Franco-German summit agrees to close military and political cooperation

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The German and French governments have agreed to close cooperation regarding reform of the European Union and defence matters. This was the outcome of the 75th Franco-German summit meeting held June 9 in Mainz.

Up to now the relationship between German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and France's President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin has been regarded as rather frosty. But in the aftermath of the summit newspapers are reporting a “revival of the Franco-German axis” and a “liaison amoureuse”, or love affair, between the two governments.

The arrangements agreed upon in Mainz have wide-ranging consequences, not only concerning the future shape of Europe, but also for transatlantic relations. They come at a time of increasing tensions between Europe and the US.

On a political level, Schröder and Chirac agreed to present a common front at forthcoming negotiations over reform of the European Union (EU). Over the next six months, while France occupies the EU presidency, the power structures within the Union are to be reshaped.

This is seen as a basic precondition for the planned incorporation of new EU members from Eastern Europe. In order to prevent individual countries from disrupting the whole EU, majority voting is to replace the previous system requiring unanimity. The proportion of votes allocated to member countries will be newly weighted in proportion to the size of their populations, and the European Commission—which in the past has included representatives from each of the member countries—will be reduced in size.

If, as agreed, Germany and France join forces on this issue, they will be able to model the EU's future development according to their own conceptions. They are thereby taking the first step towards the founding of a “core Europe”, an elite club that will set the political tone within the EU.

France and Germany hope that in foreign affairs the EU would no longer be as dysfunctional as the huge, politically formless economic association the US now considers it to be. President Clinton's proposal, made during his recent visit to Germany, to keep the EU open even to Russian membership led to a lot of head-shaking in French and German leading circles. Clinton's suggestion was likened to the proverbial cuckoo's egg laid in another bird's nest: it could only thwart the Europeans' political ambitions.

Perhaps even more politically significant than cooperation on EU reform were the accords reached by the Franco-German summit in the field of military collaboration and armaments.

The German government agreed to purchase 75 Airbus A400M military transport planes. Previous plans to buy the considerably more economical Antonov aircraft, manufactured in Russia and the Ukraine, have been scrapped. As expressed in the concluding declaration, however, the summit participants “desire” the cooperation of Airbus Industries with Russia and the Ukraine.

Since both Britain and France have already committed themselves to the Airbus, all three of the most important European powers now have at their disposal a uniform means of air transport, which is completely independent of American technology and American components suppliers.

The summit also declared its intention to develop a common satellite system in space. This reconnaissance system is to be “independent.” But whether that means it is to operate outside existing NATO structures was not made clear. Until now, Europe has been largely reliant on the US for satellite reconnaissance, the decisive factor in modern warfare.

Both decisions—concerning Airbus and the satellite system—are part of efforts by the European powers to free themselves of military and political reliance on the US, and to pursue their own global interests independently. Up to now, these efforts have been evident above all in the build-up of European command structures and organisations independent of NATO. This course had already been set at the EU summit in Cologne, as the war in Kosovo reached its climax in the spring of 1999. The Helsinki summit last autumn then resolved to establish a 60,000-strong European army corps.

At that time, however, it was agreed with the US that independent European military operations would only take place in cases where NATO as a whole was not involved. This was to avoid the possibility of a European alliance coming into competition with the US-dominated NATO. In return, the US offered its assurance that NATO would place weapons, personnel, planning authorities and command structures at the disposal of the European organisations. However, this has so far not taken place. Objecting that the EU is unable to meet its high standards of secrecy, NATO has refused to provide the EU with material of a secret nature.

President Chirac is therefore pressing for the EU's complete independence from NATO. Shortly before the meeting in Mainz, he declared that the EU must acquire all military means which would enable it to act “without having to be dependent on decisions reached elsewhere”. To this end, “instruments of planning, decision-making and military leadership will be created which will allow for crises to be dealt with successfully”.

The German side expressed itself more cautiously. However, the systematic build-up of an independent European armaments industry shows that Germany too is thinking about growing military independence from the US. While other branches of industry are being drawn together in the wake of globalisation, armaments firms on both sides of the Atlantic are increasingly isolating themselves from one another. This is energetically supported by the respective governments, as are mergers to form larger concerns. Even Britain, which usually regards most European projects with scepticism, is taking part in the consolidation of the European armaments industry.

The most ambitious proposal made in this direction so far is the establishment a United European Air-Space Association (EADC), consisting of the French firm Aerospatiale, British Aerospace, Germany's DaimlerChrysler Aerospace, Spain's CASA, Sweden's Saab and Italy's Finmeccanica-Aleni. This would produce military aircraft, helicopters, systems for space missions, long-range guided missiles and other weapons systems—areas of manufacture in which Europe would be able to stand up to the American armaments industry and its three large combines, Boeing, Lockheed and Raytheon.

In the US this is raising economic and, increasingly, national security concerns. In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, three American national security experts—John Deutch, Arnold Kanter and Brent Scowcroft—warn that the political foundations of the American-European alliance are being shaken by the drifting apart of transatlantic defence industries. They complain that “all leading politicians seem to believe that a European armaments industry is a crucial factor for a European Union which can confront the United States as a political equal.”

In Europe, on the other hand, the intention of the American government to establish a national missile defence system is arousing suspicion. During President Clinton's recent visit to Germany, Chancellor Schröder publicly criticised these plans on several occasions. Europe fears that if the US succeeded in protecting itself from missile attack from future enemies with a national missile defence system, a new arms race would result, and Europe would find itself caught between two fronts or held hostage to American global politics.

In Europe, particularly since the war in Kosovo, expressions of discontent over the military dominance of the US can be heard ever more clearly. In official announcements, the attack on Yugoslavia is still being presented as a NATO operation based on the principle of partnership, but criticism of the war is growing, together with accusations that the US used its military superiority to plunge Europe into a rash enterprise.

An article written for *Die Zeit* by Egon Bahr, architect of former German Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, is typical. Bahr contends the Yugoslav war shows that “as far as American security policy is concerned, it regards Europe as a protectorate.” The dominant role played by the US in leading and conducting the war against Belgrade—from the choice of targets and the implementation of the newest technology to the propaganda campaign—could hardly be concealed by making NATO its instrument and allowing it to report on the daily progress of the war.”

For its part, the US considers European moves towards military independence with increasing unease. America has long demanded that the Europeans make a greater military contribution to NATO, but the fact that this is coinciding with an ever more open challenge to American hegemony within NATO is a source of great concern in Washington.

Recently, Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright summed up the differences between the US and Europe as follows: “In particular, we are worried that Europe—owing to its common security and defence policies—might dissociate itself from NATO and from us. At the same time, the Europeans are afraid that we might dissociate ourselves from them—on account of our national missile defence system.”