

Putin's Rising Price for Peace in Ukraine

Facing years of aid for a costly war, the West is now likely to seek, not offer, an off-ramp.

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German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and President Joe Biden in Berlin, Oct. 18. Photo: Andreas Gora/Zuma Press

Berlin

When German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier awarded [Joe Biden](#) the Grand Cross special class of the German Order of Merit in Bellevue Palace here last week, it was a moment of vindication for the beleaguered American president. The only other American so honored was George H.W. Bush, who supported German unification at the end of the Cold War against objections from Russia, Britain and France.

Mr. Biden believes that the U.S.-German partnership is the foundation of the trans-Atlantic alliance. As the West faces challenges from a newly energized and aggressive group of authoritarian and totalitarian revisionist powers, Mr. Biden thinks the U.S.-German partnership will stand at the heart of the alliance of democracies united in defense of the current world order.

The Trump administration, as Mr. Biden sees it, failed to grasp the centrality of this alliance, with devastating consequences around the world. Rebuilding Washington's alliance with Berlin was the core of Mr. Biden's strategy to reassert American leadership. His stance is appreciated in Germany, and Mr. Steinmeier spoke for millions of his fellow citizens when [he told Mr. Biden](#) at the ceremony, "Sir, when you were elected president, you restored Europe's hope in the trans-Atlantic alliance literally overnight."

But there's a fly in the ointment. Mr. Steinmeier went on to say, "And then, only a year later, came Putin's war. When Putin invaded Ukraine, he didn't just go after one country. He attacked the very principles of peace in Europe."

As Mr. Steinmeier conspicuously did not say but undoubtedly knows, some 32 months in, Russia is winning. Despite draconian sanctions, a hobbled economy, a corrupt state, and poorly trained officers and troops, Mr. Putin's forces are driving Ukraine's army back step by step while Russian air attacks cripple Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Meanwhile, pro-Russia parties are expanding across the former East Germany, and a chorus of American voices are demanding an end to U.S. support for Ukraine.

Team Biden, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and their North Atlantic Treaty Organization counterparts deserve credit for rallying to Ukraine's defense and preventing its collapse in the opening months of the war. Without Western help, most if not all of Ukraine would likely now be occupied by the Russians. Even so, the NATO allies' inability to defeat a Russian invasion in their backyard broadcasts an unmistakable signal of weakness

around the world. China and North Korea are shedding their worries about Western threats and stepping up their support of Mr. Putin's invasion.

Early in the war, Washington and Berlin believed that Mr. Putin was headed for defeat. Sanctions would cripple his economy, and public discontent would inexorably mount as the war dragged on. Western technology would give Ukraine enough of an edge on the battlefield to block Russian offensives, and in the end Mr. Putin would come to the West looking for an off-ramp from a ruinous war.

Those were the good old days. Most Western observers now believe Mr. Putin's hold on his country is rock solid. His economy has adjusted to a war footing, and deepening partnerships with North Korea, China and Iran keep him well-supplied with weapons, technology and reportedly even North Korean mercenary troops. Kyiv is trapped in a war of attrition against a larger foe. The West faces the prospect of years of increasingly expensive subsidies and military assistance for Ukraine.

What the Scholz and Biden teams now want is an off-ramp from Mr. Putin. A compromise peace in which Ukraine surrenders territory to Russia but gains NATO and European Union membership would, they hope in Washington and Berlin, be acceptable to Kyiv and bring a not-too-humiliating end to a costly and dangerous war.

Mr. Putin, unfortunately, isn't in the business of offering easy off-ramps. Sensing Western war-weariness and Ukrainian weakness, he will probably demand a high price for peace. His territorial demands will likely be large. And letting Ukraine join NATO is not on his to-do list.

There are three things Mr. Putin wants from the war: as much of Ukraine's territory and population as he can conquer, Russian vetoes over the foreign and economic policy of what is left of Ukraine after the war, and a substantial weakening of both NATO and the EU. Although the costs are high, every day of the war brings Mr. Putin closer to all three objectives.

These are hard truths that neither Team Biden nor Team Scholz wants to face—and to which they have no realistic response. Mr. Biden is welcome to his Order of Merit, but as he prepares to leave office, the partnership between Germany and the U.S. is failing its most important test since the presidency of George H.W. Bush.