

Franco-German Divergence

by David C. Grabbe

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For the last fifty years, the Franco-German partnership has been the bedrock of European power. According to Strategic Forecasting (Stratfor), however, German and French interests may begin to diverge ("Geopolitical Diary," February 24, 2005).

Since WWII, the United States and Germany have been allies largely because 1) the United States occupied Germany (and still has a strong military presence there), and 2) the perception of a greater threat to the east: Russia. But times are changing. Not only does Berlin view Russia as essentially non-hostile, but German politicians—Gerhard Schröder, most notably—see a Russian partnership as necessary to Germany's political and economic future. Russia already supplies the majority of Germany's energy needs, and Germany has proved to be a stable trading partner whose government is not overly concerned with Russia's internal affairs (i.e., human rights, rule of law, democracy, freedom of the press).

Yet, no one else in Europe is as enamored with Russia—including France. France is geographically boxed in by Spain to the south, Britain to the north, and Germany and Italy to the east. Any number of coalitions can hold her in check. Her neighbors have an interest in keeping her so, and Paris has responded by trying to build associations—political, economic, and military—with other major international players. But France has little need for Russia. As Stratfor puts it, "It is too far away to be militarily useful, too poor to be a good market, and French policy has for decades sought as much independence in energy matters as possible"—France having invested more in civilian nuclear power than any other European nation.

Because of France's situation, its geopolitical strategy revolves around reducing the powers of other players (thus raising its relative status) while simultaneously maintaining its options for advancement. Stratfor observes, "This is what drove France to support American independence in the 18th century, to first guarantee and then abandon Czechoslovakia in the run-up to WWII, to join the Israelis in an attack on Egypt, to flirt with the Soviets, the Iraqis, the Chinese and anyone else who might not be fond of the Americans." This is part of the reason France opposed the invasion of Iraq—she had her own political and economic interests in the region, specifically in Iraq—and why she has been a main proponent of the European Union (EU): It keeps most of Europe bound together, with France as a dominant player.

But Germany, the other major force on the Continent, lacks these options. It stands at the heart of a region that it cannot command financially or politically, let alone militarily, and as such, needs alliances to ensure its relevance. A Russo-German partnership looks increasingly attractive. As Stratfor notes, "Schröder's rise to power meant an end to a Germany that walked around saying 'sorry' and nodding to everything that Paris said. Germany has its own foreign policy now, and its interests are diverging from those of France."

Even as France's and Germany's interests diverge, recent events in the Russian sphere of influence may set the stage for Russia to be further interested in partnering with Germany. Lately, the relatively Kremlin-friendly leaders of Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine have been replaced with leaders who are pro-Western. In particular, the so-called "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine—where pro-Europe (and

pro-NATO) Viktor Yushchenko ousted pro-Moscow Viktor Yanukovich—could have devastating consequences for Russia. Yushchenko has already indicated his interest in bringing Ukraine into the NATO fold. This is significant because Ukraine hosts Russia's only warm, deepwater naval base, as well as the preponderance of Russia's major infrastructure connections—especially energy—to the outside world. Moreover, if Ukraine eventually joins NATO or the EU (another possibility), it puts a potential Russian enemy less than 300 miles from Moscow—an easy drive for an armored division. In short, Ukraine's turn to the West makes Russia essentially indefensible by conventional warfare standards.

Russia is somewhere between being hedged in and being backed into a corner. War is not about to break out, but, Stratfor warns, in geopolitics *capabilities* matter far more than *intentions*, for intentions can change rapidly. Russia recognizes that the West stands in a threatening position, and she needs alliances to keep matters in check. Partnering with Berlin is a good option for Russia, too.

Of course, the full effects of a Franco-German divergence are uncertain, but it is no coincidence that the CIA has predicted the potential collapse of the EU within 15 years, based in part on what France decides:

One view has been that since the EU is a primarily French creation—an attempt to preserve French power in Europe and to enhance France economically—its fate will depend on France. In crises, the French either [will write] a new constitution or violently [dismantle] the state [the EU]. This suggests that Europe may end in an explosive collapse. (National Intelligence Council Europe Workshop, April 28-29, 2004).

This much is certain: The EU is far from united. The member states are bound up in red tape from Brussels, their economies are stagnating from the federalist bureaucracy, and they have no single voice for foreign affairs. For any sort of strength to arise in Europe—political, economic, or military—the old institutions will have to fall. A Franco-German divergence could be the beginning of such a reorganization.