

France vs. South Africa, Tuesday 13:30 [SAST]

At a June 14th press conference, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, standing next to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, played down the differences between the two countries in an attempt to show that Franco-German leadership of the European Union remains strong. In one sense, France and Germany remain on a co-equal basis – each lost World Cup matches this week. But that's where the balance ends. In recent weeks, Paris acquiesced to several German demands and agreed to drop a proposal for new eurozone institutions, enact unpopular budgetary cuts, and accept that tough penalties will be imposed on states skirting eurozone budgetary rules. In short, Paris is quickly becoming a follower in the German-French leadership duo of the EU.

This evolution was inevitable. A unified Germany, freed from the constraints of the USSR-US Cold War confrontation, is too powerful for France to balance. The best Paris can hope for is to influence Berlin behind the scenes in an advisory role akin to the dynamic that exists between the United Kingdom and United States. France, post-Charles de Gaulle and post Cold War, will always be overshadowed by Berlin as long as it tries to share the spotlight with Germany.

The stinging French loss to Mexico at the World Cup is a fitting metaphor for the waning influence that France wields in the EU. France's fortunes have fallen far from the glories of its World Cup championship in 1998 and second place finish four years ago. France now occupies a reduced role in Europe – both in football and in geopolitics. The latter no doubt will be harder to redress in the coming years.

Slovakia vs. Paraguay, Sunday 13:30 [SAST]

It was a surprise to most people that Slovakia made it to the FIFA World Cup. It emerged through a grueling qualifying campaign in Europe while the neighboring Czech Republic, generally considered the football powerhouse of the region, failed to qualify.

Similarly, Slovakia's membership in the eurozone is considered an overachievement as well, especially because the Czech Republic is not a member. But Slovakia has used its cheap labor to its advantage, attracting a number of West European manufacturers to the country throughout the 2000s. This has led to stellar economic growth and entry to the eurozone in 2009.

Slovakia's membership in the eurozone seemed like a blessing in the midst of the Central/Eastern European economic crisis of 2008/2009 – the country avoided the worst excesses of foreign-denominated lending that was so detrimental to the region.

But now its eurozone membership is seen as a curse because Slovakia no longer has the ability to depreciate its currency to boost competitiveness. Moreover, it is uncomfortable with the idea of footing the joint eurozone bill to rescue profligate spenders in the Club Med such as

Greece. Ivetta Radicova, who is expected to become the new prime minister following a strong showing in the June 12 elections, has already questioned Slovak participation in the eurozone financial aid mechanism. If she follows through, the decision would earn Bratislava the ire of EU heavyweights France and Germany.

Slovakia is facing a difficult month, and we are not referring to its disappointing 1-1 draw against New Zealand at the start of the World Cup.