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Closing Ukraine's Weapons Gap

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Foreword

The extraordinary resistance of the Ukrainian people and armed forces in the face of Russia's unprovoked invasion has prevented the Kremlin from achieving its initial aim of overthrowing the Ukrainian state and replacing it with a client regime.

Western training teams and supplies of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile launchers were crucial in enabling Ukraine to defeat and force back the Russian assaults on Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv and Mykolaiv during the first phase of the invasion. The US and UK in particular took the lead in rushing significant proportions of their Javelin and NLAW (Next-generation Light Anti-tank Weapon) stocks to Ukraine in time for them to be used with devastating effect against Russian tank and armoured-vehicle columns on all fronts. However, the expenditure rate of these weapons has been far higher than any of the procurement policies which produced them had accounted for before the conflict, and the initial rate of supply cannot be maintained. Furthermore, as Russian forces concentrate on large-scale offensive operations against Ukrainian positions in the more open terrain of the Donbas, shoulder-fired weapons like NLAWs and Javelins used by light infantry are no longer sufficient.

Ukraine urgently requires artillery, tanks, armoured vehicles and above all ammunition of all kinds to resist the current Russian offensive. These same categories of heavy equipment will be vitally important to the success of Ukrainian counter-offensive operations, which are already underway around Kherson and Kharkiv. However, there must be realism about the timeframes to set up the logistics, maintenance and training needed for Ukrainian forces to operate NATO standard equipment. In the short term, Soviet- and Russian-made systems will be of more use.

The Russian army has taken catastrophic losses during the first two months of its invasion and has limited regular forces which it can still draw on for reserves. If Ukraine can be supplied with enough of the necessary equipment, it can exhaust the Russian army's capacity for offensive operations and start to take back territory. However, it will have to be a sustained effort, and the best time to start was yesterday.

Justin Bronk

Senior Research Fellow for Airpower and Technology at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

Executive Summary: The Growing Gap Between Ukraine's Equipment Needs and Its Supply

As Russia launches a significant offensive in the east of Ukraine, the war is entering a critical phase. Yet as the initial shock of the invasion wears off and the daily global media coverage of the conflict evolves, there is a risk that acute political interest could wane.

There is a danger that, just when the Ukrainians most need Western support to repel the Russian offensive, our efforts will fall short of helping them do so effectively.

Unless the costs of maintaining the conflict are too painful for Russia to bear, the Kremlin will not be under the pressure necessary to end hostilities. The best possible outcome for Ukraine relies on the West helping to close the “weapons gap”: the mismatch between the equipment Ukrainians have and the equipment they need to deploy quickly to match the shifting nature of the conflict.

Closing the weapons gap requires the following three-step plan:

1. Supply the right mixture of military materiel to Ukraine.
2. Provide logistical support on training, maintenance and repair.
3. Improve international coordination of supply.

Adopting this approach would see Ukraine supplied with the maximum possible amount of Soviet-era equipment its armed forces are trained to use, while also training them to increasingly use modern NATO equipment. Replacing the current state of affairs – with President Zelensky having to go country-by-country with a list of equipment needs, and a series of ad hoc bilateral agreements – our recommended approach would see a new grouping, such as an emergency response and assessment team, oversee coordination and align Ukraine's needs more effectively with supply.

Natia Seskuria, associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and a lecturer in Russian politics, commented exclusively for this report:

“The Western rhetoric has significantly shifted since Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At the beginning of the war, Russia was expected to achieve its initial military aims of occupying a considerable part of Ukraine and gaining a swift advantage on the battlefield. However, Ukraine's resistance in conjunction with the Western military aid made it possible for Kyiv to inflict significant damage to the Russian army and prompted the West to provide heavier weaponry such as tanks, artillery and long-range air-defence systems that have long been part of Ukraine's wish list.

In light of Russia's humiliating performance in the battle for Kyiv, the Ukrainian military has destroyed the image of the invincibility of the Russian military. However, as the war has entered the second and possibly the deadlier phase, with a wave of the Russian attacks in the Donbas region and open threats to spill the conflict over to Moldova, the West cannot afford to lose time. Ukraine is fighting a war for the future of the European security and as long as the West supplies the right mixture of weapons and training, Kyiv will be in a position to repel the Russian aggression against the odds."

This paper sets out how the international community can best support Ukraine to meet the objective of making the war unsustainable for Russia and maximising the chances of a positive and sustainable outcome for Kyiv.

Equipment Supply to Ukraine: The State of Play

Ukraine needs equipment both for the conflict as it stands today and for the conflict that will evolve in the coming days and weeks. Above all, this means having equipment that Ukrainian forces can deploy relatively quickly and that is tailored to their needs in the Donbas.

For example, in response to the fighting in and around Kyiv, the US and other countries rapidly sought to provide the Ukrainian military with weapons and equipment for what many expected to be a short war: sniper rifles, helmets, medical kits, encrypted communications, lots of ammunition, and portable, shoulder-held Stinger and Javelin missiles.

As the fighting has shifted to the eastern regions around Donbas, the West has focused on sending longer-range weapons like howitzers (long-range artillery weapons), anti-aircraft systems, anti-ship missiles, armed drones, armoured trucks, personnel carriers, and even tanks and fighter aircraft.

But, according to Ukraine itself, the weapons they are being sent differ from what they need. Understanding this properly is vital if we are to ensure commitments of support are channelled as effectively as possible in the next stage of the conflict. As Russia launches a significant offensive in the east of Ukraine and shifts to high-intensity warfare, the needs of the Ukrainian military will evolve; we must ensure that the kit being sent matches the demand as it changes.

Baron West of Spithead, former First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff, speaking to us for this paper, added, "The demands for changing weapons and ammunition inevitably stem from high-intensity warfare. The war in Ukraine has swung from lower to higher intensity with the consequent increase in different weapon and ammunition demands. This has to be addressed if the brave Ukrainian forces are to continue their struggle successfully."

The international community has sent a considerable number of weapons to support the Ukraine military. In an Annex included at the end of this paper, we have catalogued the type and number of weapons Ukraine has requested, and what commitments have been made by NATO and individual countries to meet those requests.

The data in the Annex makes two key points clear:

1. Ukraine is primarily requesting specific, older, Soviet-type weaponry. However, in many cases Ukraine is receiving newer weapons that require additional training, which in some cases has not been provided.
2. A coordinated approach is necessary. As the conflict evolves, so will the needs of the Ukrainian military. NATO countries should work together to ensure support is coordinated to make all aid as effective as possible.

However, a key caveat to our Annex is that the data it contains are based on the latest *publicly* available information; many countries have sent an undisclosed number of weapons or have not made their delivery intentions public. Therefore, we cannot see the whole picture.

Effective Supply and Support: The Right Weapons, the Right Training and the Right Coordination

Effective supply doesn't just mean shipments of the right weapons; it also means a broader and evolving strategy of training and coordination that works to address the gap between the military materiel Ukraine has and what it needs to continue to effectively counter the Russian invasion.

In order to close the weapons gap, the international community needs to take urgent action to:

1. Supply the right mixture of military materiel to Ukraine.
2. Provide logistical support for training, maintenance and repair.
3. Improve international coordination of supply.

We set out more detail on each of these in the sections that follow.

1. Supplying Ukraine With the Right Weapons Mix

Ukrainian forces are better equipped to use older, Soviet-style weapons because they are trained in how to employ them effectively. NATO has some access to Soviet-legacy weaponry through its Eastern European partners. These countries are willing to help, but they are only prepared to provide such weaponry on the basis that NATO replaces them with newer weapons to ensure they can maintain their own defence capabilities.

As a result, there is urgent need for an agreement between NATO and countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Cyprus to provide new weapons to these countries if they provide their older, Soviet weapons to Ukraine. For example, Slovakia gave Ukraine a Russian-made S-300 air-defence system and in return will receive additional equipment from NATO allies.¹ Similarly, the US and the UK could also fund Ukraine to have Soviet-era equipment repaired in countries such as Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic.

Speaking to Aaron David Miller of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, former US Defence Secretary Robert M Gates explained: "We don't really have time to get a lot of heavy American armour into Ukraine, and there isn't time to train the Ukrainian military [...] But there is a lot of former Soviet military equipment still in the arsenals of the East European states." He also said that the United

States “ought to be ransacking the arsenals” of former Warsaw Pact countries for anti-aircraft systems and armour, “with a promise from the US to backfill over time with our equipment to our NATO allies.”²

NATO members must urgently identify which countries have that type of equipment and how we can encourage them to send it to Ukraine, making sure that countries are making the most of their surplus supplies. Some potential options are:

- Poland is willing to supply MiG-29 Fulcrum jets, which are Russian military aircraft and therefore familiar to Ukrainian troops. In return Poland wants the US to provide used aircraft with similar capabilities, essentially a like-for-like swap. It has urged other countries that possess similar Soviet aircraft to do the same.³
- Among other weapons, Cyprus possesses Russian-built 9K330 Tor short-range and 9K37 Buk medium-range surface-to-air missiles, as well as a sizeable fleet of more than 50 T-80s. Cyprus could give up these to Ukraine and in return get modern US replacements to improve its ageing artillery.⁴
- Both Bulgaria and Greece possess S-300 air-defence systems, and it would make sense for them to give these to Ukraine in exchange for more modern Patriot or other Western-built systems.⁵

2. Logistical Support for Training, Maintenance and Repair

As the war in Ukraine enters a new phase, the problem is not just what weapon systems NATO countries can provide Ukrainian forces. Ukraine also faces issues accessing training operators who can quickly train military personnel to use new, relatively advanced equipment, as well as challenges with the maintenance, repair and logistical arrangements needed once equipment has been provided.

The US, the UK and others have begun to train Ukrainian forces on military equipment they are less familiar with. The US, for example, has started a “train the trainers” programme in which a small number of Ukrainians will be trained on US howitzers outside of Ukraine before being reintroduced back into the country to train their colleagues.⁶

In addition, recent reports suggest the UK is training Ukrainian forces in the UK on how to use 120 British armoured vehicles before returning with them to fight in the war against Russia.⁷ There are similar reported training programmes in Poland in the use of anti-aircraft defence systems,⁸ and in Ukraine on British-supplied anti-tank missiles.⁹

In addition, the US is working with other countries to provide the spare parts the Ukraine air force needs to help make 20 military aircraft operational. As the fighting continues, it is not only the flow of new

equipment, but also of parts and munitions that will help Ukrainian forces keep their existing equipment operational.

On maintenance and repair, the focus so far has been on Russian-made or Soviet-era equipment that Ukraine knows how to maintain, service and repair. Western militaries have an opportunity to work with Ukraine's neighbours to support the maintenance, repair and logistical support for this kind of equipment. Czech firms, for example, are repairing Soviet-era T-64 tanks and armoured vehicles used by the Ukrainian military.¹⁰

Supply Processes

But within NATO itself, defence companies in many countries are facing pandemic-related delays. Many firms are still stuck in "peacetime mode," where response and delivery times are slow. Because of the pandemic, they are also facing supply-chain and workforce limitations that mean production capacity is limited. This is hindering the defence sector's ability to meet higher demand. US weapons stockpiles are running low, and the country has already donated a third of its Javelin inventory to the conflict.

The right equipment is only valuable if the supply is right. As part of our plan for improved support for Ukraine, it is important that supply is moved onto a wartime footing, with maximum possible quantities provided to help on the front line.

This supply process should be efficiently managed to ensure the right equipment is getting to the right place, giving those sending the supplies confidence. Best practice in this area would include ensuring there has been a clear needs provision, tracking weaponry and keeping the right records. This is important not just for the immediate conflict but for ensuring the equipment stays in the right hands post-conflict.

3. Improved International Coordination in Supplying Weapons

The realities on the ground, particularly in the Donbas region, suggest we need to evolve our approach to weapons supply. The current approach is disjointed, and bilateral agreements between Ukraine and individual countries will not be enough.

- Supplying, repairing and maintaining military equipment in Ukraine is a matter of urgency and is essential to avoiding defeat, because Ukraine is not able to replenish their equipment losses like Russia.
- Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba has spoken out about how nations are taking too long to adjust their thinking on what to send to Ukraine as the war is progressing.
- This approach will therefore also require a longer-term view that takes into account Ukraine's needs

now and in the future.

A key element of enhancing support will therefore be better coordinating supply to fit Ukraine's need. Such an approach should transcend patchy bilateral supply but not fall into the trap of creating, in effect, a NATO supply mechanism.

On 26 April, the US hosted over 40 countries at its Ramstein Air Base in Germany to discuss how to speed up and better coordinate the delivery of weapons to Ukraine. All NATO countries were present, as well as 14 non-NATO nations.¹¹ Reuters reported that, after the meeting, it was announced that the forum would continue as a monthly "contact group", which would meet to discuss Ukraine's defence needs.¹²

This high-level coordination is welcomed and should be built upon and sustained throughout the conflict as Ukraine's military needs evolve.

Implementing an Emergency Response and Assessment Team

To help overcome logistical and political hurdles, Ukraine and its allies could draw upon established models for coordinating international aid for disaster relief. One such model would see the US, the UK, Germany, France and Ukraine create a single emergency response and assessment team. The team would be responsible for creating a single coordination platform to mobilise military assistance to Ukrainian forces.

The US, for example, has recently appointed a retired three-star general, Terry Wolff, to coordinate the military assistance the country is sending to Ukraine. The UK, France and Germany should also nominate a single person to work with Wolff and a Ukrainian counterpart on the emergency response team. Working closely with allies (such as Poland, Turkey, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), the emergency response and assessment team would be the focal point for liaising, responsible for three primary objectives:

1. Provide a single structure for Ukraine to define equipment priorities and request military aid.
2. Facilitate effective and coherent sharing of information between supportive countries.
3. Provide a predictable and effective coordination mechanism for supplying weapons, providing training on Western equipment and maintaining and repairing weapons.

A single coordination platform would speed up the process of identifying the pipeline of equipment Ukrainian forces need, sourcing that equipment (and any relevant training) from allies, and developing appropriate supply arrangements.

Conclusion

As this paper sets out, while the international community has largely been effective and responsive in supporting Ukraine in the conflict, this assistance is now in danger of falling short at the most critical time.

Commenting on this paper, Phil Wilson, a former member of the House of Commons Defence Committee and political consultant at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, said: “The West’s unity has shocked Putin. His invasion of Ukraine is a wake-up call. This paper shows NATO countries need to move to a state of perpetual readiness, which means having the right military equipment in the right place at the right time. It’s not just about the front line, but also about how that front line is supplied by streamlined logistics providing a rapid supply of ammunition and military equipment.”

While Russian forces have been effectively pushed back across most of the initial Russian invasion routes, the renewed offensive in the Donbas will, most likely, come to define the conflict. How this offensive plays out will shape the terms of the eventual end to the conflict. Putting in the place the right support for Ukraine now will lay the best possible foundations to ensure the war ends on reasonable and enduring terms. As this paper sets out, the following three-step plan is required to close the weapons gap.

1. Deliver the right mixture of weapons and materiel for the changing war.

With no end in sight and expectations of a perpetual war high, it is essential that NATO send a combination of Soviet weaponry that Ukraine can use in the immediate term along with more Western weaponry that Ukraine can learn to use in the longer term. Ukraine has proved capable on the defensive front, but there is also demand for more offensive weapons.

2. Provide logistical support on training, maintenance and repair of weaponry.

As the war drags on and losses mount, replenishing front lines with fresh troops, supplies, weaponry and supply lines is critical. The West can aid Ukraine by increasing the flow of maintenance and repair equipment. It can further increase Ukraine’s domestic abilities to repair its own equipment by establishing more training sites for Ukrainian military personnel over the borders in NATO-allied countries.

Additionally, logistical support should also include a focus on ensuring communications systems are properly maintained. For example, in cases where Putin strategically cuts off communication, for instance mobile-phone towers before siege and destruction, ensuring that communication is coordinated via drones and other systems will be important.

3. Improve the international coordination of supply.

This means creating a more coordinated, agile system that can more quickly align what NATO and other countries can offer in terms of meeting specific equipment needs of Ukrainian forces, as well as delivering training, maintenance, repair and logistical services to support that equipment.

[Download the Annex outlining Ukraine's weapons gap.](#)

Charts created with [Highcharts](#) unless otherwise credited.

Footnotes

1. ^ <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-04-08/slovakia-gives-s-300-air-defence-system-to-ukraine-prime-minister>
 2. ^ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/19/world/europe/us-ukraine-weaponry.html>
 3. ^ <https://www.rferl.org/a/poland-mig29s-handover-us/31743397.html>
 4. ^ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2022/04/08/why-cyprus-might-transfer-its-russian-made-military-arsenal-to-ukraine/?sh=10e4e8bc6656>
 5. ^ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2022/04/03/supplying-ukraine-russian-built-military-hardware-will-help-kyiv-and-enhance-nato-interoperability/?sh=15ccae023ba1>
 6. ^ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3002920/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/>
 7. ^ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/apr/21/uk-training-ukrainian-soldiers-weapons-equipment>
 8. ^ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/apr/21/uk-training-ukrainian-soldiers-weapons-equipment>
 9. ^ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sas-troops-are-training-local-forces-in-ukraine-32vs5bjzb>
 10. ^ <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/04/20/czech-firms-repair-ukraine-tanks/>
 11. ^ https://breakingdefense.com/2022/04/from-jordan-to-japan-us-invites-14-non-nato-nations-to-ukraine-defense-summit/?utm_campaign=BD%20Daily&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=211078311&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_wSWdY1HOGxrjuFPCXfP5Sr5ENRmMPJXx5QuBGFx8u6dhCy_PsBqvsMXNi07FvXkJ6J1UsmqzWc9LWSiO4h
 12. ^ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-hosts-ukraine-talks-germany-war-enters-critical-phase-2022-04-25/>
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