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Brief

Western Military Assistance

Russia's War in Ukraine Series No. 10

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Moscow apparently believed that the West was too weak, too dependent on Russian energy, and too fragmented to react meaningfully to its aggression against Ukraine. In this, as in many other aspects of the war, it miscalculated. The West responded rapidly and cohesively with robust political condemnation, punitive sanctions and with military assistance in the form of lethal weapons, equipment and training. While this military assistance was not the direct intervention called for by Ukraine's leadership – notably in its requests for Western states to impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine – and while Ukraine has asked for more, and for more sophisticated, weaponry than donor states have supplied, this aspect of the West's support has perhaps more than any other changed the course of the conflict.

Throughout the war, the West has consistently made clear its strong support for Ukraine and provided it with material assistance. US and European leaders have condemned Russia at every opportunity and collectively branded it "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area".[1] They have shared intelligence publicly to undermine Russia's claims and actions and visited Kyiv. The US and EU imposed their first sanctions on 21 February in response to Putin's recognition of the independence of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and have steadily tightened sanctions regimes as the war has continued. According to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy's Ukraine Support Tracker (June 2022, including data to 1 July), the EU and its members states have provided Ukraine with 17 billion euros in financial assistance and 3 billion euros in humanitarian assistance, and the US close to 10 billion and 9 billion euros respectively.[2] European countries were, by mid-July, host to more than 4 million Ukrainian refugees.[3]

Even before Russia began its full-scale invasion, however, NATO and its members made very clear that their armed forces would not directly intervene to assist Ukraine. As he withdrew US forces from training missions and urged American citizens to leave the country, President Joe Biden warned that he would not risk using US forces even to assist an evacuation of US citizens. "That's a world war when Americans and Russia start shooting at one another," he stated.[4] The West has held this line throughout the war but has supplied Ukraine with arms in significant amounts. It has also become increasingly emboldened, stepping over earlier self-imposed restrictions, such as its reluctance to provide 'offensive' and longer-range weapons.

Naturally, Russia has protested and threatened the West, variously claiming that arms donations are dangerous and destabilising, that arms convoys are "legitimate military targets" and that the supply of longer-range weapons would provoke Russia to "strike at those targets that we have not yet been hitting".[5] It has also made (mostly unconfirmed) claims to have targeted and destroyed Western-supplied arms inside Ukraine, presumably intended to send messages to both Ukraine and donor states.[6]

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Defensive and Offensive Weapons

Western states have provided security assistance to Ukraine since its independence in 1991, often in non-materiel programmes such as defence reform, education, and training. They increased levels of support after Russia's annexation of Crimea and

intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014, with the US providing by far the greatest contribution: between 2014 and mid-2021, it committed more than $8.7 billion in security assistance including training, mentoring and doctrinal support as well as non-lethal equipment provision – items such as counter-battery radars, night and thermal vision devices and secure communication systems that helped the Ukrainian Armed Forces to operate their Soviet-legacy inventory with greater efficiency and effectiveness.[7] In 2017, the US agreed to also supply lethal weapons allowing Ukraine to acquire, among other items, Javelin anti-armour missiles and patrol boats.[8]

Western assistance began to ramp up in early 2022 in response to requests from Ukraine. Early donations included US and UK anti-armour missiles and short-range air defence missiles from the Baltic states.[9] These systems, portable and easy to operate and maintain, were not only intended to assist Ukraine in a defensive war against advancing armour, but also to attack occupying forces in the insurgency that most observers thought would follow Ukraine's inevitable and rapid capitulation to Russia's numerically superior armed forces. Such systems appear to have been highly effective against Russian targets and are claimed to have been instrumental in turning the course of the early war.[10]

Western donors, though, were donors, through, were keen to stress that their donations were of 'defensive' systems only.[11] The distinction between 'offensive' and 'defensive' weapons is blurry, but offensive systems are broadly those that can take the fight to the enemy (e.g. the main battle tanks, armoured combat vehicle, artillery pieces, combat aircraft and attack helicopters codified in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe). But most weapons systems can be used for both offence and defence. As Ukraine's foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba has pointed out, "When it comes to Ukraine, there should be no such difference as between defensive weapons and offensive weapons. Because every weapon used in the territory of Ukraine, by the Ukrainian army, against a foreign aggressor is defensive by definition."[12]

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The War in the East

The defensive-offensive dilemma was largely resolved when the war shifted to the east. Here, Russia's forces, concentrated on smaller fronts and closer to their own supply lines would be better placed to practise their preferred form of warfare – a war of attrition, dominated by artillery battles. To survive, let alone prevail, Ukraine would need long-range fires in substantial numbers. In response, the West ramped up the supply of more offensive weapons, beginning with items such as former Soviet tanks and US Switchblade drones.[13]

In this phase of the war, systems such as the 70 km-range US High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), which Ukraine has used to strike higher formation command and control centres and logistics depots behind the front lines, have proven very effective.[14] Alongside Western-supplied artillery, Ukraine employed such systems to increase its daily rate of artillery fire from 1-2 000 rounds to around 6 000 (compared to Russia's 12 000).[15] But US worries about Russian reactions, especially if Ukraine was to use HIMARS to strike inside Russia itself, are among the factors that have prevented it from supplying longer-range (300 km) Army Tactical Missile System variants.[16] Its supply of HIMARS has also been cautious – at the end of July, the US had sent a total of 12 systems (three tranches of four) to Ukraine (from a national inventory of likely more than 400).[17] Germany and the UK are also reported to have supplied rocket artillery to Ukraine. Germany has provided three MLRS MARS II (from an inventory of 41), and the UK an undisclosed number of MLRS to be backfilled by transfers of mothballed systems from Norway.[18]

Donor Dilemmas

Fear of escalation is not the only factor limiting what donors are ready to provide. A leading concern is the extent to which donors can supply Ukraine while at the same time maintaining sufficient stocks to meet their own security needs and commitments; and, related, that they will be able to afford to replenish their stocks if they have donated frontline equipment. Although donations have not matched Ukraine's requests, when measured against donor defence budgets and inventories they have been substantial.[19] By the end of June the US had provided 23.8 billion euros in military assistance (estimated replacement costs of donated weapons and equipment and financial aid with military purposes), the UK 3.8 billion euros, and the EU countries and institutions 7.5 billion euros.[20] In early June, Bloomberg reported that the war had consumed a third of the US inventory of Javelins and a quarter of its Stingers.[21] Concerns

regarding replenishment are exacerbated by the apparently limited capacity of manufacturers to produce replacements.[22]

To mitigate these concerns some, usually larger, countries have provided replacements to donors, most prominently to those European allies that have provided the ex-Soviet systems with which the Ukrainian armed forces are already familiar. This backfilling has mostly taken the form of (US) grants to purchase replacement American military hardware, and deterrence and reassurance deployments.[23] Schemes that involve the direct transfer of equipment to donors, including the infamous MiG deal and an arrangement by which Germany would replace donated Polish ex-Soviet tanks with Leopards from its own inventory, have proved less successful.[24]

Furthermore, both the US and the EU member states have established financial mechanisms to compensate for their transfers of military weapons and equipment to Ukraine. The US Congress has passed a $40 billion support package that includes provisions for the administration to withdraw and subsequently replace equipment from military inventories (drawdown), as well as to directly purchase weapons for Ukraine. Between August 2021 and July 2022, the drawdown provisions had been used on 17 occasions to provide $6.2 billion of equipment from US military stockpiles.[25] The EU, meanwhile, has used its European Peace Facility to provide Ukraine with 2.5 billion euros worth of military assistance.[26] The peace facility, established in 2021, was intended to finance operational actions under the Common Foreign and Security Policy with military or defence implications, but has been used to compensate member states for the equipment they have supplied to Ukraine.[27]

It is essential to match, as far as possible, the West's donations and Ukraine's needs

A second concern for donors is ensuring they can provide what Ukraine needs. Ukraine has asked for equipment of types and in quantities that the West, through a combination of caution and limited capacity, has been unable to provide. In June, for example, one of President Zelenskyy's advisers tweeted that Ukraine needed "heavy weapons parity" to include 1 000 155mm howitzers, 300 MLRS [Multiple Launch Rocket System], 500 tanks, 2 000 armoured vehicles and 1 000 drones.[28] Given the disparity between demand and supply, it is essential to match, as far as possible, the West's donations and Ukraine's needs. Naturally, Ukraine understands best the war it is fighting, but its unfamiliarity with many western systems means that it may not always be the best judge of its own requirements. The HIMARS systems provided by the US, arguably as iconic in the war in the east and south as the Bayraktar TB2 drone was in the battle for Kyiv, was apparently the US response to Ukraine's request for the more heavily armed, but slower and more maintenance heavy M270 MLRS.[29]

To better coordinate assistance between donors and Ukraine, and among donors, a coalition of nations has established the International Donors Coordination Cell at US European Command, Stuttgart. The cell, containing both Ukrainian and donor personnel, attempts to rapidly match demand and supply, often through complicated multi-party arrangements that bring together weapon systems, ammunition, documentation, training packages, and transportation.[30]

Conclusion

Although Western nations made clear at an early point that they would not intervene militarily in Russia's war of aggression, they have supplied military equipment to Ukraine in substantial quantities. This type of assistance is not unprecedented: the proxy wars of the Cold War provide many examples in which the US and USSR supplied large numbers of weapons to foreign combatants. The unwritten protocols of the Cold War ensured that none of these escalated to superpower conflict and Western nations could be confident, despite Russia's protestations, that supplying Ukraine was unlikely to provoke Russia to attack them militarily.

Nonetheless, the West's military assistance has been uneven and broadly cautious. It has stepped over certain self-imposed thresholds only as Ukraine has continued to show both resolve and skill and as Russia has refrained from directly attacking donor states. Ukraine's victories are Ukraine's alone, but it is doubtful that they could have been achieved without military assistance from donor states. The present war of attrition shows no sign of ending, but its outcome will depend, to a large extent, on the continued political will of Western nations to supply weapons and equipment as Russia's military strength steadily degrades.

Endnotes

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[19] For some nations more than others. For several reasons, it is not necessarily helpful to compare national donations. These include data availability, an inability to assess the military (as opposed to financial) value of donations, and what to select as an appropriate measure for comparison. Nonetheless, according to calculations on data from the Kiel Institute, the top NATO and EU donors of bilateral military assistance (as a percentage of GDP) are Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom. Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, and Turkey are at the bottom of the table with no recorded bilateral military assistance. Germany, which has received much public criticism of its lack of support is, by this measure at least, close to the middle of the table, some way ahead of other larger NATO nations such as Italy, France, and Spain.
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