

## Transatlantic ‘growing pains’: how Olaf Scholz made Joe Biden shift on tanks for Ukraine

German chancellor’s insistence ‘not to go it alone’ forced a policy U-turn in Washington

James Politi and Courtney Weaver in Washington, Laura Pitel and Guy Chazan in Berlin YESTERDAY

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Joe Biden showered Olaf Scholz with praise from the Roosevelt Room of the White House on Wednesday after their co-ordinated announcement that the US and Germany would be sending battle tanks to Ukraine.

“Germany has really stepped up,” the US president said, “and the chancellor has been a strong, strong voice for unity . . . and for the level of effort we’re going to continue.”

Earlier in the day in Berlin, Scholz was equally effusive about his American counterpart: relations with Washington were better than they had been in a “very long time” and there was “perfect harmony” with Biden, he said.

The planned deliveries of US-made M1 Abrams tanks and German-made Leopards were met with [jubilation](#) in Kyiv and relief in western capitals — a potential new turning point in the transatlantic response to [Russian president Vladimir Putin’s invasion](#).

But the breakthrough involved tense negotiations, policy U-turns and leaps of faith in both Berlin and Washington that tested the strength of US-German relations as a fundamental pillar of the western alliance.

They also underlined how, for all its talk of taking on a leadership role in the world, Europe is still deeply dependent on America as a guarantor of its security.

“There’s a western policy but there’s no European policy,” said Liana Fix, a fellow at the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations. “Everyone is looking towards Washington.”

To many in Washington, the dispute illustrated, too, the challenges of keeping Germany, a nation still burdened by its history and reticent about projecting hard power, on board with other Nato allies as they confront the biggest threat to western security in decades.

“Germany is one of — if not the most — important European ally of the US and we need to tend to that relationship,” said Rachel Rizzo, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Europe centre. “But Germany is still a teenager when it comes to their security and defence policy, so there will be some growing pains.”

The tensions were rooted in a policy that Scholz, a soft-spoken but steely Social Democrat, adhered to with quiet persistence. He insisted he would not send Leopards to [Ukraine](#) unless the US also moved to send its own Abrams tanks.

A January 17 call between the two leaders both exposed the rift and set the stage for this week’s agreement. Biden explained that the US was reluctant due to logistical and technical difficulties in getting the Abrams on the ground in Ukraine. Scholz countered that the US and Germany had always acted “in lockstep” when it came to providing Kyiv with weapons. The implication was clear: Germany would only move on tanks if the US did.

German officials said the approach had a precedent. “Whenever we decided to send Ukraine a new category of weapons . . . we always synchronised our announcements with our closest allies, first and foremost the US,” said one.

Biden promised to “get back” to Scholz on the issue, and later that day he met Antony Blinken, the secretary of state, and Jake Sullivan, his national security adviser, and told them he was interested in finding a solution. “It was important to the president to preserve unity and deliver for Ukraine,” a White House official said.

What followed was a whirlwind of talks led by Sullivan, mainly with Jens Plötner, his German counterpart, to “figure out how to get to yes”, the White House official said. “It was going back and forth on how to get this done”, with Sullivan working to ensure the European contribution was as substantial as possible, the official added.

Publicly, the stand-off continued. During a meeting with a group of US lawmakers in Davos on January 18, the German chancellor reiterated his position that America needed to deliver its own tanks. “He was absolutely clear,” said Seth Moulton, a Massachusetts Democrat who attended the meeting and thought it was a “reasonable position” for Germany to take.

Underlying the German approach was a conviction that by moving together on tanks, the western allies would reduce the risk of Russian retaliation. “It means no country would face Russian criticism on its own — these aggressive verbal taunts and threats we keep hearing,” said Social Democrat leader Lars Klingbeil.

But by Friday last week, when US secretary of defence Lloyd Austin visited his nation’s Ramstein air base in western Germany, the lack of an agreement was raising pressure on both sides. The Ramstein meeting was intended as a show of western unity and hopes had been high that Germany would use it to announce it was sending Leopards. But there was [no breakthrough](#), triggering an outpouring of frustration from Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic nations and increasing the impetus for a deal, including Washington’s rethink on the Abrams.

Meanwhile, lawmakers on Capitol Hill were increasingly filled with angst.

“My impression is that the secretary of defence went to Ramstein and nothing changed because the Germans didn’t change their position,” Moulton said. “So he came back and maybe heard the voices of some of us in Congress saying ‘just send the damn tanks!’”

As late as Monday, US officials were still publicly downplaying the need to send the Abrams. But that was a crucial day in the talks. Sullivan and Plötner spoke three times, and Sullivan, Austin and Mark Milley, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, met Biden to get final negotiating guidance. In the meantime, Austin had presented a new proposal to the president that “overcame some of the challenges” with sending the Abrams tanks to Ukraine.

Biden approved the deal on Tuesday.

## Countries sending tanks to Ukraine

Country	Type of tank	Number of tanks
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Financial Times

Scholz’s approach was contentious even in Germany, where some in his three-party coalition worried about the damage it might do to the US-German relationship. By insisting on Abrams as a precondition, Scholz “effectively tried to strong-arm Biden”, said one official in Berlin. “It’s kind of the tail wagging the dog.”

Country	Type of tank	Number of tanks
US	Abrams	31
Germany	Leopard 2	14
Poland	Leopard 2	14
UK	Challenger 2	14

Financial Times



Biden on Wednesday brushed off any suggestion that he was pressured by Scholz. “Germany didn’t force me to change my mind,” he said. “We wanted to make sure we were all together.”

The agreement vindicated Biden’s approach towards Scholz, which is often described as “strategic patience” with Berlin. The US has eschewed any public pressure or criticism of Germany over its reluctance to take certain steps, whether on sanctions or military aid.

Wolfgang Ischinger, a former German ambassador to Washington, said that Biden’s U-turn meant that Scholz could cast the outcome as a success to the German public, which polls show is deeply divided on the wisdom of sending tanks to Ukraine.

But he warned the long, painful deliberations on the issue had inflicted further damage on Germany’s image. “The Scholz approach — his tactical behaviour, his



as a burden . . . and not as an asset.”

“It was very hard for Germany to get to this decision, and we need to honour that,” said Heather Conley, president of the German Marshall Fund of the US. “However, we are in this rinse, lather and repeat cycle, where there is great hesitation, allies pile in, they push, they cajole, they give their own equipment to try to push things along. And we wait, we wait, we wait,” she added. “This constant cycle, it wears out the allies, it wears out that unity.”

Officials in Berlin said the frustration expressed by some allies was unfair. Germany is, after all, one of the largest suppliers of military assistance to Ukraine after the US.

There is also a particular sensitivity in Germany about tanks, which they say the country’s allies have failed to understand. “If tanks with German crosses appear on the battlefield, Putin can say — look, it’s what I’ve said all along, Nato is intervening in this war,” said one official. “It’s an RT [Russia Today] narrative that has a lot of resonance in Latin America and Africa and we need to be aware of that.”

Samuel Charap, a senior political scientist at the Rand Corp, said the co-ordinated announcement on tanks — celebrated by Scholz’s allies in Berlin as a big success for German diplomacy — was “the best outcome that could have been hoped for under the circumstances”.

“Alliance management ain’t easy,” he said. “Washington demonstrated to Berlin that it’s willing to do something it wouldn’t have done otherwise for the sake of that relationship. That’s what it takes to make these things work.”

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