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## A New Role for France: Europe's Pivotal Nation

by Anthony Silberfeld

In the early days of U.S. President Barack Obama's term, the administration announced a strategic "pivot" toward the Asia-Pacific region. Implicit in this policy, however, was the assumption that if a nation pivots toward something, it is simultaneously pivoting away from something else – Europe and the Middle East in this case. The reality is that foreign policy is not always a zero-sum game, and governments ought to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time.

Although the policy debates of yesteryear have maligned the word "pivot," it is fitting that its redefinition should begin in France, where the word itself originates. The British referendum on membership to the European Union sent shockwaves in every conceivable direction. Many on the European continent pronounced the British exit, or Brexit, the end of two unions – the United Kingdom and the EU. Germany, a country that has based its post-WWII foreign policy on consensus building, multilateralism and a strong Europe, now finds itself in a position with which it is decidedly uncomfortable – leader of Europe. Caught in the middle – both geographically and politically – of this Brexit maelstrom is France, which must now pivot between the United Kingdom and Germany, in equal measure, to strengthen the bonds in a Europe that is becoming increasingly fragmented.

### We'll Always Have Lancaster

On the streets of London and Paris, bashing France and the UK, respectively, is a national sport. While government officials in both countries have had their disagreements, the ties that bind the two nations are both broad and deep.

Perhaps the most effective vehicle for strengthening this bond is via the Lancaster House Treaty signed by France and the UK in 2010, to build a mutually beneficial partnership in defense and security. The durability of this accord has already been tested politically, since it was signed by two leaders – David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy – who are no longer in power. Their successors Francois Hollande and Theresa May are expected to continue this partnership uninterrupted, even in the wake of the Brexit vote. With French and British Defense ministers meeting on a monthly basis, and an existing operational joint action force, this agreement has the added benefit of keeping the UK invested in and linked to European defense and security structures.

Future ties between London and Paris are not limited to the scope of Lancaster. Indeed, it was revealing that the new foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, chose to visit France in his maiden voyage to the continent. During the visit, Johnson and his French counterpart, Jean-Marc Ayrault, discussed close cooperation on terrorism and migration, and reaffirmed their commitment to the alliance in spite of the Brexit vote. The British foreign secretary signaled the importance of France as a key conduit to the EU, and [declared](#) that although the "UK has voted to leave the EU, it doesn't mean that we will be leaving Europe."

## From Maginot to MagiYES

As the French remain attentive to their partners across the English Channel, they have a pivotal role to play when it comes to their German neighbors as well. The presence of the UK in the European Union has arguably provided a critical counterweight to Germany. It served the dual purposes of alleviating the apprehensiveness of Europeans who fear a strong Germany, and eased the leadership burden on a Germany who is eternally cognizant of its history.

The British departure from the EU will undoubtedly disrupt the balance of power in Europe, and France is uniquely positioned to restore that equilibrium. Despite recent sluggishness, France still ranks in the top six of the world's largest economies, and, following Brexit, will be the second largest in the EU (behind Germany). It also remains the only EU country with the capacity and willingness to project its military power abroad. And as a founding member of the European Union, it is integral to assuring a positive trajectory for the European project.

Collaboration between Berlin and Paris in both the economic and security spheres are strong. Germany is France's most important export destination ([\\$85.4 billion](#)), while Germany sends [\\$119 billion](#) of its products to France (second behind the United States). On the security front, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Hollande have agreed to work more closely to combat terrorism and to coordinate their military efforts abroad in West Africa. The cabinet-level meetings at the Franco-German Ministerial Council provide a predictable and consistent platform for this partnership, and will become increasingly important in the absence of the UK from EU institutions.

## An Endless Pirouette

The post-Brexit environment has changed Europe, but it needn't change it for the worse. There are significant opportunities for the United Kingdom, Germany, and France most of all. The UK, which has never been a particularly constructive voice in European foreign and security policy will soon be in a position where it can limit its role to constructive engagement when its interests are at stake. Germany, whose size and economic heft will require it to assume its role as Europe's leader, can make that transition incrementally with the help of its neighbor to the west. These opportunities, however, are reliant on France's ability to pirouette between its British and German allies. If managed effectively, France has the ability to strengthen British, German and European prospects, while taking the pivotal role befitting its stature in Europe.

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