

Political Differences and Conflicts Between France and Germany in the European Union

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Abstract: France and Germany are the core countries of the European Union and have played an essential role in promoting the historical process of European integration. The two countries have a deep friendship and cooperation. However, in recent years, with Europe facing multiple crises and challenges, there have been a series of differences and conflicts between France and Germany in energy, defense, economy, diplomacy, and other aspects, which have brought uncertainties and risks to the prospect of European integration. This reflects the strategic differences, the leadership struggle, and the solidarity crisis within Europe. The paper aims to analyze the political differences and conflicts between France and Germany in the European Union. These challenges not only affect the friendship and cooperation between France and Germany but also adversely affect the unity and development of Europe. Therefore, France and Germany need to strengthen communication and coordination, seek common interests and goals, enhance mutual trust and understanding, and contribute to the prospect of European integration.

Keywords: France, Germany, European Union

1. Introduction

The core members of the EU, France and Germany, are the leading forces in promoting European integration. The two countries have a deep friendship and cooperation, known as the “Franco-German axis” [1,2]. However, the two countries have different views and interests on critical issues, leading to political divisions and conflicts within the EU. For example, there are differences and demands between France and Germany on EU enlargement, European defense, fiscal policy, energy security, and foreign relations. Political differences and conflicts between France and Germany are not new, as the two countries have alternated between cooperation and competition since the beginning of European integration.

Under the current profound changes in the international situation, the political differences and conflicts between France and Germany have brought more significant challenges to the development and stability of the EU. On the one hand, the Russia-Ukraine crisis, the United Kingdom’s “Brexit”, the United States “withdrawal,” and other events have put European security under unprecedented threat, forcing the EU to strengthen strategic independence and integration. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, digital transformation, and other issues have also brought enormous pressure and changes to the European economy and society, requiring the EU to strengthen internal coordination and solidarity. In this context, the political differences and conflicts between

France and Germany affect not only the interests of the two countries but also the future of the EU as a whole. The study of political differences and conflicts between France and Germany is of great significance for understanding European integration's history, current situation, and prospects. Analyzing the causes, manifestations, and effects of differences and conflicts between the two countries in various fields could reveal the problems and challenges in the European integration process and how to solve them through cooperation and compromise. In addition, the study of political differences and conflicts between France and Germany also helps to understand the role and status of the two countries in international affairs and the impact on other countries and regions. Especially for China, as the world's second-largest economy and one of the EU's largest trading partners, understanding the political differences and conflicts between France and Germany can help deepen cooperation and exchanges with the EU and its member states.

2. Conflicts Between France and Germany

2.1. Antagonism of Energy Policy

Energy is a key factor affecting Europe's security and development. Due to the lack of sufficient energy resources, Europe is more than 50% dependent on external supplies, of which Russia is the largest supplier of natural gas to Europe. However, the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has threatened natural gas supplies and skyrocketed prices, creating a serious energy crisis for many European countries.

In this context, there is a clear divergence between France and Germany on energy policy. On the one hand, France advocates setting a ceiling on the price of natural gas, establishing a unified EU procurement mechanism, promoting green energy transition and other ways to deal with the energy crisis, and calls on EU member states to maintain unity.

On the other hand, Germany, Europe's largest gas consumer, opposes any intervention in gas prices, arguing that it would affect the market mechanism and cause suppliers to move elsewhere. Germany also insists on completing the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project in cooperation with Russia, and seeks to cooperate with Spain to build the MidCat gas pipeline project from North Africa through the Iberian Peninsula to the European hinterland to increase energy supply sources and diversity. In addition, Germany has decided to provide 200 billion euros in subsidies to companies and people affected by high energy prices to ease the economic pressure.

Regarding energy policy, the main differences between France and Germany come from controlling natural gas prices, using energy subsidies, and constructing energy pipelines. France favors a cap on gas prices, opposes Germany's unilateral subsidies for its energy consumers, and supports BarMar, an undersea hydrogen pipeline in the Mediterranean. Germany, opposed to EU intervention in gas prices, has announced €200bn in subsidies for its own people and businesses in an attempt to push through MidCat, a gas pipeline stretching from North Africa through the Iberian Peninsula to the heart of Europe.

The policies by Germany have caused discontent and criticism within the European Union. France and other countries argue that Germany's unilateral subsidies for its companies and citizens create unfair competition within the EU and could trigger a "subsidy race" among countries, fuelling inflation. Macron even warned that Germany's subsidy program could threaten the EU single market, and demanded that Germany take European solidarity into account when formulating energy policy.

2.2. Dispute on Defense Cooperation

Defense is an important area affecting European security and sovereignty. In recent years, in the context of the pressure exerted by the Trump administration on NATO Allies and the potential threats faced by Europe, such as Russia, European common defense cooperation has made certain progress,

including the joint push by France and Germany for the EU to launch the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the EU to set up the European Defense Fund (EDF).

However, there are some differences and contradictions between France and Germany in defense cooperation. On the one hand, France advocates Europe's "strategic autonomy" in the field of defense, reducing its dependence on the United States and building its own military capabilities and industrial base. France has also launched the European Future Air Combat Systems (FCAS) project, which aims to develop a new generation of fighters and air combat systems to improve Europe's air superiority.

France advocates the EU to achieve "strategic autonomy" in the field of defense, build Europe's own military capabilities and industrial base, and launched the European "Future Air Combat System" project (FCAS), which aims to develop a new generation of fighter jets and air combat systems. Germany is more inclined to maintain its trans-Atlantic alliance with the United States, buying advanced American equipment in the field of defense, such as F-35 fighter jets and Patriot air defense systems, and launching the European Sky Shield Initiative, which has attracted 13 NATO countries and Finland to join, but France is not among them. These differences reflect the ongoing debate between "Europeanism" and "Atlanticism" over European security, and the lack of strategic consensus and coordination mechanisms between France and Germany.

Germany, on the other hand, prefers to maintain its transatlantic alliance with the United States, strengthen NATO's role in European security, and buy advanced American weapons such as F-35 fighter jets and Patriot air defense systems. Germany has also launched the European Sky Shield Initiative, which has attracted 13 NATO countries and Finland to join, but France is not among them.

These differences reflect the ongoing debate between "Europeanism" and "Atlanticism" over European security, and the lack of strategic consensus and coordination mechanisms between France and Germany. This not only affects the trust and cooperation between France and Germany, but also brings obstacles and challenges to the goal of EU defense integration.

2.3. Different Attitudes Towards European Integration and the US

Economic diplomacy is an important means of influencing Europe's interests and status. As the largest economies in the European Union, France and Germany have an important influence on the economic policy and external relations of the European Union. However, in the context of the profound changes in the current global economic pattern, there are also some differences and conflicts between France and Germany in economic diplomacy.

On the one hand, France advocates that the EU adopt a more proactive economic diplomacy strategy, safeguard the interests and values of the EU, and take a tougher attitude toward external competitors. France also supports the EU in expanding its influence and strengthening cooperation with Africa, Latin America and other regions. Germany, on the other hand, prefers to maintain an open and pragmatic economic foreign policy, avoid conflicts with important trading partners, and seek cooperation opportunities with countries such as China and Russia.

Germany is also opposed to excessive expansion of the EU, fearing that new members would increase the fiscal burden and make it harder to manage. These differences reflect that France and Germany have different interests and strategic orientation in economic diplomacy. This has not only affected the coordination and communication between France and Germany, but also brought difficulties to the formation of a unified position and action within the EU.

France and Germany are the pillars of the EU and play a key role in promoting European integration. The two countries have close relations, forming a "Franco-German axis." However, recently, Europe has encountered various crises and challenges, and there have been many differences and conflicts between France and Germany in their relations with the United States and European integration, which are harmful to the unity and development of Europe. This reflects strategic divisions, leadership struggles, and a crisis of unity within Europe.

In relation to the United States, France and Germany have different positions and strategies. France advocates that Europe achieve “strategic independence” from the United States, reduce its dependence on the United States, safeguard European interests and values, and take a tougher attitude toward external competitors. France also supports the EU in expanding its influence and strengthening cooperation with Africa, Latin America and other regions. French President Emmanuel Macron has put forward the idea of establishing a “European political community” to promote a higher degree of integration of the EU in foreign affairs, defense, trade and other fields. France advocates that European integration should be guided by “intergovernmentalism” and build the EU into an association of sovereign states [3,4]. For example, on 18 November 2018, when Macron was invited to deliver a “Day of National Mourning” speech in the German Bundestag, he stressed the “unshakable Franco-German friendship” and called on Germany to work together with France to make Europe “more European” [5,6].

Germany is more inclined to maintain an open and pragmatic policy of relations with the United States, avoid conflicts with important trading partners, and seek cooperation opportunities with the United States. Germany is also strengthening NATO’s role in European security, buying advanced U.S. weaponry such as F-35 fighter jets and Patriot air defense systems.

In the European integration, France and Germany also have some differences and contradictions. As the joint leading force of the European Union, in the face of changes in the international pattern, France proposed that the only way out is “European strategic autonomy”. Europe must not allow itself to be overwhelmed by the competition between the United States and China, and the way to achieve strategic autonomy is mainly to strengthen military capabilities. France advocates “strategic autonomy” for the EU in the field of defense, building Europe’s own military capabilities and industrial base. France has also launched the European Future Air Combat Systems (FCAS) project, which aims to develop a new generation of fighters and air combat systems to improve Europe’s air superiority. Germany is more inclined to maintain the trans-Atlantic alliance with the United States, buying advanced American weapons and equipment in the field of defense, and launched the European Sky Shield initiative, which has attracted 13 NATO countries and Finland to join, but France is not among them.

In addition, in economic diplomacy, the differences between France and Germany are mainly due to their different orientations towards China. France has become more assertive in its China policy, supporting more EU sanctions against China in order to safeguard European values and interests. France is also trying to expand the EU’s influence in Africa, Latin America and other regions to compete with China in third markets. Germany, on the other hand, is more open and pragmatic in its China policy, avoiding conflicts with important trading partners and seeking cooperation opportunities with China. Germany also supports the resumption of negotiations on a China-Eu investment treaty and hopes to strengthen communication with China on global issues such as climate change. These differences reflect the different economic interests and diplomatic strategies of France and Germany in dealing with China’s rise and upholding multilateralism.

In conclusion, the conflict over energy policy, the dispute over defense cooperation, and the difference in economic diplomacy are the three major challenges that France and Germany face in the process of European integration. France and Germany also face differences in their relations with the United States. These challenges have not only affected the friendship and cooperation between France and Germany but also adversely affected the unity and development of Europe.

3. The Reason for the Tension Between France and Germany

The different attitudes in energy policies reflect the different interests and strategic orientations of France and Germany in dealing with the energy crisis and maintaining the unity of the European market.

When it comes to defense cooperation, the differences between France and Germany stem mainly from their different understandings and levels of support for European “strategic autonomy” and the transatlantic alliance. In the construction of European defense, the policy of “independence” from the United States advocated by France and the position of “alliance with the United States” insisted by Germany highlight the profound differences between the strategic cultures of the two countries, which may lead to cracks in the Franco-German axis [7].

In the relations with the United States, the differences between France and Germany mainly come from the difference in the degree of trust and dependence on the United States. These differences reflect that France and Germany have different interests and strategic orientations in their relations with the United States. If these problems are resolved, then France and Germany will further deepen cooperation and strengthen the leadership of the two countries. The enhanced leadership of France and Germany is conducive to easing the EU crisis and promoting the development of European integration [8].

4. Conclusion

In summary, the differences between France and Germany in energy policy, defense cooperation, economic diplomacy, and relations with the United States in the European Union are mainly caused by their different interest demands and strategic orientations when dealing with multiple crises and challenges inside and outside Europe. These differences not only affect the coordination and communication between France and Germany but also bring difficulties to forming a unified position and action within the EU. Taken together, the Franco-German relationship is inseparable from the process of European integration. Although cooperation and competition coexist between France and Germany, cooperation has always been the mainstream of Franco-German relations, and this trend will not change greatly in the foreseeable future. Franco-German relations will continue to play an important role in the process of European integration [9,10].

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