

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

## US and Germany risk owning Ukraine's stalling war effort

The onus is on European allies to step up support and chart a path for Kyiv towards Nato and EU membership

**CONSTANZE STELZENMÜLLER**



Despite German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and US President Joe Biden providing significant levels of assistance to Ukraine, Russia retains substantial unused military capabilities © Sean Gallup/Getty Images

**Constanze Stelzenmüller** YESTERDAY

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More than 50 countries are supporting Ukraine in its defence against Russia's full-scale invasion. Yet Ukraine's existential struggle in Europe's largest war since 1945 currently hinges mainly on two countries. US leadership, as well as financial and material support for Kyiv, have been essential to Ukraine's survival. Germany is its second largest supplier of weapons and money, far ahead of the rest of the field.

Above all, Washington and Berlin have imposed a firmly demarcated strategy on the rest of Ukraine's supporters. It rests on three principles. The western alliance will help Ukraine, but it will not put Nato boots on the ground (that, US President Joe Biden has said, would mean "world war three"). It will support Ukraine for as long as it takes (read: but not with whatever it takes). Lastly, it will undertake security commitments but not guarantees (read: Kyiv will get weapons but, as long as there is a war, no Nato membership with its promise of mutual defence).

So immense are the stakes and effort involved that this strategy has been defined and managed by a small and tightly knit cadre at the highest levels of government. The counterpart of Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, is Chancellor Olaf Scholz's national security adviser, Jens Plötner. He is closely shadowed by Scholz's

omnipresent right-hand man, Wolfgang Schmidt, whose activist role in security policy is somewhat unusual in a chancellery chief of staff.

The amount of US and German assistance since Russia's invasion in February 2022 is staggering by any measure. Both Washington and Berlin have just announced substantial increases. Biden and Scholz, like their advisers, are sincerely committed to Ukraine's defence. And how could one not empathise with Sullivan's conviction that he has "an obligation to the American people" to prevent escalatory scenarios?

The problem is that the strategy is not working. Ukraine is failing to prevail, as Valery Zaluzhny, chief of staff of its armed forces, recently admitted. Its allies are struggling to provide the ammunition and missiles Kyiv needs. Russia, meanwhile, is preparing for another winter of bombarding Ukrainian cities and power plants, building a war economy and weaponising political divisions between the west and the rest of the world. The rise of the hard right across the transatlantic space and the Israel-Hamas war are perilously limiting policymakers' bandwidth. A recent visit to Berlin and to EU and Nato headquarters in Brussels found seasoned diplomats united in gloom.

Unsurprisingly, this is energising advocates for "negotiations". It is the alliance's worst-kept secret that some of the most emphatic supporters of a territorial settlement sit in the German chancellery. But the idea has friends elsewhere, including some in Washington. Draw a ceasefire line, leave occupied eastern Ukraine to Russia and arm what remains to the teeth, the reasoning goes. If necessary, threaten Russia with letting a "rump Ukraine" into Nato.

This plan fails to acknowledge that Russia has zero intention of negotiating on conditions other than its own (the subjugation of Ukraine) except for the sole purpose of gaining time to regroup. The Kremlin retains substantial unused capabilities (air force, navy, cyber, nuclear). Moreover, its invasion is not just about Ukraine; it has become a "[forever war](#)" against the west. A stable equilibrium of power in Europe — ever Germany's fondest hope — is not to be had with a Russia that is totalitarian at home and pursues imperial ambitions abroad. Which is why the "[axis of prudence](#)" between the White House and the chancellery is generating deep unhappiness and foreboding in the machine rooms of diplomacy in Washington and Berlin.

What is needed instead is a strategy of resilience, deterrence and defence for Europe for the long haul that shifts the burden from a domestically embattled America to where it belongs: Europe. Ukraine needs more weapons and ammunition. Above all, it needs an irreversible commitment from Europe that its security is our security. The

EU wants to open membership negotiations with Kyiv in December. Europeans should also resolve to create a parallel track to bring Ukraine closer to Nato at the alliance's 75th anniversary summit in Washington next July.

Biden and Scholz, together with their key advisers, will have a crucial role to play in this shift. For now, they own the strategy for one of the most consequential security challenges to the transatlantic alliance since the second world war. They risk also owning its failure.

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