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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Renault-Nissan as a Project of Projects: A Relational Approach to Strategic Alliances

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Abstract

The study of strategic alliances has traditionally focused on their initial purpose and examined the complementarities in assets and competences that prompt two firms with aligned objectives to collaborate. More recently, research has shifted toward understanding the dynamic nature of these alliances. In alignment with Dyer and his colleagues (1998; 2018), this article seeks to investigate the Renault-Nissan strategic alliance as a relationship conceptualized as a project of projects. To achieve this, this study draws on the literature on alliances, relationships, and projects. Through the analysis of the Renault-Nissan Alliance, the study establishes that this collaboration is a dynamic, multilevel relationship that articulates an unfinished project ('unfinished business'; Duck, 1990) and finished projects and that presents itself as a project of projects. Within this dynamic framework, the future takes precedence over the past (questioning the importance of relational capital). By examining the Renault-Nissan case through the lens of relational dynamics as a project of projects, this article makes thoughtful contributions to the theories of alliances, projects, and relationships.

Keywords: *Strategic alliances; Relationships; Projects; Multilevel dynamic analysis; Renault-Nissan alliance*

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Alliances between companies were initially examined through the concept of complementarity: two companies form an alliance because they possess complementary assets and competences, and each requires the expertise of the other to execute one or multiple projects (Furlotti & Soda, 2018; Rothaermel, 2001; Teece, 1986). While this approach considers the motives behind alliances, it is limited by its static nature. However, alliances are interorganizational relationships that dynamically unfold over time. Therefore, Dyer and his colleagues (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Dyer et al., 2018) introduced a relational perspective to alliances. This leads to a paradox. Initially, two firms choose to ally because of their complementarities, and each possesses the expertise that the other lacks. If the relationship is efficient, cross-learning occurs, resulting in the two firms needing each other much less. In other words, the dynamics of the alliance tend to diminish the initial motive for the relationship. Alliances are most often finite relationships: they conclude at the end of a project after

cross-learning, dissolve due to project failure, or culminate in a merger or acquisition of one firm by the other (Blanchot & Guillouzo, 2011; Rajan et al., 2020). The following question therefore arises: can two companies enter into a relationship that is designed to be stable and resilient, that is, an alliance with an indefinite time horizon, and what might be the model for such a relationship?

Established in 1999 and named 'the Alliance', the relationship between Renault and Nissan was conceived in this manner. Given the high failure rates associated with mergers, the alliance format was chosen. However, as indicated by the capital letter (the Alliance), its leaders envisioned it as a very particular type of alliance: a new managerial object intended to endure as an interorganizational relationship. In 2018, Carlos Ghosn, its CEO, was arrested by Japanese authorities, thrusting the Alliance into a profound crisis. As of the writing of this article, 24 years after its creation, the Alliance not only persists but has also expanded to include a third partner, Mitsubishi.

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This analysis is based on this case study, which was conducted through interviews in 2021 following the crisis triggered by the arrest of Carlos Ghosn.

To understand strategic alliances, three theoretical frameworks are needed. The first, which focuses on alliances, specifically the relational approach, lacks insight into what a relationship is. To address this gap, a complementary framework is necessary: the theory of interpersonal relationships. This theory emphasizes dynamic and processual aspects and highlights two points: a relationship exists when projected into the future, and this future is indeterminate and is described as 'unfinished business' (Duck, 1990, 2011). These elements, which are applicable to any relationship, suggest that interorganizational alliances can be analyzed within the broader trend of projectification within companies (Lundin et al., 2015). This perspective views alliances as projects that combine the concepts of unfinished projects and finished projects operating on two distinct levels.

By combining the contributions of the three theoretical fields, the Renault-Nissan alliance can be understood from a theoretical framework that analyzes it as a project of projects. This theoretical framework, in turn, contributes to the three theories used to construct it. The main result of the analysis of the case is that with regard to the stability and resilience of this relationship, the future takes precedence over the past. This perspective has not been prominently emphasized in alliance theory, which tends to prioritize the past through the concept of relational capital. With regard to projectification, the theoretical framework distinguishes between projects with a finite horizon and projects with an indefinite horizon. The theory of relationships emphasizes the notion of a project and offers a fresh perspective by approaching it from the concept of a project of projects.

This article begins with a literature review that explores the three theoretical fields mentioned earlier. Four propositions are formulated as a result of this review. The methodology is presented to detail how the dynamic and multilevel dimensions were addressed. The case is then presented using verbatim extracts from the interviews. The discussion considers the analysis of the case with regard to the initial theoretical fields. The conclusion highlights the theoretical and managerial results of the approach while showing its limitations.

Theoretical frameworks and propositions

Theory of strategic alliances: From static to relational dynamics

The classic definition of alliances was provided by Wheelen and Hunger (2000:125), who suggested that an alliance is 'an agreement between firms to do business together in ways that go beyond normal company-to-company dealings, but fall

short of a merger or a full partnership'. An alliance is therefore an intermediate strategy between a pure transaction, even if repeated, between customers and suppliers or between two competitors, and a merger. A more recent definition has been formulated: 'A strategic alliance is a purposive relationship between two independent firms that involves the exchange, sharing, or co-development of resources or capabilities to achieve mutually relevant benefits' (Kohtamäki et al., 2018, p. 99).

This definition suggests interesting elements. It emphasizes the alliance as a relationship built for a specific purpose and based on the search for mutual benefits. Empirically, the phenomenon of alliances has been studied in various sectors, such as the pharmaceutical industry (Hess & Rothaermel, 2011), high technology (Stuart, 1998), air transport (Kleymann & Seristö, 2016), and the aeronautical industry (Ren et al., 2022).

It is generally believed that resource complementarities form the basis of the alliance strategy between firms (Furlotti & Soda, 2018; Rothaermel, 2001; Teece, 1986). Companies pool complementary resources to achieve a common objective from a learning perspective (Dussauge et al., 2000; Muthusamy & White, 2005; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2009). However, for an alliance to function, the benefits and learning must respect the requirement of fairness (Ariño & Ring, 2010; Bouazzaoui et al., 2020; Luo, 2008). This raises two major questions regarding the level of analysis and the dynamic analysis of alliances.

First, at the level of the firms themselves, resource complementarities are analyzed. However, it seems interesting and fruitful to conduct a multilevel analysis that distinguishes the level of firms and that of projects, which constitute the content and result of the alliance (Gerwin & Ferris, 2004; Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018). Thus, the purpose of the alliance between two firms is specified at the time of signing, but this does not provide information on the projects they will undertake individually, and those they will undertake together. Second, the question of dynamic analysis arises. Assessing the failure rate of strategic alliances is challenging, but this rate appears to be consistently high: estimates range from 50% (Kaplan et al., 2010) to 70% (Kalmbach & Roussel, 1999). It is also important to distinguish between possible ways that alliances terminate. An alliance can conclude as planned, through a merger (either by agreement or because one partner acquires the other) or through a breakup (Blanchot & Guillouzo, 2011; Rajan et al., 2020). There is therefore a relational risk linked to the fact that each firm may be reluctant to fully commit to the alliance and may seek to adopt opportunistic behavior (Elmuti & Kathawala, 2001).

Some factors help to mitigate this relational risk by promoting the success of the alliance through a reciprocal learning phenomenon. These include proximity or a shared language (Elfenbein & Zenger, 2014) as well as strictly managerial

factors, such as the establishment of formal or informal governance (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Reuer & Zollo, 2000) or the separation between exploitation and exploration strategies within the alliance (Lavie et al., 2010).

To attempt to understand the dynamics of alliances, Dyer and Singh (1998) constructed a relational view that, 20 years later, appeared too static to the authors and prompted them to work on a genuinely dynamic analysis of relationships (Dyer et al., 2018). According to these authors, this analysis is based on four elements. The first is classical and involves the search for complementary resources in a potential partner. The other three involve the development of relationship-specific assets, knowledge-sharing routines, and effective governance. Previous studies have shown that by interacting within the framework of an alliance, firms can dynamically build relational capital, reducing the risk of opportunism (Elfenbein & Zenger, 2014; Kale et al., 2000). Other studies have demonstrated that the experience of the relationship can enhance the relational flexibility of firms (Lighthart et al., 2016). The analysis by Dyer et al. (2018) is more nuanced. Initially, resource complementarities generate significant value. However, over time, due to the cross-learning phenomenon, resources tend to overlap: 'Our work also suggests that viewed dynamically, many of the relational view mechanisms that are often argued to lead to effective value creation (such as repeated ties, trust, cospecialized assets), may (over time) actually trigger diminished alliance performance' (Dyer et al., 2018, p. 3159).

In other words, according to these authors, the accumulated relational capital resulting from the alliance can have a negative impact on dynamics. The dynamic approach to alliances therefore produces ambiguous results. An alliance inherently carries a relational risk due to the possibility of opportunism between partners. Subsequently, in dynamics, two contradictory phenomena seem possible. Firms engage in a process of cross-learning, leading to the construction of relational capital. This capital can have a positive effect, particularly in fostering trust between partners (Nielsen, 2004), or it can have a negative effect, with each firm acquiring part of the other's resources and consequently needing its partner less. This phenomenon dynamically undermines the interest of the alliance (Dyer et al., 2018). This ambiguity in results is likely linked to a previously mentioned phenomenon: too often, the effects of the alliance are assessed solely at the firm level without considering the multilevel reality of alliances (Lumineau & Oliveira, 2018). A dynamic study of alliances benefits from considering this multilevel aspect. This led Lehianny and Chiambaretto (2014), drawing inspiration from the concept of multidimensional strategic sequences by Dumez and Jeunemaître (2005), to propose an approach that is both dynamic and multilevel in regarding alliances as relationships. However, the so-called relational view of alliances still struggles to conceptualize the alliance relationship itself or even to define it.

The theory of interpersonal relationships: The precedence of the future

An alliance constitutes a relationship between two or more companies and can thus be analyzed as such. The theory of strategic alliances, as noted previously, evokes the relational approach. However, this relational dimension has rarely been explored, possibly because the term 'relationship', which is frequently used in social sciences, is often employed more metaphorically than conceptually and encompasses numerous types of relationships (Laursen et al., 1996), leading to 'clouds of ambiguity' (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983, p. 12). Neither Dyer and Singh (1998) nor Dyer et al. (2018) questioned what a relationship is or provided a definition of it, which explains the challenges they faced in developing a dynamic analysis of alliances. It therefore appears that an inquiry of this nature is necessary. To achieve this, despite idiosyncratic interorganizational relationships, it seems beneficial to draw on the most advanced research on relationships, particularly research related to interpersonal relationships (Perlman, 2009), a field that will allow us to define what a relationship is. Inspired by Hinde (1979), relationships have been defined as 'series of interactions occurring between two individuals over time, each interaction relatively limited in duration but affected by past interactions and affecting future ones' (Laursen et al., 1996, p. 78). The notion of relationship implies a normative dimension. Individuals who engage in a relationship experience it both on the basis of what it is and what they think it should be. This is what Miller (2007) refers to as the dialectical tension of the relationship.

For a long time, relationships were analyzed from the perspective of structures and functions. This was particularly the case in anthropology for kinship relationships, which have traditionally been seen as a rigid and stable system. However, as with strategic alliances, a dynamic and processual shift occurred. A relationship was subsequently conceived as a negotiated experience. In anthropology, the turning point was marked by Strathern (1992); after that point, kinship was viewed as 'an arena of flexibility, negotiation and experience' (Miller, 2007, p. 536). A similar turning point has impacted all studies on relationships: 'The recent battle cry has been for work on process and transaction' (Duck, 1990, p. 6). The notion of process is conceptually vague and can encompass a diversity of phenomena and approaches. Methodologically, it also poses a challenge. If we consider that a relationship is built over time, the researcher faces a contradiction: 'In order to reach a definition of a relationship, we need to study it across time, but the 'it' is what we are trying to define in the first place. Therefore, in order to define it and study it over time, we have to presume that it had already been defined' (Duck, 1990, p. 10).

Two points are crucial when introducing the dimension of time into the analysis of a relationship and conceiving it as a

process. The first is the precedence of the future: 'You have a relationship when the partners believe in the future of it' (Leatham & Duck, 1990, p. 7). Past interactions attest to only one thing: a relationship existed. They say nothing about the current existence of the relationship. A relationship only exists when it is projected into the future by its participants. The second point is that this future is indeterminate, like that of any process: 'Every interaction has the potential for changing the relationship. [...] There is always more relating that needs to be done, in short, and even apparently stable relationships can be shown to be essentially open-ended by some catastrophe, crisis, development or declaration' (Duck, 1990, p. 9).

Even if there is relational capital, it says little about what might happen in the future (otherwise, if we refer, for example, to romantic relationships, couples who were happy would not divorce). A relationship, in this sense, is 'unfinished business' (Duck, 1990), 'always incomplete and never really ending' (Duck, 2011, p. 21). The analysis of alliances as relationships has led us to search the literature on interpersonal relationships for a definition of relationship and to highlight, in the dynamics of relationships, the precedence of the future. If we accept this precedence, we are led to the notion of project; the relationship projects itself forward toward the future.

The theory of project: The oscillation between finished and unfinished

Boutinet (1990) defines a project as 'a fuzzy, operative anticipation of a desired future'. The notion of the future is therefore inherently linked to that of a project. The operational character suggests a targeted objective, as reflected in the adjective 'desired'. The vagueness of the project is tied to the indeterminacy of the future. The project involves transforming this vagueness, this indeterminacy, into something operational, which is where the project's performance lies. The emphasis on the future, the existence of an objective to be achieved (normativity), and the operational dimension bring together the concept of project and that of alliance conceived as a relationship.

In modern societies, the project is the way individuals and institutions experience time, which gives it an anthropological dimension (Boutinet, 1990, p. 15). Some authors speak of a 'project society' (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999, p. 166), while others discuss the projectification of the firm (Midler, 1995) and, even more generally, the projectification of the human condition (Jensen et al., 2016). Bredin and Söderlund provide the following definition of projectification in the business world:

a change of the organizational structure, slowly moving the firm into putting more emphasis on the project dimension of the organizational structure, from strong functional units where projects have played a subordinate role, to projects playing at center stage with functional units acting as labor pools. (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011, p. 9)

Among companies (Lundin et al., 2015), we distinguish project-based organizations (organizations that have always operated through projects, such as architecture or cinema), project-supported organizations (traditional sectors that have increasingly functioned through projects since the 1960s), and project networks (interorganizational projects in which strategic alliances are situated). Thus, society, individuals, and companies are projectified, similar to strategic alliances. Furthermore, the project, as described earlier, aims to transform uncertainty into something operational. It relies on tools, governance, and the setting of deadlines. Its performance is evaluated in terms of the cost/benefit ratio and compliance with deadlines. In this sense, a project is generally 'finished business'. However, from this perspective, project practice appears excessively rationalized (Lenfle, 2008) or overly formalized (Garel, 2013), and rationalization does not exhaust the nature of the project.

These various dimensions of the project are also reflected in the Latin roots of the word 'project', which appeared in Old French as *project* (1529) and then *projet* (1637) (Rey, 1994), from which the English *project* is derived. The word comes from the verb *projicere*, which initially meant throwing something in front of oneself in a concrete sense and was often used in a military context with a technical dimension (e.g., lance and projectile). Figuratively, it means throwing oneself forward. The adjective *projectus* not only expresses the idea of being thrown forward but also has a particular nuance: being thrown forward without restraint. The word *projectus* itself carries the sense of extension, the action of spreading out. The notion of a project therefore seems etymologically to contain a nuance of overflow in the forward projection. It oscillates between the ideas of finished and unfinished business.

Propositions

By combining the contributions of the three theoretical fields, it appears that analyses of alliances as relationships lead to the propositions to be discussed in our case regarding the issues of complementarities, the relative importance of the past and the future in the dynamics of a relationship, the alliance as a project, and the alliance as a lived relationship. Each proposition is formulated as opposing viewpoints.

Proposition 1 on complementarities

I.a. The core of an alliance's functioning resides in the complementarities between the firms (assets and competences) as estimated *ex ante* by the two firms. I.b. Complementarities can be built dynamically.

Proposition 2 on the importance of the past and the future

2.a. The alliance operates dynamically in the form of capitalization. Past experiences determine the alliance's performance. 2.b. The alliance as a relationship is oriented toward the future, which takes precedence over the past.

Proposition 3 on the alliance as a project

3.a. As a project, the alliance develops within a finite time horizon and is dominated by costs and deadlines. 3.b. The alliance is a relationship with no planned end (unfinished business).

Proposition 4 on the nature of the alliance as a lived relationship

4.a. The alliance is a relationship experienced by actors as a positive reality (what it is). 4.b. The alliance is experienced by actors as a normative reality (what it should be).

Methodology

The great majority of research on alliances is of a statistical nature (52%), and case studies are much less numerous (8.7%) (Gomes et al., 2016). Among these case studies, few have examined the lived experience of alliances. This research is based on a case study of the Renault-Nissan alliance. This alliance (called the Alliance) was created on March 27, 1999. In 2024, it was still operational and had been extended to Mitsubishi. On November 19, 2018, the CEO, Carlos Ghosn, and the Alliance's development director, Greg Kelly, were arrested in Japan and accused of tax evasion and abuse of corporate funds. The Alliance underwent a profound crisis, but it was not formally called into question. This case study is intended to be comprehensive (Dumez, 2016). More precisely, it attempts to comprehend how a strategic alliance, conceived as a relationship, operates in light of a crisis, and how it is experienced by the actors involved.

The methodological section is organized into three parts. First, it addresses the literature on the Renault-Nissan case, which is included in the methodology rather than the literature review for three reasons. First, existing research predates the Alliance's temporal depth and focuses on pre-crisis periods. Second, past studies often misunderstood the Alliance's originality due to a lack of temporal perspective (its creators designed it as a new managerial form, although it was studied as a classic alliance). Finally, previous research did not emphasize the lived and multilevel aspects we aim to highlight. We employ this literature methodologically (rather than theoretically, even though it contains theoretical elements that we discuss, such as the

question of complementarity). This helps us to better position our approach and enrich our material while evaluating it. The second part addresses the data collection, while the third part elaborates on the process of data analysis.

The Renault-Nissan alliance in the literature: Methodological perspective

The Renault-Nissan alliance has been the subject of numerous research articles since its inception. Some articles merely cite it as an example, while others make it the focus of their empirical analysis, mainly based on interviews, internal documents, or press articles. We will focus here on the latter. Several points emerge from these studies. The Renault-Nissan alliance is, first, considered a success and one of the longest alliances, even though, as mentioned previously, 50 to 70% of alliances fail (Čirjevskis, 2021; Donada et al., 2016). As the first factor of success, we find complementarities, the factor traditionally proposed to explain alliances. These complementarities were considered in the integration phase to allow synergies to emerge and generate economies of scale (Čirjevskis, 2021; Moulouguet, 2013). For example, the strategic relational capacity acquired by Renault in its relationship with suppliers was used in the alliance with Nissan to pool purchases and obtain better prices from suppliers (Donada et al., 2016). Another seemingly paradoxical complementarity lies in intercultural differences. It might be expected that the differences between the culture of Renault (which was very French at the time of the Alliance's signing) and the culture of Nissan (which was very Japanese) would have been sources of conflict. In contrast, studies show that this intercultural complementarity constituted one of the strengths of the Alliance (Barmeyer & Mayrhofer, 2009; Gill, 2012; Stahl & Brannen, 2013). However, other research has questioned these complementarities. The analysis of its functioning shows that the Alliance has been a means to explore and advance the two partners' ways of operating rather than a search for synergies, as in traditional alliances (Segrestin, 2005).

In connection with this question about complementarities as a success factor, emphasis is often placed on the quality of leadership of Carlos Ghosn, who succeeded in establishing organizational systems and practices of human resources at Nissan to enable the functioning of the Alliance (Gill, 2012; Mikami et al., 2022). Several other success factors have also been proposed. Renault provided time, energy, and information to Nissan through the logic of giving and altruism (Gomez et al., 2004; Masclef, 2012). In 1999, despite the lack of a real alternative for Nissan (Donnelly et al., 2005), a negotiation occurred between Renault and Nissan that clarified the framework of the Alliance (Weiss et al., 2004). After the agreement was signed, success relied on the pursuit of equity between the two partners (Mikami et al., 2022).

Although analyses of the Alliance are abundant, many of them were conducted before the crisis experienced by the Alliance with the arrest of Carlos Ghosn. Furthermore, they evoke this quality of the relationship without examining the lived and multilevel dimensions of the relationship itself, which constitute important elements of the dynamic analysis of the Alliance we conduct in this study.

Data collection

This study poses specific methodological challenges regarding the choice of data. First, a relationship is an experienced phenomenon. To gain access to this level, we conducted interviews between January and April 2021 with actors from Renault and Nissan who were involved in the relationship. The 11 interviews took place by video due to the COVID-19 crisis and the geographical location of the interviewed actors (i.e., France, Japan, and Mexico). The interviews lasted between an hour and 2 h, and some actors were interviewed twice, allowing for a deeper exploration of certain dimensions. We also mobilized secondary sources on the Renault-Nissan alliance, which has been widely publicized and widely studied (see the previous section of this article). Some have the advantage of being also based on interviews, as in the work of Greimel and Sposato (2021) and Bayard and Egloff (2019). The Alliance leaders have provided their testimonies in books (Ghosn & Riès, 2004, 2020; Schweitzer, 2007). These secondary data were treated as the reuse of qualitative data as part of a matched analysis (Chabaud & Germain, 2006).

The analysis of a relationship also has a dynamic dimension, and access to this dimension can be achieved in two ways. First, we went back in time (1999–2002) and focused on the first Alliance project, which was pioneering and led to the initial learning of the relationship. Similar to the consideration of this phase as central in the analysis of interpersonal relationships in terms of self-presentation (self-disclosure of both partners; Finkenauer et al., 2018; Jourard, 1971), we hypothesized that it played the same role at the interorganizational level. This involved the project of producing Renault vehicles (i.e., the Clio and the Scenic) on Nissan's assembly lines in Mexico. Second, the interviews were conducted in the context of the crisis experienced by the Alliance following the arrest of Carlos Ghosn in Japan. The actors were able to reconstruct the dynamics of the relationship as they had experienced it before and after the crisis. The analysis is therefore cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, a method often adopted for understanding relationships (Kashy et al., 2018).

Finally, a strategic alliance is a multilevel relationship, and the different levels of the relationship can be experienced differently by various hierarchical levels within the company. We therefore identified three categories of actors at different hierarchical levels: top managers, managers, and engineers.

All the data used are presented in Table 1.

Data analysis

The interviews were coded using multinomial coding (Ayache & Dumez, 2011), followed by the closest generalization and specific difference. The main codes are presented in Box 1.

Because the Alliance is a relationship experienced by actors, the case study relies primarily on the analysis of verbatim statements from interviews conducted by ourselves or other authors (notably Greimel & Sposato, 2021). From this coding, the researchers practiced what Dubois and Gadde (2002) call a systematic combining of the analysis of the material and the three theoretical frameworks, that is, a process in which the theoretical framing, empirical work, and case analysis evolve jointly through an abductive process (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 554; Dumez, 2016).

Findings

The findings are presented in two parts. The first is based on the construction of a narrative of the relational dynamics of the Alliance. The second interprets this narrative in light of the propositions formulated from the literature review.

Narrative: The relational dynamics of the Alliance

The case will be analyzed in three parts: the establishment of the Alliance and its signing (1999), the first structuring project, and the crisis (2018) and the period that followed. These phases correspond to the temporal bracketing recommended by Langley (1999). The narrative begins in 1999, the year of the Alliance's signing. To understand this starting point, it is necessary to go back in time, which involves the work of analepsis (Dumez, 2016). On the Renault side, it is constituted by previous negotiations with Volvo, while on the Nissan side, it involves negotiations with Daimler-Benz.

The establishment of the Alliance

In 1998, Nissan, the second-largest Japanese car manufacturer, was in virtual bankruptcy after 6 consecutive years of losses and 20 billion dollars of debt (Moulonguet, 2013). Renault, in contrast, was considered too small and too French. Was there complementarity? Yes, probably, but it was one-sided and very risky. Nissan was present in America and Asia, where Renault had never managed to establish itself. However, from Nissan's perspective, which focused on quality, Renault did not appear to be a very solid partner (Renault was not well known in Japan, and its quality level seemed low). Nissan conducted major negotiations with Daimler-Benz, which benefited from its image of German quality and appeared to be much more complementary than Renault. However, the German group announced through a press release that it was giving up; its board of directors considered an investment in Nissan far too

Table I. Data collection

Primary data: interviews

Interviewees	Department	Duration of interview
Engineer 1 Renault	Production	2 h
Engineer 2 Renault	R&D	2 h
Engineer 2 Renault	R&D	1 h (deepening interview)
Manager 1 Renault	Human resources	2 h
Manager 2 Renault	Human resources	50 min
Top manager 1 Renault	Executive management	1 h
Top manager 1 Renault	Executive management	1 h (deepening interview)
Engineer 1 Nissan	Engineering	1 h 30
Manager 1 Nissan	Production	40 min + additional written responses by email
Manager 2 Nissan	Engineering	1 h
Manager 3 Nissan	Commercial	2 h

Secondary data

Research papers	Barmeyer and Mayrhofer (2009); Čirjevskis (2021); Donnelly et al. (2005); Gomez et al. (2004); Masclef (2012); Mikami et al. (2022); Moulonguet (2013); Segrestin (2005); Weiss et al. (2004)
Newspapers	Cristiani (2022); Guichard (2023); Rousseau et Steinmann (2023)
Books by journalists	Bayard and Egloff (2019); Greimel and Sposato (2021)
Books by top managers	Ghosn and Riès (2004; 2020); Schweitzer (2007)

Source: Own elaboration.

Box I. Main codes

Design of the alliance/design device/alliance conceived as a project

Framework of the relationship/alliance as a project that can be stopped (which is a strength)/alliance as capable of generating successful projects/need to find concrete projects/no experience effect

Relationship structure/general framework and freedom of initiative/arbitration (and support)/leader-co-leader balance/vertical accountability (hierarchy)

Alliance functioning/normality of conflicts (at least reluctance, or simply the existence of two ideas)/total equality between the two members of the alliance difficult to manage/development of cooperative principles/project (importance of rules; logic economic – profitability, investments)

Country cultural dimension (France, Japan, Mexico, and Sweden)/Japan: acquired confidence leading to ease of working/professional/industrial cultural dimension (= openness); research, engineering, design offices, purchases (= closure)/the business cultural dimension can take precedence over the country's cultural dimension/firm cultural dimension (Renault, Nissan)

risky. As Bob Lutz, a leading expert in the automotive sector, wrote at the time, investing in Nissan was like putting five billion dollars in a container and throwing it to the bottom of the ocean. The Japanese manufacturer had no choice but bankruptcy or Renault.¹ On March 27, 1999, an agreement was

signed between the two groups. For its leaders, the Alliance was a new managerial object, as explained by Carlos Ghosn:

But the Alliance itself is something new, and what we've accomplished at Nissan is new. [...] We're creating a new model and new references in management, but we're also going through an experience that will be valuable even beyond the world of the company. (Ghosn & Riès, 2004, as cited in Greimel & Sposato, 2021, p. 28)

The Alliance, as its name suggested, was not intended to lead to a merger. Mergers, according to the top managers of Renault and Nissan, take too much time and consume too many resources with a high risk of failure. A few years earlier, Renault

¹ One of the anonymous reviewers, whom we thank, questioned the possibility of Renault and Nissan being in a cooperative situation. When the Alliance was established, they were not. On one hand, Nissan was on the verge of bankruptcy and was no longer a credible competitor for any car manufacturer. On the other hand, the competitive overlaps between the two firms in terms of both products and geographical markets (Europe for Renault, Asia and America for Nissan) were minimal. Therefore, the Alliance was conceived independently of a cooperative situation.

had experienced a merger project with Volvo, the Swedish car manufacturer, which did not materialize (1993). This time, Renault and Nissan emphasized that they would work together and develop synergies with a long-term future horizon: 'Schweitzer [then CEO of Renault and negotiator of the Alliance after having been the negotiator of the projected merger with Volvo] was very long-term oriented' (Manager 1 Renault).

In other words, the two companies would develop joint projects in the very long term without seeking to merge.

Ghosn had this genius. He focused everything on projects. As soon as we got out of there, things went wrong [...] Between us, he didn't believe in the merger. He wanted win-win [...] The type of relationship that worked very well was when we did projects. It's not very different from doing a project at Renault. We just have to make sure that they [Nissan] have an interest in it and respect their culture. (Manager 1 Renault)

As in all alliances between car manufacturers, the two partners announced the creation of common platforms for their future vehicles. However, the objective was at least medium term, and it was assumed that Nissan had recovered. For these complementarities to be realized, the engineering departments had to work together. However, they were reluctant.

In newspapers, there were announcements of common platforms, front axle, rear axle, emission. In fact, no, we had a lot of difficulty bringing together the engineering departments, formerly design offices, those who develop the subassemblies. It is almost impossible to get them to collaborate; each believes they are the best in the world. (Engineer 1 Renault)

In the short term, there was a risk of nothing happening, and the Alliance would have no concrete existence. Therefore, it was quickly decided to launch a limited project that could succeed rapidly and constitute a visible achievement. Joint working groups were established to examine the subjects for collaboration. These groups looked like project teams.

I draw a parallel with project management [...] This allowed us to develop projects with milestones, cost-delay effects. We proceeded with objectives given by the top management (quality, profitability, volume, etc.). (Engineer 1 Renault)

We created task forces by profession, engineering, and procurement, each time with a correspondent from each firm. I was in contact with my correspondent. Our strengths, our weaknesses, where we could find synergies. We formed a team like an advisory team on a project, an exploration team. For me, it's a project mode, like an airplane, a car, a consulting firm. (Manager 1 Renault)

Therefore, a project structure was established at the Alliance level that aimed to determine the complementarities and thus the concrete projects to carry out. The first one identified was the Mexican project.

The Mexican project

Renault wanted to return to Mexico, from which it had been forced to withdraw mainly due to quality issues, but it did not have a factory there. In contrast, Nissan had two production units there. The Alliance's first project therefore consisted of producing Renault models (the Clio and the Scenic) on the production lines of Nissan factories. The decision was made almost at the time of the signing of the Alliance: 'My first mission. Ten days after signing, we left for Mexico. One Friday evening at 7 p.m., a message was sent. That gave us the initiative to work, find solutions, make it work. There, this was an industrial project, things existed, and we were able to move very quickly' (Engineer 1 Renault).

Possible complementarity was sought on the basis of a defined project over a 2-year period, which would show that cooperation could work and produce visible gains: 'For the relationship to work, it must be experienced as effective, we must see that it is working' (Manager 1 Renault).

On the Japanese side, the situation was different. A Nissan Mexico manager questioned Nissan headquarters in Japan and was told: 'It's Renault's idea, and we must obey it. Your role is to do just the minimum necessary to respond to Renault's requests. You need to handle things as much as possible at the Mexico level without causing problems at the Japan headquarters' (Manager 1 Nissan).

He explained that 'Mexico is far from Japan, and the project was not a big topic at Nissan Japan. Regardless, this proposed alliance began its activities without a clear intention from Nissan at the Japanese headquarters. This situation was not resolved until the project was completed' (Manager 1 Nissan).

Even on the Renault side, trust did not exist at the very beginning: 'To be transparent, we did not start with trust. Having trust is very naive. Someone has to say, 'That makes sense'. We worked together. Was the trust there? I do not think so' (Manager 3 Nissan).

The discussions took place in English. Neither the French nor the Japanese had mastered this *lingua franca* well.

The Renault-Nissan Alliance benefited from the poor English on both sides. (Manager 2 Renault)

The common language was English, but there were people whose English conversation skills were insufficient, which posed a great barrier to communication. Some had to communicate through whoever could speak English. Both sides had to respond by confirming in the document after the meeting. Communication took more than three times as long as a regular meeting. (Manager 1 Nissan)

Language and deep cultural differences therefore did not constitute major obstacles to working together. However, tensions emerged in daily work.

For example, the difference in screw standards caused a problem. In the process of installing an air conditioner on the same production line, it required a screwdriver and a screw for Renault and a different screwdriver and a different screw for Nissan, resulting in wasted time and inefficiency. The Alliance had to decide to change either the Renault design or the Nissan design. Nissan had the largest production volumes, but, following an Alliance meeting, it was ultimately Nissan that had to change. (Manager 1 Nissan)

As in any alliance, conflicts arose. However, these differences were not considered highly significant: 'At their level, people worked well together. When there was a conflict, it was no more difficult to manage than what happened in projects at Renault' (Engineer 1 Nissan).

These conflicts were escalated through Alliance committees with equal representation from Renault and Nissan and were arbitrated (as in the case of screws). At the top of the Alliance was Carlos Ghosn, who had warned that he did not want to arbitrate disputes.

One of Ghosn's talents is that he has probably never arbitrated anything between the two companies. If the boss of Renault and that of Nissan arrived at the Alliance meeting in conflict, they would be yelled at like no other. This fear of being yelled at made them agree. It was a talent of Ghosn. (Manager 2 Nissan)

As a result, solutions were found before the problem escalated to him: 'It was a small project, but the complexity was the novelty. It was THE test project for the entire Alliance' (Engineer 2 Renault).

The Mexican Clio was a great success, but the Scenic, which was poorly adapted to the Mexican market, was a failure. After this first project, others emerged that centered on engines and platforms. The Mexican project was about exploitation, while the others were about exploration. In 2013, the Alliance launched the Common Module Family program based on the notion of commonization. Vehicles were required to share a common platform, incorporating maximum shared components such as gearboxes and engines while maintaining distinct visual appearances. The Alliance aimed for 70% of common vehicles on three platforms. The conflicts were deeper, with both engineering teams considering themselves the best and unwilling to yield to the other.

The crisis of the Alliance and what followed

In November 2018, Carlos Ghosn was arrested by the Japanese authorities. It appears that senior Nissan executives collaborated with the Tokyo prosecutor's office to have him indicted. The case involved tax fraud. In this context, two structural problems undermined the Alliance on the Japanese side. On the one hand, Renault and the French

state shareholder were now considering a merger. Initially presented as a new mode of managing the relationship between the firms (that is, a global alliance that intended to remain an alliance), the relationship was changing. On the other hand, Nissan had recovered; it now sold more vehicles than Renault and was much more profitable (a substantial part of Renault's profits came from its Nissan shares). Nissan thought the relationship was unbalanced. Behind the Carlos Ghosn personal affair, the crisis of the Alliance appeared much deeper. Nissan felt as if it was paying the heaviest price to the Alliance: 'Nissan's Japanese factories were closed, staff reductions continued. People at Nissan were strongly affected by the negative side of the Alliance' (Manager 1 Nissan).

This verbatim suggests that Nissan charged the Alliance with the costs of its recovery. It seems that sentiment toward the Alliance evolved dynamically.

Initially, everyone at Nissan praised the Alliance, CEO Ghosn and his French team, until Nissan recovered its revenues and paid off 20 billion dollars in interest-bearing debt. After that, Nissan continued to send a large part of the annual profits to Renault after paying the amount financed by the Alliance. From that moment on, Nissan patriots began to think about the fact that we should continue to send our profit to help Renault. When they experienced the privileged life of luxury ([which was] unsuitable for the Japanese culture) of Ghosn and the workers seconded from Renault, when they saw that they were unable to obtain a key position, they considered with despair that Nissan was no longer a Japanese company but just a Renault colony. (Manager 1 Nissan)

At both the Alliance and project levels, the impression of a win-win situation, which was strong at the beginning, faded in the face of unequal sharing of costs and benefits: 'If we have the feeling that one is taking the advantage, as soon as we have this feeling of something not being balanced, we start to ask ourselves questions: is there really transparency, can we really trust each other, do we want to share everything, without keeping secrets?' (Manager 3 Nissan)

When a project was decided upon, the Japanese dedicated ample time to meticulous planning, seeking a balance between the partners *ex ante*. In contrast, the French accepted a higher degree of risk and uncertainty. For them, the balance between partners had to be managed dynamically. While it was clear that it had to be ensured, the balance was *ex post*. This difference in approaches created tensions: 'Projects can never be clear; we always forget something. As soon as we have the feeling that someone is gaining more, we imagine things; everything is dead' (Manager 3 Nissan).

Gradually, the projects were abandoned (without formal abandonment decisions) in an insidious form.

No more Ghosn at the top, and no more common management. Little by little, these little stones, we found them more painful. We made the effort, but it was more painful. Before, engineering was complaining, but we managed to convince them; there, I had much more difficulty. It's insidious. There is never a frank and direct refusal, such as 'Until now I was making the effort, but now it's over'. It's insidious because they say, 'I'm going to study it', and they don't. We ran into delays. Nissan was making progress on the Nissan side and Renault on its side, but everything was frozen when we had to use each other's tools. We felt like things were moving slower. All these projects were delayed and pushed back. Indeed, in the automobile industry, when you fall behind, it's bad. We constantly have environmental constraints; when we lose time, it's over. Many projects will not see the light of day. The constraints evolved and made the projects obsolete. (Manager 2 Nissan)

A feeling of disillusionment and demoralization set in, with questions about how the Alliance had functioned until then.

We now see something that was built over twenty years falling into disrepair, and we wonder if the foundations were as solid as we thought. [...] The Alliance was very successful for 20 years with a fragile balance. (Engineer 1 Nissan)

This remains a question for me: why are these organizations so fragile? (Top manager 1 Renault)

The triggering factor of the crisis – the arrest of Carlos Ghosn – was preceded by less visible but more profound factors. In the deterioration of the Alliance's functioning, projects that were not launched played the greatest role, even more so than abandoned projects. Carlos Ghosn was a visionary regarding the shift of the automotive sector toward electric vehicles. This was the area in which the Alliance made the most sense: moving jointly toward electric vehicles. However, that was not what happened: 'Ghosn says, 'We have to go electric'. The two are going for two different and incompatible technical solutions, even on the [electrical charging] sockets. We were the pioneers. We could impose the standard, and we managed to choose two different options' (Engineer 1 Nissan).

The interviews conducted by Greimel and Sposato (2021) confirm our own interviews.

As executives from both sides came to loggerheads over the technologies at a joint management meeting, Ghosn was requested to make a final call – an amazing appeal to the CEO for a matter normally settled by underlings many rungs below. But to the frustration of many involved, Ghosn didn't make one. He listened to both sides and simply let them pursue their separate strategies. In one view, this made sense. Electric vehicles were still using nascent and rapidly changing technologies. It might be prudent to avoid putting all of the Alliance's eggs in one basket. On the other hand, it flew in the face of achieving joint savings through a bigger scale – the whole reason for having an Alliance in the first place. (Greimel & Sposato, 2021, p. 80)

The idea emerged that there was still joint work on one-off projects, but without the continued existence of the Alliance as a project: 'Today, exchanges only occur on projects. We no longer have the purpose; the trigger for exchanges has completely changed' (Manager 3 Nissan).

In 2021, the Alliance seemed to be at a standstill. Did this mean it was dead? This was not the impression of the actors, even though, following the COVID-19 crisis in particular, the impression left by the actors during the interviews was quite dark. A manager concluded an interview with these words: 'Your questions do me good. It does me good to take a step back. When you don't have perspective, all you have is pain' (Top manager 1 Renault).

At the time the interviews were conducted, the future of the Alliance, despite the crisis, remained open.

We must save the Alliance, identify around ten subjects with rapid common victories, and publicize them. Relaunch this dynamic, neutralize the people who are against. [...] Afterwards, especially when we create new businesses, propose a common entity, electric vehicle, autonomous vehicle. Relatively easy synergies. People who belong to a common company, with common bonuses, who know what we can do together; what each brings. [top manager 1 Renault]

This is what the leaders of the Alliance attempted to do since, on January 27, 2022, they announced that Renault, Nissan, and Mitsubishi would jointly develop a range of 35 electric vehicles around five common platforms to the 2030 horizon. The program involves an investment of 23 billion euros over 5 years (Cristiani, 2022). However, more than a year later, discussions on the Alliance have still not advanced despite the rebalancing of shares (Guichard, 2023) and the reassuring speech of the leaders about the progress of the Alliance (Rousseau & Steinmann, 2023).

Interpretation of relational dynamics

In light of the collected and presented material, it is now possible to revisit the four propositions derived from the literature review.

Proposition 1 on complementarities

I.a. The core of an alliance's functioning resides in the complementarities between the firms (assets and competences) as estimated *ex ante* by the two firms. I.b. Complementarities can be built dynamically.

Alliance theory emphasizes complementarities as a decisive factor. When the Alliance was signed between Renault and Nissan, the complementarity factor played a weak role. On Nissan's side, the issue was not finding a partner with complementarities but finding one willing to attempt to

save a failing company. Daimler-Benz, with which the strongest complementarities seemed to exist, decided not to take the risk, whereas Renault assumed it. However, Renault appeared very weak in quality compared to Nissan and did not provide it with missing skills. On Renault's side, Nissan offered complementarities since it had positions in the United States and Asia, where the French firm was not established. However, these complementarities were hypothetical. They assumed that Nissan could recover, which few specialists considered possible. Real complementarities were sought after the Alliance's signing. Neither company had any particular alliance capability. Renault had the experience of a failed attempt with Volvo, while Nissan, as a very Japanese company, had not developed significant relationships with its competitors. The cultures of the two companies were very different, and their staff had to communicate in English, a language they had not mastered. A priori, therefore, the conditions for a successful alliance were not met. However, the Alliance has operated for 20 years and may survive a major crisis. In reality, complementarities were discovered and built around projects, and cultural differences were overcome in the joint work represented by these projects. The fact that the Alliance was presented at the summit as an open and balanced relationship materialized through common projects with no prospect of a merger made both the construction of dynamic complementarities and the management of cultural differences possible.

Result 1: In the Renault-Nissan alliance, complementarities did not pre-exist at the time of the signing of the agreement. They were built dynamically through interactions in the form of projects.

Proposition 2 on the importance of the past and the future

2.a. The alliance operates dynamically in the form of capitalization. Past experiences determine the alliance's performance.
2.b. The alliance as a relationship is oriented toward the future, which takes precedence over the past.

The theory of alliances between firms conceptualizes the dynamics of the relationship through the lens of relational capital and alliance capability. When Renault and Nissan signed the Alliance, they had no common past and limited experience (which was negative for Renault due to its failed attempt with Volvo). When the crisis occurred, the 20 years during which the Alliance operated did not seem to constitute relational capital. In contrast, the relationship seemed likely to disintegrate quickly. The nature of a relationship is dynamic, as reflected in the etymological sense of the Latin verb *projicere*, to throw oneself forward. The relationship holds as long as concrete projects are decided upon and carried out and then succeed or fail; regardless, they give rise to learning or

exploration. The Mexican project was the first and served as the starting point for this dynamic. This was when obvious projects (i.e., projects that required necessary pooling) were not carried out, such as the shift toward electric vehicles, when some projects were completed, while others were not born, and when launched projects began to bog down, the relationship deteriorated. It seemed to revive in January 2022 when the three firms (Renault, Nissan, and Mitsubishi) launched an extensive joint project of platforms and technologies in electric vehicles. The Alliance must therefore be viewed from the perspective of the dynamics of the relationship, which was oriented toward the future in the form of projects in the making. The shadow of the future clearly outweighs the shadow of the past. Past projects do not constitute real relational capital, even if they are successful. This success is only 'capital' insofar as it can encourage new projects. The Mexican project was decisive because it succeeded (and it had to succeed to create the relationship). It served as a learning basis, but it played a role insofar as it was followed by other projects.

Result 2: In the Renault-Nissan alliance, the future determines the quality of the strategic alliance between the two firms, and the shadow of the future prevails over the shadow of the past even if the past is marked by successful projects or failed projects that resulted in learning.

Proposition 3 on the alliance as a project

3.a. As a project, the alliance develops within a finite time horizon and is dominated by costs and deadlines.
3.b. The alliance is a relationship with no planned end (unfinished business).

A project in firms requires a deadline for completion, and its success depends on respecting deadlines and costs. If two firms decide to join forces on only one project, the logic of project termination is imposed on this alliance. A merger can also be considered a project that requires completion and deadlines for the integration of the two companies. The Renault-Nissan alliance did not fall into either of these two forms. Carlos Ghosn explained that the Alliance – the relationship established between Renault and Nissan – was a new and original managerial object: it sought to articulate a traditional logic of joint projects and a relational logic with no horizon of termination. This management device worked, with one weakness: the projects that should have been launched and were not, particularly the common electric vehicle. In the period following the crisis triggered by Carlos Ghosn's arrest, joint projects continued, although they slowed down. However, in the words of one of the actors, the trigger no longer existed. To trigger new projects, the framework of an unfinished and non-terminating relationship is needed. The relationship must project itself in the sense of throwing itself forward with relatively unbridled, overflowing expansion, which is exactly the

meaning of the Latin word. Without concrete, limited, and successful (or even failed but learning) projects, the relationship falters. Without the framework of a relationship without an end time horizon, launched projects slow down, and new projects are not initiated. The relationship only works if, at the upper level, it is conceived as a framework without termination, an unfinished project, and if, at the lower level, finished projects are constantly relaunched with a sufficient success rate. In the case of the Renault-Nissan Alliance, the relationship entered into crisis when the prospect of the termination of the relationship in the form of a merger appeared at the upper level and when the major project that should have been produced by the Alliance – the electric vehicle – had not been launched, with each firm making its own choices.

Result 3: The Renault-Nissan alliance is a two-level project: a project as unfinished business materializing in finished projects (i.e., both levels are necessary).

Proposition 4 on the nature of the alliance as a lived relationship

4.a. The alliance is a relationship experienced by actors as a positive reality (what it is). 4.b. The alliance is experienced by actors as a normative reality (what it should be).

For a strategic alliance to work, it needs to be a win-win relationship that involves mutual learning. This is expressed by the idea of complementarity that is emphasized by alliance theories: firm A possesses capabilities that firm B lacks but needs and vice versa. However, the concept of complementarity is static. Dynamically, A learns from B and acquires previously lacking capabilities and vice versa. In dynamics, therefore, the relationship should end. In reality, the win-win relationship can continue if new complementarities are discovered during joint projects (highlighting the precedence of the future over the past in terms of complementarities). Complementarities result from learning more than being a condition. However, the win-win nature alone is not sufficient to ensure that both partners are satisfied with the relationship. It is crucial that they feel that the created benefit is shared fairly. During interviews, we were struck by the asymmetry at this level of the Renault-Nissan alliance. Renault employees focused on the win-win dimension of the Alliance, while Nissan employees complained about the asymmetry in the sharing of benefits created by the projects. Renault employees explained that they had learned a lot from their Japanese partners, while Nissan employees did not emphasize this learning effect and showed a lack of involvement. From an observer's perspective, Renault, which acquired the ability to carry out efficient projects while respecting deadlines and costs, learned from Nissan to better address the quality dimension, while Nissan, which was outstanding in quality, learned from Renault to better meet deadlines and costs; this missing competency had led it to the brink of bankruptcy.

However, the learning was acknowledged on Renault's side, not on Nissan's side. Everything happened as if, for the relationship to be maintained, it must create a win-win effect, and the benefits must be equitably distributed between the two partners. However, the partners must also share the perception that this is the case. If one partner feels that the sharing is not fair, the relationship is undermined. The context played a role here as well. Nissan's practice was to take time to try to resolve all uncertainties of projects and therefore to be able to agree with its partner on the sharing of costs and profits, while Renault's practice was to consider that a project always includes a dimension of uncertainty, which should be reduced *ex ante* without spending too much time, and that the balance between the partners must be sought dynamically, with one contributing more and receiving less at certain times and symmetrical compensation at other times.

Result 4: The success of the concrete projects developed by the Renault-Nissan alliance is real (what it is – positivity), but this real success was not experienced by both partners as fairly shared (what it should be – normativity). The real success of the projects was erased by one of the partners (Nissan) through the perception of unfair sharing.

Discussion

To analyze the Renault-Nissan case, an alliance that aspired to maintain its non-merger status, we initially mobilized the relational theory of alliances (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Dyer et al., 2018). Although this theory emphasizes dynamics, it lacks a definition of a relationship. We then turned to the theory of interpersonal relationships with a focus on relationships as having no assigned term (unfinished business in the sense of Duck, 1990; 2011) and the precedence of the future. This idea of the precedence of the future, of projecting the relationship forward, led us to project theory. In this theory, a project that is oriented toward the future is designed to end. In the 1990s, project management introduced a new concept, that of projectification (Midler, 1995). The firm itself evolves toward a project structure, but the project form also affects, more broadly, society itself.

From these three theoretical frameworks, the Alliance (the relationship between Renault and Nissan) can be analyzed as a relationship on two levels as a project (with no programmed end) of projects (with a programmed end). The Alliance was designed in a very particular way: an alliance that has no finite horizon (unfinished project) but launches concrete (finished) projects that are renewed and nourish a common future. The crisis that occurred in 2018 can be considered to have been caused by two elements: the prospect of a merger that was promoted by the French government (hence, the end of the unfinished project) and the lack of a common (finished) project of the electric vehicle, meaning the nondevelopment of

an essential concrete project. Relational capital (Kale et al., 2000) accumulated over nearly 20 years does not seem to have played a significant role. The relationship was, indeed, a project, and it survives only as a project. The Alliance must therefore be analyzed not from the shadow of the past (Ligthart et al., 2016), that is, the *ex ante* complementarities between the two firms and the dynamically accumulated relational capital, but from its future (Leatham & Duck, 1990), including the unfinished project at the upper level and the new finished projects at the lower level. When one of the two levels weakens, the relationship is threatened. It can only be revived by relaunching new projects. This was attempted through the joint strategy between Renault, Nissan, and Mitsubishi in terms of electric vehicles in early 2022 (Cristiani, 2022). Furthermore, the Alliance persists as an unfinished project only if the partners feel that the sharing of benefits is fair. From this perspective and with awareness of this problem, the new leaders announced the rebalancing of cross-shareholdings and voting rights in the Alliance in early 2023 (Guichard, 2023).

Built from three mobilized theories, the theoretical framework developed to analyze the particular case of the Renault-Nissan Alliance allows for reciprocal enrichment of these three theories. Regarding the relational theory of alliances, the Renault-Nissan case illustrates that complementarities between firms can be built through the relationship rather than through necessary conditions. In this case, complementarity must be conceptualized as built around projects. This projectification of the alliance is based on the precedence of the future over the past, where past successes do not constitute real relational capital. The existence of a win-win situation in past projects is not sufficient to maintain the dynamics of future projects. The benefits generated by past projects must also have been fairly distributed (Ariño & Ring, 2010; Bouazzaoui et al., 2020; Luo, 2008). However, the Renault-Nissan case illustrates that fairness is challenging to evaluate and strongly depends on the lived experience of the Alliance. One member of an alliance may feel disadvantaged in the sharing (as in the case of Nissan), while the other believes that the sharing is fair. The divergence of perceptions regarding fairness therefore undermined the dynamics of the Alliance itself and weakened it as an unfinished project. Therefore, the analysis of the Renault-Nissan case, which mobilizes the theory of relationships, enriches the theory of alliances.

The analysis of the Renault-Nissan case confirms that the projectification movement affects firms (Midler, 1995). Alliances can be seen as projects that can flourish. However, the theoretical framework shows that projectification must be analyzed at two levels by combining the notions of unfinished project and finished projects. Projectification is possible if it is not reduced to a series of concrete and finished projects but implies a framing project with an indefinite horizon. This framework, in turn, can function only if concrete projects are

launched and relaunched. The projectification of the alliance is based on this tension between unfinished and finished projects. The analysis of the Alliance thus helps to refine the concept of projectification by articulating project management and concepts from the theory of interpersonal relationships (i.e., the precedence of the future and a relationship with an indefinite horizon).

Finally, the developed theoretical framework enriches the theory of interpersonal relations. Despite emphasizing the future perspective for the relationship and proposing the notion of unfinished business, this theory does not highlight concrete projects. The concept of a relationship as a project of projects could constitute an interesting research avenue for the theory of interpersonal relationships, although we are not specialists in this field. Simply by examining this theory, it appeared to us that the notion of a project was not very present, whereas in the realm of interorganizational relationships, it proves fruitful. A transposition could therefore be considered.

The theoretical contributions of our analysis are summarized in Table 2.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the Renault-Nissan case, the research question we attempted to answer was as follows: can two companies engage in a relationship designed to be stable and resilient, in other words, an alliance with an indefinite time horizon, and what is the model for such a relationship? Established in 1999, the Alliance experienced a major crisis with the arrest of Carlos Ghosn in Japan, but it continues to operate as a relationship between several firms (Renault, Nissan, and later Mitsubishi). The theoretical perspective on its functioning can be analyzed as a project of projects. Our analysis leads to three theoretical results.

(1) Alliances, as relationships between firms, are part of an overall movement of firms toward projectification. However, to analyze this movement, it is necessary to distinguish between finished and unfinished projects. The dynamics of finished projects are nourished by a projection into the future with an indefinite horizon, while the dynamics of unfinished projects are nourished by the success of finished projects.

(2) In alliances as relationships between firms, the accumulated relational capital matters less than the importance of future projects. There is precedence of the future over the past. An alliance can therefore rely on complementarities built in the projects themselves rather than on complementarities that existed before the signing of the alliance. Conversely, an alliance that has accumulated relational capital remains fragile if it lacks future projects.

(3) The two-level analysis of the relationship between firms, between an unfinished project and finished projects, can likely be generalized to any form of relationship. In interpersonal

Table 2. Theoretical contributions

	Contributions of the three theories to the integrated framework	Integrated theoretical framework: the relationship as a project of projects	Contributions of the integrated framework into the three theories
Relational theory of alliances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acquiring a new capacity • specific assets, knowledge sharing, governance • relational capital • multilevel deployment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • projectification of alliances • at the higher level, the project as an unfinished business with precedence of the future • at lower levels, launch of projects as finished businesses • multilevel governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • precedence of future • complementarities can be constructed through the relationship • relationship as <i>unfinished business</i>
Interpersonal relationships theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>unfinished business</i> • precedence of future 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • importance of projects, with a multilevel perspective: relationship as combining unfinished and finished projects
Project theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>finished business</i> • projectification 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multilevel combining of the project as an unfinished business with projects as finished businesses

Source: Own elaboration.

relationship theory, emphasis has been placed on the precedence of the future and the concept of an indefinite time horizon (unfinished business), but it is probably necessary to add to the analysis of the relationship the finished projects shared by both parties of the relationship.

In terms of managerial results, the Renault-Nissan case illustrates the importance of multilevel management of alliances. It is necessary to manage both the unfinished dimension of the alliance and the finished projects. The fairness question, which is central to the proper functioning of an alliance, must also be managed at two levels: the general framework of the alliance and the projects developed by both firms. Finally, the case shows that accumulated relational capital over time is likely less important than perspectives on the future of an alliance and should not provide the illusion of stability of the alliance over time.

The limits of the analysis are related to the case itself. The Renault-Nissan case was presented by its supporters, especially Carlos Ghosn, as original and new, constituting a new form of management. We analyzed this case in light of the literature as a project of projects. For now, Renault-Nissan appears to be a very special type of alliance. Nevertheless, it is part of a general movement of projectification. Generalizing an analytical logic that can be applied to other situations therefore appears possible (Yin, 2011, p. 18). It could be based on case studies relating to alliances with a long lifespan, such as the General Motors/Renault alliance in the utility vehicle, which was signed for one project but was extended and therefore passed from a finite horizon to an indefinite horizon.

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