



# Defending Europe by Arming Ukraine

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**Overtuning its policy of supplying Ukraine with strictly non-lethal military aid, the US will soon supply the Ukrainian military with much-anticipated anti-tank guided missiles. However, will this be enough to turn the tide of the war in the Donbas?**

Russia's undeclared war against Ukraine began on 20 February 2014. Four years later, about 7% of Ukraine remains under occupation, more than 10,000 people are dead, 25,000 maimed and nearly 2 million internally displaced, even as the urban-industrial infrastructure of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasts* (the Donbas) has been destroyed (see [Donbas in Flames](#)). From the start of this hybrid war, Moscow has utilised every imaginable tactic of subversion and destabilisation, from targeted assassinations and terrorist bombings, to cyber attacks against critical infrastructure targets such as electricity grids, to fomenting ethnic, political, religious and social divisiveness within Ukrainian society, even [defaming](#) Ukrainian diaspora leaders such as Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland.

This unprovoked war of aggression came in the wake of the Revolution of Dignity, a national uprising against Russia's corrupted satrap in Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, who was removed from power following efforts to block Ukraine's anticipated integration with the EU, moving it instead towards a Russian-dominated Eurasian sphere of influence. Enraged and alarmed by the diminution of his country's influence over Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, the seeming president-in-perpetuity of the Russian Federation, precipitated an international crisis that festers to this day. For not only have Europe's supposedly agreed borders been undone by military force (coupled with the associated and quite bogus referendum of 16 March 2014 in occupied Crimea) but the West's timid response to Ukraine's dismemberment understandably

provoked a serious rethinking among many Ukrainians about whether they were right to have signed the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances. Following their accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the dismantling of what was once the world's third largest nuclear arsenal, Ukrainians were lured into believing their country's territorial integrity and political sovereignty were inviolable, secured by the pledges of the US, UK and even the Russian Federation. They have since had good reason to [reflect on their geopolitical naïveté](#). Likely, other states – North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, India and Israel in particular – having witnessed Ukraine's rendering, irrespective of the relaxing pledges once bandied about by diplomats, might well conclude possessing weapons of mass destruction is a far better guarantor of security than succumbing to empty promises.

Despite having secured temporary advantage from previous offensive military operations against Moldova, Georgia and in Ukraine's Crimea, the Russians erred in their pre-war assessments of Ukrainian society's capacity to mobilise and offer resistance to an invader. Irrespective of language, religion, socioeconomic status or nationality, Ukraine's citizenry quickly united in its determination to blunt Russian designs on their independence. In the spring of 2014, thousands of volunteers surged towards the front lines in defence of their homeland, while many more provided logistical and materiel support for the embattled Ukrainian military. The latter, deliberately enervated for many years, fielded often obsolete Soviet-era

weapons, suffered from a dearth of non-commissioned and combat ready officers, and lacked up-to-date doctrines. In the spring/summer of 2014, as one of the co-authors witnessed, Ukrainian 'minutemen' often fought in running shoes, without helmets or bullet-proof vests, using vintage Kalashnikov rifles and ammunition that often misfired, relying on insecure civilian-grade cellular phones for combat communications.

Their stout defence came at an extraordinary price, for battlefield casualty rates were very high. Yet, Ukraine managed to check the forces Putin was prepared to risk for the sake of Russian foreign adventurism. Clearly, Moscow had miscalculated. The blowback of this invasion has been the ignition of a genuine Ukrainian war of independence whose outcome may well change the face of Europe, at whose gates Ukraine today stands and fights, and does so quite well.

Meanwhile, and despite Ukraine's pleas for help, Western governments confined themselves to scolding Moscow for its aggression, offering only non-lethal military aid – clothing, medical supplies, helmets, ballistic vests and limited quantities of night-vision goggles, secure communications equipment, used Humvees, a few counter-battery radars and the like. While welcome, these gestures and resources had a limited battlefield impact. Most definitely, Ukrainian soldiers had expected more from those whom they believed were their friends, even allies. [As one front-line commander told one of the co-authors](#): 'We are not asking for NATO troops to fight in Ukraine. We only request sufficient supplies of

Ukrainian troops at the battle of Debaltseve in eastern Ukraine, 15 February 2015. Now in its fourth year, the Kremlin's war against Ukraine shows no sign of ending anytime soon. *Courtesy of Gleb Garanich/Reuters*



modern weapons to stop Putin before he moves further. Americans give these weapons to many of their allies, so why not to us?' Of course some American Ukrainians [promote a more self-congratulatory assessment](#) of the efficacy of their country's aid to Ukraine.

Notwithstanding bipartisan pressure from Congress, and the recommendations tabled by some of his defence and security advisers, President Barack Obama refused repeatedly to provide Ukraine with defensive lethal weapons, convinced doing so would provoke Putin into a reactive escalation of this war. Without Washington's blessing, the Euro-Atlantic community was likewise not prepared to intervene. Canada's principled condemnations of Russian aggression, voiced by the Conservative prime minister, Stephen Harper, and his Liberal successor, Justin Trudeau, did little to help Ukraine fend off the foe. As for the economic sanctions imposed by many Western governments, they did sting but were, and remain, quite insufficient to thwart the current Russian regime's game plan.

On 22 December 2017, the Republican administration of President Donald Trump signed off on a \$41.5 million deal allowing for the export of Barrett M107A1 sniper rifles, ammunition and other items to

Ukraine. Soon after, the US government acknowledged it would equip Ukraine with 35 FGM-148 Javelin command launch units and 210 anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs). President Trump also signed the US defence budget for the 2018 fiscal year, allocating \$350 million in military aid for Ukraine. On 23 January 2018, this White House decision [received support](#) from former American Vice President Joe Biden, who affirmed that providing Ukraine with weapons was 'right' and 'wise'.

What good will Javelin ATGMs do for Ukraine? Let us recall the history of this war. In the summer of 2014, Ukrainian forces launched a campaign aimed at clearing occupied Donbas of the invaders. They were succeeding until the battles of Ilovaysk in August 2014 and Debaltseve between January and February 2015, when Ukrainian forces came up against [well-trained soldiers](#) from the Russian Federation's 5th and 6th Tank Brigades and 37th Motorized Infantry Brigade, deploying modern T-72B3 and some T-90A tanks. Following the rout of the Ukrainian forces, particularly at the key railway hub of Debaltseve, Ukraine's need for modern ATGMs became critical, with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko calling in July for the provision of 1,240 Javelins. Evocatively, [he reminded his](#)

[listeners](#) that 1,240 was the number of nuclear warheads Ukraine had surrendered voluntarily under the Budapest Memorandum, purportedly in exchange for guarantees of its sovereignty, the latter subsequently violated by Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine. Even now, after several years of fighting, Ukraine is still afforded less than a fifth of the Javelins asked for. Perhaps that explains why Ukraine's defence manufacturers have been working to increase production and introduce upgrades of Ukrainian-made ATGM launchers, notably the Stugna-P and the RK-3 'Corsar'. Both were successfully tested in July 2017 military exercises, adding a home-grown component to Ukraine's deterrent capabilities even if not as effective a weapon as the Javelin.

Even arming Ukraine with this reduced number of Javelins does, however, change the military balance between the contending armies. Why? Because the FGM-148 Javelin, a third generation ATGM, has rightly been called '[the US military's tank-killer missile that Russia fears most](#)'. This sophisticated infrared-guided weapon, in addition to a traditional direct attack mode, can also operate in a top attack fashion, hitting a tank's thinner armour

from above. Furthermore, upon contact, its warhead explodes twice – once to penetrate any reactive armour and a second time to destroy the target. It can also be used against fortifications and to take down low flying helicopters. Finally, the Javelin is a fire-and-forget weapon. It hits its target even if the launcher is not kept in line of sight. In other words, operators can immediately hide after launching a missile or move on to engage another target. Providing the Ukrainian military with this advanced capability to fight back against Russian armour will be a game changer, as one of the co-authors [witnessed](#) in July 2017 when a Ukrainian special operations unit he was with was forced to retire in the face of advancing Russian armour, near the Donetsk town of Marinka.

Significantly, there is no question about the Ukrainian military's readiness to receive such modern weapons. Over the past three years, aided by their Western partners (mainly Canada, the US, the UK, Lithuania and Poland) the Ukrainian Armed Forces have proactively [engaged in military re-organisation and modernization reforms](#), including making significant progress toward achieving interoperability with NATO forces.

Since the US announced its intention to provide Ukraine's forces with Javelins and the training required to use them, numerous commentaries have appeared, with some favouring and others questioning this decision. Supporters argue that doing so decreases the probability of further Russian aggression against Ukraine, while sending Putin an unambiguous message that the West is no longer willing to turn a blind eye to Moscow's misbehaviour. Supplying Ukraine with ATGMs also signals that the West might perhaps become ever-more assertive in countering Russian aggression if and as necessary, potentially by providing additional military aid to Ukraine, through the application of enhanced economic sanctions or by deploying political pressure to further isolate the Russian Federation internationally. Commenting on the desirability of Javelins, Dmytro Tymchuk, a Ukrainian parliamentarian and military expert, [somewhat bluntly observed](#) early in September 2017: 'If

every Rostov-Buryat schmuck realizes that you can't just go out in your T-72 tank deployed from the Urals to shoot with impunity at the positions of the [Ukrainian] Armed Forces, these [Minsk] agreements ... now in a state of permanent coma might ... start working'.

Critics, on the other hand, are convinced that arming Ukraine will only make things worse, believing Russia will not bend to the West's pressure but instead will ramp up the fighting. Aside from the predictable rhetoric of official spokespersons and diplomats, however, there has been no specific comment from either Putin or any member of his influential inner circle on the Javelin deployment issue. Indeed, a late December 2017 prisoner exchange between Ukraine's and Russia's surrogates went ahead as planned and no significant escalation in fighting has been reported recently.

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Even if one accepts the supposedly frozen nature of the Donbas conflict, there are now, according to the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin, 'up to 500 [Russian] tanks [deployed in the Donbas], [four times as many operational tanks as the British Army](#)'. And their number does not include the additional armoured fighting vehicles attached to Russian battle groups that are troublingly positioned astride Ukraine's international borders (for a general review of Russian capabilities see [this US Defense Intelligence Agency report](#)). Even a superficial analysis of Putin's rule suggests he can start a war

or escalate an existing conflict without much reference to others, including an ill-informed Russian public, regardless of whether his next move is against Chechnya, Georgia, Syria or Ukraine. Yet recognising the damage Javelins will inflict on armoured vehicles and their personnel may be one of the few calculations that will give Putin pause.

So, for the moment, Ukraine's enhanced defensive potential has not been tested. Possibly, Putin is waiting for the presidential elections of March 2018 to reaffirm his rule over Russia before he acts again. Perhaps he has other reasons that cannot yet be divined. What we do know is that he has time and again shown respect only for those who deal with him from a position of strength – signs of weakness provoking only his further bullying. And, having launched and sustained a costly four year war against Ukraine, still infuriated and in denial over the Ukrainian nation's attempt to return to its rightful place in Europe, it is very unlikely Putin will withdraw Russia's troops or begin abiding by the rules of international law, much less respect treaty obligations he long-ago discarded. [Putin lamented publicly](#) in April 2005 over the collapse of the USSR as the 'greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century' – instead of recognising it as the welcomed liberation of Eastern Europe. Given this, arming Ukraine may thwart the empire-rebuilding agenda of the current czar in the Kremlin. Doing so also secures the peace of Europe.

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