with the other European countries, have to be taken into account as well. Lastly, the United States sound less interested in the future of the Old Europe and this perception has accelerated the evolution towards a stronger French-British partnership.

In November 2010, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron signed two treaties in order to increase their bilateral military cooperation and this is an essential condition for the remaining global geopolitical players. It is still necessary to give more substance to these treaties and the Libya operation is a new step for these two powers who want to go further. In this way, France is coming closer to the “Anglo-Saxon maritime powers”, as it is said in the classical geopolitical theories. In fact, the British vision of the EU – i.e. a big market with variable and flexible cooperation between sovereign States – is more adequate to the global trends in Europe. A “hard core” of several like-minded nations at the head of the EU and even a Paris-Berlin-London triumvirate are improbable.

The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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The new shape of the French project is questioning the “French-German couple”. It is immediately necessary to underline that this idyllic representation of the French-German relationship is artificial. After the Second World War, French foreign policy’s goal was to lean on Germany in order to control it and to lead Western Europe. Thus, a “French Europe” would have been able to match the United States and USSR. During the Cold War, this project failed because Germany had a natural preference for the American protection instead of the abstract French vision.

In 1989, when Germany was on the verge of reunification, Paris endeavoured to re-launch its European project and such was the sense of Maastricht. Since this treaty was ratified, Germany’s weight in Europe has been growing and France’s leaders are now wary of being left behind. Simultaneously, German leaders and people have no real ambitions on the diplomatic and military level. Because of History, Germany has reservations about military interventions on a far off theater. Business logics, monetarism and “made in Germany” (will to export) are stronger than militarism.

Thus, the EU could be driven by a double axis. On the diplomatic and military level, there is a French-British axis but this is not strong enough to bring common willingness and energies together without United States support and outside the NATO framework. Therefore, it is necessary to reach a compromise with the Allies, Germany included. On the economic and monetary level, there is a French-German axis and the common handling of public finances crisis in the Eurozone. If truth be told, Germany’s role is much more important than France’s in this matter. Paris would appear as a weak power if it decided to play as a “free rider”. Consecutively, French leaders have to follow the German move, put France’s public finances in order and beef up its economy. This will be to be difficult.

On paper, each thing and its opposite are compatible but it is not the same in real life. Moreover, there is a rift between these contradictory realities on the one hand, global and dominant representations in the French public opinion about Europe and economics on the other. The European Union will not be turned into a new global actor of international relations. It might rather be a vast and fragile Paneuropean Commonwealth, with various balancing points depending on issues and contexts. More broadly speaking, the European continental ensemble’s unity is founded on two pillars: the EU pillar and the NATO pillar. Those two pillars are interdependent.

We probably have to downgrade the European ambition but a Paneuropean Commonwealth is still more significant than a free trade zone and a polygamous Europe. With multipolar tendencies in Europe and even geopolitical libertinism, the Euro-Atlantic ensemble (EU and NATO) would be less cohesive. Such a trend would weaken all the countries and Europe, as an economic space and a geopolitical zone, would be less safe and wealthy. In other words, self-help is a zero sum game, even a sort of “potlatch”, and the “Europe of nations” which is so often put forward is a trap for each member. There won’t be any European renaissance like that.

Then, the next challenge is not to “build” an idealistic Europe or call for Soft Power. It is important to identify balancing points between European states in the EU and NATO, respect rules of fair conduct as in a club and reach “gentlemen’s agreements”. And if the need arises, “we shall agree to disagree”. The right governance requires a driving force, indeed, and also political initiatives between a few member states. However, it would be wiser to avoid a *fait accompli* policy and waive diplomatic codes, especially when Europeans and Westerners disagree about a tangible geopolitical situation or some other issues.

If we look at things as they stand, it is obvious that it will not be an easy enterprise. Geopolitical dynamics, the involution of the European Idea and internal political trends within many State members are going in opposite directions. Therefore, we shall have to adopt Burke’s powerful maxim: «Never despair; but if you do, work on in despair ». This mindset will be very important for Europe and the West.

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