

What if not the MiGs? Western options for military aid to Ukraine

After almost two weeks from the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine that begun on February 24th, the current situation of the Ukrainian Armed Forces remains difficult. Despite clearly growing losses, logistical problems and stiff defence of the Ukrainians, the Russian Armed Forces continue their movement through operational axes, attempting to surround Kiev from the West and East, trying to close the noose around Kharkiv and intending to cut down Ukrainian forces fighting around Donbas. The Ukrainian army, however, effectively slows down the movements of Russian troops by using regular armoured and mechanised units as well as through irregular, guerrilla fighting – including destroying logistic chains with light infantry squads and unmanned systems. Moreover, despite heavy attacks on the Ukrainian Air Force bases and anti-aircraft defence systems, according to the US Department of Defense and the British Ministry of Defence, Russia has so far failed to secure a full air dominance over Ukraine, and the Ukrainian Armed Forces have retained some capabilities in terms of both surface-to-air missile systems, as well as a fleet of rotary- and fixed-wings platforms.

The Ukrainian authorities, however, clearly indicate that the Russian air superiority is the main problem in their defence campaign, which is well reflected in attacks on defence positions as well as civilian facilities in the defended Ukrainian cities. Hence, the Ukrainian authorities are calling for the establishment of a no-fly zone over Ukraine. Although, at the present stage of the conflict, it is impossible to establish such a zone (it would mean a direct involvement of NATO member states' air forces, the necessity to fight Russian aircraft over Ukraine with possible consequences, e.g. in the form of a Russian attack on bases from which the planes patrolling the airspace would be operating), NATO states should consider supporting Ukraine by other means as soon as possible, including through the supply of heavy military equipment. This is important because the Russian aggression against Ukraine is not an isolated case, but an emanation of a consistently implemented, broader Russian strategy aimed at rebuilding Russia's imperial position with spheres of influence and buffer

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zones around Russia. This means that Vladimir Putin will not stop at trying to subjugate Ukraine, but will instead continue his aggressive policy against vulnerable states of NATO's eastern flank (possibly also by using military means). Thus, the maximum military weakening of Russia in Ukraine is in the interest of the entire Transatlantic Community.

Hitherto assistance for Ukraine

Western countries have supported the Ukrainian Armed Forces in a limited way since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian aggression in Donbas (previously a small pool of American equipment – e.g. HMMWV vehicles – was obtained by Ukraine against the backdrop of stabilisation missions in Kosovo and Iraq and through Foreign Military Sales). Against the background of these events, the disastrous condition of the Ukrainian Army was clearly revealed, and the intensive modernisation process has been started in order to adjust the UAF to Western standards. This modernisation was mainly supported by the United States. In 2014, the US Congress adopted the Ukraine Freedom Support Act, which authorised the US administration to provide Ukraine with security assistance up to the amount of USD 350 million, including lethal weapons. Initially, during the Obama's administration, the US aid, due to relations with Russia and the resistance of some European allies, covered mainly non-lethal weapons such as battlefield radars, communication systems, night-vision devices, etc. At the same time, the Ukrainian government was able to obtain lethal weapons commercially from American producers.¹ In 2017, the subsequent US administration decided, however, to hand over Javelin anti-tank guided missiles (considered as lethal weapon) to Ukraine. In the following years, these deliveries were continued (about 350 missiles with 50 launchers in total) and also included other capabilities (e.g. patrol boats). In general, since 2014, Ukraine has received US security aid for a total amount of approximately USD 2.7 billion, which was implemented through the Foreign Military Sales programme and financed by the Department of State and the Department of Defense (Foreign Military Financing and Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative respectively).

Following the US support, the so-called NATO's eastern flank states decided to begin a broader military cooperation with Ukraine (before the US decision on providing Ukraine with lethal weapons, only Lithuania – and Bulgaria commercially – decided to support Kiev in this way by sending, among others, heavy machine guns, mortars and ammunition). This group included Poland, the Czech Republic and Turkey (e.g. Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicles).²

Western support was clearly intensified against the background of the political and military crisis initiated by Russia, which started in March 2021 that further intensified in the fall of 2021. In this context, the Biden administration granted Ukraine USD 200 million in military aid in December 2021 (including around 300 Javelin missiles, grenade launchers, ammunition, and non-lethal equipment), as overall security assistance in 2021 reached USD 650 million.³ The United Kingdom (NLAW anti-

tank missiles), Poland (MANPADs – Grom/Piorun, ammunition), the Czech Republic (ammunition) and the Baltic States (Javelin, MANPAD – Stinger) also decided to provide military aid to Ukraine.

After the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the US administration authorised USD 350 million for direct and immediate military aid to Ukraine, of which – according to the Department of Defense – approx. 70 percent has already been delivered (according to information from the American press, the number of anti-tank missiles, including Javelins, has reached 17,000⁴ which seems too optimistic). Individual decisions to hand over light weapons and military equipment (mainly anti-tank guided missiles, MANPADs, personal equipment and fuel) were also made by a number of Western EU and NATO countries (including Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany and Sweden).

The Council of the European Union also decided to finance the purchases of weapons and medical equipment for Ukraine for the amount of EUR 500 million from the European Peace Facility. According to information provided by EU diplomats, the aid could even cover the financing of the purchase of combat aircraft for the Ukrainian Air Force, which gave rise to speculation about the possibility of supplying Ukraine with soviet-designed fighters used both in Ukraine and some countries of NATO's eastern flank. The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky has also asked US Congressmen to hand over such combat aircraft to Ukraine. The US Government responded to this appeal by pointing out that it was "looking at the possibility" of providing US aircraft to countries that would agree for such a transfer, but on the basis on their sovereign decision (which, taking into account possible retaliation – including military actions – from Russia, would make this operation virtually impossible).

On the other hand, in response to a proposal from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to transfer Polish aircraft to the disposal of the US government at a base in Germany, the Department of Defense assessed that, for logistical reasons, this proposal lacked "substantive rationale" and was not "tenable".

Options of supporting the Ukrainian Armed Forces

Given the very advanced stage of the Russian military operation against Ukraine and the lack of the possibility of longer training for Ukrainian personnel on the new equipment, any additional Western aid would have to cover systems known to the Ukrainian Armed Forces or easy to use. In terms of this first group of weapons, many types of heavy and light weapons, known and used by Ukrainian soldiers, can be found in the armed forces of the countries of NATO's eastern flank, especially Poland. Deliveries of these weapons could be carried out relatively quickly and – depending on the scope of their modernisation – their usage would only require a short training and instruction. However, these systems cannot be unilaterally handed over by any CEE state in the conditions of

the ongoing war, due to a possible response – including a military one – by the Russian Federation, which could interpret such aid as a direct involvement of a given state in the war and take hostile actions to deter other states from analogous attempts to support Kiev. Therefore, any possible reinforcement of Ukraine would have to be carried out by a wider program of NATO or the European Union, or – which would be less time-consuming – by the US Government. Regardless of the programme formula, the US government would have to be involved in it, because in fact only the US Armed Forces would be able to provide capabilities (both in terms of presence and transfer of equipment) in a relatively short time, to fill the gap that would arise in the defence systems of states that would decide to hand over more complex weapon systems to Ukraine.

Among the groups of weapons that can be transferred to Ukraine are:

Air defence systems

Based on the need to defend the Ukrainian airspace, prioritised by the Ukrainian side, a simpler solution (than the discussed supply of combat aircraft) could be the provision of short-range surface-to-air missile systems. The Polish Armed Forces still poses (these systems are also used by the Bulgarian Armed Forces) the S-125 NEWA (SA-3 Goa, 17 sets of 3 launchers) systems known to Ukrainian anti-aircraft units. In the 1990s, an attempt was made in Poland to modernise these systems, replacing analogue tube circuits with integrated circuits (the Ukrainian defence industry also undertook similar efforts). NEWA sets are capable of fighting air objects at low and medium altitudes (from 20 m to 18 km). Their maximum range is 24 km and the minimum range is 3.5 km. These systems in the Polish Armed Forces are planned to be withdrawn and replaced by new systems within the frameworks of the WISŁA and NAREW programs – their partial transfer would therefore not expose the Polish state to any large costs, but the gap created in the Polish air defence would have to be replaced by a temporary – until it acquires appropriate capabilities – deployment of the US air defence systems (MIM-104 PATRIOT) – or systems of other allies with such capabilities – to Poland (similarly to the NATO mission in Turkey launched in 2012). This would also enable faster training of Polish anti-aircraft personnel to use the US-made PATRIOT systems acquired by Poland.

The 2K12 Kub (SA-6 Gainful) and 9K33 Osa (SA-8 Gecko) systems are also in stocks of the Polish Armed Forces and other countries in the region (including Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary), which are also to be replaced in Poland by NAREW batteries. Nevertheless, their replacement – due to high mobility and assignment to anti-aircraft units of tactical units – by allied units could be more difficult.

Heavy equipment

The Polish Land Forces – similarly to the armies of other countries in the region – still have a large number of vehicles in stock, which are well known to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. These are, in particular, the T-72 MBT family (about 130 in the possession of the Ukrainian Armed Forces), the BMP IFVs and 122 mm artillery systems. Different variants of T-72 tanks (depending on the scale of national modernisation programmes) – apart from Poland (approx. 300 units), are also used in Bulgaria (90 units), the Czech Republic (120 units, of which 30 thoroughly modernised), Slovakia (30 units) and Hungary (44 units). In turn, the IFVs of the BMP family, apart from Poland (approx. 1,200 units), are also available in Bulgaria (90 units), the Czech Republic (approx. 120 units) and Slovakia (approx. 250 units). In terms of self-propelled 122 mm artillery sets, the 2S1 Goździk systems are available in Bulgaria (48 pieces) and Poland (approx. 220 pieces).⁵

In addition, there are hundreds of wheeled armoured personnel carriers, reconnaissance vehicles and towed artillery. Theoretically, with the help of military equipment from Central and Eastern Europe, it would be possible to arm units of the division level. Of course, the countries of the region, in the conditions of the intense political and military crisis between NATO and Russia, would not be able to afford such a dramatic breach in their defence resources. This equipment would therefore have to be quickly replenished by allies, especially the United States Armed Forces. The US programme could therefore include, for example, the temporary handover of the available equipment already stored in Europe as part of Advanced Prepositioned Stocks (which would have to be quickly replaced by equipment supplied from the USA) along with an appropriate intensive training package, and ultimately the transfer of available used American equipment (M1A2 tanks, M3 Bradley combat vehicles and M109 Paladin howitzers), which recipient countries would possibly have to modernise at their own expense. From the Polish perspective, it is justified because the Polish Armed Forces are partially switching to American equipment, and M3 Bradley combat vehicles could be a bridging solution until the entry of the Borsuk IFV to combat units.

Airplanes and helicopters

The Ukrainian government identifies combat aircraft as the most needed systems. However, their delivery and use may turn out to be a complex issue. The air fleets of NATO's eastern flank states include MiG-29 fighters used by Ukraine (Poland – 28, Slovakia – 12, Bulgaria – 15) and Su-25 attack aircraft (Bulgaria – 3). However, some Polish planes (16) have been modernised (including new avionics, communication, replacement of analogue devices with digital ones, etc.), so that their operation would have to require at least basic training for Ukrainian pilots, which for safety reasons could not be carried out on territory of the Republic of Poland. The issue of delivering these aircraft to Ukraine also turns out to be problematic (they would take off from a NATO base, entering the war zone, hence a more reasonable solution, although otherwise risky, would be land transport), assuming that despite the intense missile attacks, the Ukrainian air force still have bases from which

they could safely operate. In terms of replacing this capability in the air force of potential donors, it would also be necessary to provide allied support in a shorter period of time through an extensive air policing mission, and in the medium term through the transfer of used US F-16 fighters – replaced in the US Air Force by the F-35s (or e.g. Eurofighter from one of the European allies) – and support in the preparation of infrastructure (in this case, training assistance would not be needed, as Poland already has a training system for the F-16, which could also be used by other countries).

It might be easier to provide the Ukrainian side with combat helicopters (they do not require extensive back-up and airport infrastructure like planes) of the Mi-24 family. The armed forces of some NATO countries, including the armed forces of Bulgaria (6 units), the Czech Republic (7 Mi-24 and 10 Mi-35), Poland (28 units), Slovakia (14 units), and Hungary (8 units), have those machines.⁶ In the armed forces of individual countries, the gap could be filled by the permanent deployment in Poland of combat units of the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade stationed in Germany, and in the medium term by handing over the available American AH-64 Apache and AH-1Z Viper helicopters along with the appropriate training package.

In addition to heavy equipment, the armed forces of NATO's eastern flank also have large amounts of easy-to-use post-Soviet light equipment (9K38 Igła Man-portable anti-aircraft missile systems, 9K32 Strela-2, RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launchers) that can be used as equipment for volunteer subunits formed in Ukraine. However, the possibility of increasing military aid to Ukraine does not only apply to the countries of NATO's eastern flank. Western countries also have some of equipment that is simpler or already known to Ukrainian soldiers, such as HMMVW all-terrain vehicles, Carl Gustav grenade launchers and 60 and 98 mm mortars.

Conclusions

1. NATO countries should consider stepping up support to Ukraine as soon as possible, including through the supply of heavy military equipment. The maximum military weakening of Russia in Ukraine is in the interest of the entire transatlantic community.
2. The military support provided by the West, including the United States, to Ukraine before 2021 should be considered limited (e.g. due to the problem of temporary limits of the supply of lethal weapons) and, as it turned out, also insufficient to deter Russian aggression.
3. Poland and other countries of NATO's eastern flank have large resources of weapons compatible with those used in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (including the S-125 NEWA anti-aircraft defence systems, T-72 tanks, BMP IFVs, Mi-24 helicopters). However, these systems cannot be unilaterally handed over in the conditions of the ongoing war, due to a possible response – including a military one – by the Russian Federation, which could interpret such aid as a direct involvement of a given state in the war and take hostile actions to deter other states from analogous attempts to

support Kiev. Therefore, any possible rearmament of Ukraine would have to be carried out by wider programme of NATO or the European Union, or – which is less time-consuming – by the government of the United States.

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¹ Peter J. Marzalik, Aric Toler, “Lethal Weapons to Ukraine: A Primer,” *Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/lethal-weapons-to-ukraine-a-primer/>.

² See more Justyna Gotkowska Piotr Szymański, „NATO member states on arms deliveries to Ukraine, *OSW COMMENTARY* No 423, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2022-02-03/nato-member-states-arms-deliveries-to-ukraine>.

³ “U.S. Security Cooperation With Ukraine FACT SHEET,” Department of State, accessed March 9, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>.

⁴ “Arming Ukraine: 17,000 Anti-Tank Weapons in 6 Days and a Clandestine Cybercorps,” *New York Times* March 6, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/us/politics/us-ukraine-weapons.html>.

⁵ *Military Balance 2021*, (London: Routledge 2021).

⁶ *Ibid.*

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