

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Self Defense: It Is Time for the U.S. to Provide Weapons to Ukraine

*Luke Coffey*

In the coming weeks, President Donald Trump will decide whether to approve the sale of U.S. weapons, including advanced anti-tank weapons, to Ukraine. Russia invaded Ukraine. Russia illegally occupies Crimea. Russia provoked and now supports a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine that did not previously exist. Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine is the victim. Every country has the right to self-defense. The people of Ukraine have shown a commitment to the transatlantic community, and the U.S. should provide advanced weapons and other tactical enablers, such as secure communications, to the Ukrainians. However, doing so should not be viewed as a single silver bullet in solving the crisis and ending Russian aggression.

### America's Interests

It is in America's interest that Ukraine remain independent and sovereign, and maintains the ability to choose its own destiny without outside interference.

Ukraine is in the midst of a national struggle that will determine its future geopolitical orientation—the West or Moscow. The outcome of this struggle will have long-term implications for the transatlantic community and the notion of national sovereign-

ty. Since 2014, almost 5 percent of Ukraine's landmass and more than half of its coastline have been under illegal Russian occupation in Crimea.<sup>1</sup>

In eastern Ukraine, Russia and Russian-backed separatists continue to propagate a war that has resulted in more than 10,000 lives lost, 23,000 wounded,<sup>2</sup> and an internally displaced population of almost 1.8 million people<sup>3</sup>; inflicted heavy damage on the Ukrainian economy; and slowed Ukraine's progress toward deepening ties in the transatlantic community.

### Fighting in the Donbas

The separatists fighting in eastern Ukraine are Russian-backed, Russian-trained, and Russian-equipped. These soldiers are kitted out in the latest military gear and wearing uniforms with Russian military insignias. Military hardware such as T-72B3 tanks—which are not in the Ukrainian military's inventory—are being used in eastern Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> In an era of prolific social media, this kind of major incursion can no longer be hidden from the outside world.

There is no reason to believe that the cease-fire agreement will last when many such agreements have failed in the past. At this moment of crisis for Ukraine, the U.S. should be ready to help the people of Ukraine defend themselves by sending vital weapons and equipment in a responsible way.

### The Time Is Now

So far, the U.S. has provided around \$750 million in military hardware to Ukraine, all of which has been “non-lethal.”<sup>5</sup> When the U.S. decides to provide weapons, especially advanced weapon systems, to a partner the decision should never be taken lightly.

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4786>

The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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During the early days of 2014, the idea of introducing advanced U.S. weaponry onto the battlefield would have been dangerous, as the Ukrainian military was in disarray. However, the situation since 2014 has changed drastically. The U.S. should supply weapons to the Ukraine now, for the following three reasons:

- 1. Ukraine has the right to self-defense.** Each country has the inherent right to self-defense. In the case of Ukraine, Russia is the invader and the aggressor. Ukraine is the victim. Russia is clearly interested only in escalating violence and not in helping deliver peace. Various cease-fires over the years have merely bought Russia and the separatists more time. The idea that Moscow is committed to a peaceful resolution to the war in eastern Ukraine is fanciful.
- 2. Ukraine is committed to the transatlantic community.** In 2014, it was unclear in which direction Ukraine was heading. This is no longer the case. The Ukrainian people have shown, whether on the streets of the Maidan or via the ballot box through multiple elections, that they see their future as part of the West, not under Russian domination. As recently as 2013, closer ties with the West were discouraged by Ukraine's leaders. Since Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovich's disposal from office in February 2014 this has all changed. The current president, Petro Poroshenko, is committed to closer relations with the West and to resisting Russian aggression.
- 3. The frontlines are relatively stabilized.** When Russia first backed the separatists, the situation on the ground was chaotic. Nobody knew how far

the separatists would go and when they would be stopped. The Ukrainian military was in disarray, and flooding the battlefield with advanced Western weaponry would have been dangerous. The situation is now different. A frontline and a traditional linear battlefield now exist. The Ukrainian military has shown its ability to defend territory. Thanks to international training, the Ukrainian military is professional, capable, and has demonstrated their ability to handle advanced weapons.

The exact types of weapons needed are best determined by U.S. and Ukrainian military experts on the ground with detailed knowledge of the local security situation, the capabilities of the Ukrainian military, and the capabilities of both the separatists and the Russian forces supporting their attacks. In general, the following capabilities are urgently needed by the Ukrainian military:

- **Anti-tank/armor weapons** (especially on account of the continued use of Russian T-72BM tanks by the separatists).
- **Counter-battery radars.** These would allow Ukrainian forces to determine the origin of artillery strikes so they can respond quickly and accordingly. The U.S. has provided some but more are needed.
- **Increased secure communications equipment and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).** These would significantly improve situational awareness on the battlefield and the coordination of effective military actions to counter separatist efforts.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Daniel Kochis, "Crimea Is Not Russia," *Real Clear World*, August 25, 2016, [http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2016/08/25/crimea\\_is\\_not\\_russia\\_112010.html](http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2016/08/25/crimea_is_not_russia_112010.html) (accessed November 21, 2017).

2 "Nearly 10,000 Ukrainians Killed, 23,000 Wounded Since War Started," *Kyiv Post*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/nearly-10000-ukrainians-killed-23000-wounded-since-russian-aggression-started.html> (accessed November 21, 2017).

3 National Radio Company of Ukraine, "Ukraine's Social Policy Ministry Reports 1.8 Million IDPs," May 31, 2016, <http://www.nrcu.gov.ua/en/news.html?newsID=26431> (accessed November 21, 2017).

4 Joseph Trevithick, "This Tank Has Become an Icon of Russia's Secret War in Ukraine," *War Is Boring*, June 6, 2016, <https://warisboring.com/this-tank-has-become-an-icon-of-russias-secret-war-in-ukraine-19711a6b7bae#.3wdhu5hqy> (accessed November 21, 2017).

5 Tara Palmeri, "Trump to Be Presented with \$47M Deal to Arm Ukraine Against Russia," *ABC News*, November 17, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-presented-47m-deal-arm-ukraine-russia/story?id=51235203> (accessed November 21, 2017).

6 The U.S. should also continuously evaluate the effectiveness of equipment it sends to Ukraine. Sophisticated Russian technology has rendered some recently provided equipment largely useless. For example, in 2016, the U.S. supplied 72 Raven RQ-11B Analog mini-drones to Ukraine at a cost of \$12 million; the analog drones proved ineffective against Russian-supplied electronic warfare, and many were jammed or hacked.

- **More freedom of movement for U.S. trainers.** U.S. troops involved with training and mentoring the Ukrainian Armed Forces are restricted to locations west of the Dnieper River. This prevents U.S. trainers from observing Ukrainian soldiers on the frontlines.

### Raising the Cost for Moscow

The U.S. should help Ukraine defend itself. Providing weapons and the advanced defensive capabilities will raise the cost to Moscow for further Russian aggression. Also, the symbolism attached to providing weapons to Ukraine should not be understated—in international affairs symbolism matters. In order to ensure America’s interests in Ukraine are met, the U.S should:

- **Supply weapons to Ukraine.** Every country has the right to self-defense. As authorized by the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act, the U.S. should appropriate funds to increase its assistance to the Ukrainian military to include anti-armor weapons, anti-aircraft weapons, and small-arms;
- **Improve the quality of non-lethal support to Ukraine.** The U.S. has provided non-lethal support to Ukraine since 2014 in the form of cold-weather gear, military rations, radios, counter-battery radars, and UAVs. While such support is welcome, the U.S. needs to improve the quality of equipment that it provides, especially in terms of secure communications and more capable UAVs.

- **Continue joint exercises with Ukrainian forces.** U.S.-led and NATO-led training exercises in western Ukraine have helped create a professional and capable Ukrainian military. This is in America’s long-term interest. Crucially, U.S. trainers and mentors should be able to operate across the whole country and not be restricted to west of the Dnieper River. This will help the U.S. have a better understanding of the training requirements for the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

- **Understand that weapons are not a silver bullet.** U.S. policymakers should understand that weapons are not a silver bullet to end the crisis in Ukraine. Providing such materiel should only be done as one part of the larger strategy to rein in Russian ambitions in the region.<sup>7</sup>

### Supporting Ukraine

While the future success of Ukraine will rest in large part on the shoulders of Ukrainians themselves, U.S. leadership is essential for counteracting Russian aggression and supporting reform. The Trump Administration should not hesitate to provide weapons and other military capabilities to Ukraine. The U.S. should seize the opportunity to move quickly and robustly to reaffirm American commitment to, and support for, the people of Ukraine.

—*Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*

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7 For details of a larger strategy to confront Russia in Ukraine, see Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis, “The Trump Administration and the 115th Congress Should Support Ukraine,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 3200, April 11, 2017, <http://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/the-trump-administration-and-the-115th-congress-should-support-ukraine>.