

# Opinion: Ukraine needs better air defense systems, not more excuses

By [Josh Rogin](#)

Columnist

March 31, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

 **Listen to article** 4 min



More than two weeks have passed since Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin traveled to NATO ally Slovakia, where he discussed transferring that country's most advanced air defense system to Ukraine. But as Russian missiles continue to rain down on Ukrainian hospitals, schools and apartment buildings, there's no visible progress. As a result, Congress is losing patience and Ukrainians are losing their lives.

Standing next to Austin in Bratislava on March 17, Slovakian Defense Minister Jaroslav Nad' said his country was ready to transfer the Russian-made S-300 missile defense system, which the Ukrainians know how to operate, "immediately." Compared to what Ukrainian forces have now, the S-300 could cover more ground and intercept more advanced incoming aircraft and missiles, potentially saving a lot of civilians. Nad's one condition was that the United States should replace Slovakia's S-300 with another missile defense system at least as capable. Austin made no firm commitments, other than to continue discussions with NATO partners.

Two weeks later, U.S. lawmakers and Ukrainians are wondering why there's no movement. The other two NATO countries that have S-300 systems, Bulgaria and Greece, have been cool to the idea of sending direct military assistance on Ukraine. Slovakia is ready to go. So, what's the holdup?

"Slovakia has offered S-300s, which are desperately needed in Ukraine. But all they've asked from us is to backfill," House Armed Services

Committee ranking Republican Mike D. Rogers (Ala.) said at a hearing

Wednesday morning with top Pentagon officials. “Why is it taking two weeks?”

Although we don’t know why, Russian ground troops appear to be regrouping in some places. Meanwhile, the Russian military continues to bombard cities all over Ukraine with hypersonic missiles, rockets and artillery shells. So far, the United States and its partners have only delivered shorter-range missile defense systems.

“The time to double down is now,” Rogers said.

Congressional aides told me that the Pentagon is preparing a proposal for the Slovakian government on a possible way to bolster its air defense capability if Slovakia transfers its S-300 system to Ukraine. The easiest fix would be to give Slovakia its own U.S.-made Patriot missile defense system. Germany and Denmark are already sending Patriot systems to Slovakia on a temporary basis, but Bratislava wants the comfort of a permanent solution.

To many in Congress, the delay fits a pattern of the Biden administration bungling a chance to work with NATO allies on giving Ukraine emergency military assistance. In February, a similar dynamic played out when the Polish government publicly said it was willing to transfer Russian fighter planes to Ukraine via a U.S. base in Germany. After a couple weeks of back and forth, the Biden team declared the idea unworkable, claiming that the fighters would provoke Russian President Vladimir Putin and wouldn’t have a significant battlefield impact anyway.

“The transfer of any system is being closely scrutinized by the White House and National Security Council as to whether or not it meets their test of what’s escalatory and what’s not,” a senior congressional aide told me. “That’s causing the system to be constipated.”

Celeste Wallander, the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, testified Wednesday that the Biden administration was working with Slovakia to determine exactly what it needs to replace its S-300 system. She also said that the Pentagon was already sourcing parts of the S-300 system from other countries and sending those parts to the Ukrainians.

“So, we’ve not simply been waiting for resolution of that offer, but have been working on getting the Ukrainians what they need right now,” she said.

Earlier this month, the Wall Street Journal reported that the U.S. government was sending Ukraine parts of Soviet-era missile defense systems that had been acquired over decades as part of a secret U.S. government program. Wallander said she would only discuss the details of current efforts in a classified setting.

At the hearing, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith (D-Wash.) said the Biden administration was trying to “balance between giving Ukraine the help it needs without spreading the wider war.”

But Air Force Gen. Tod Wolters, the head of U.S. European Command, testified that there’s always risk in whatever military assistance is provided. The fact is, Wolters said, Ukrainians will likely be dealing with incoming Russian missiles for a long time to come.

“Surface-to-air missiles are very important,” he said. “They have been effective in the campaign [against the Russians], and I predict they will continue to be effective in the coming months.”

The Biden administration is doing a lot to arm Ukrainian forces and deserves credit. At the same time, the bureaucratic and policy bottlenecks delaying the S-300 transfer are costing lives each day. If Austin can’t find one Patriot missile system to put on a plane and send to Slovakia, what message does that send to Ukrainians — or Putin, for that matter — about our commitment to the fight?

Of course, the United States should be mindful of needlessly escalating the crisis. But the best way to prevent the war from spilling over is to give the Ukrainians what they need to win. The more the United States drags its feet on things such as the S-300, the more people will die and the longer the fighting will continue. And if Ukraine falls, the risk of a greater conflict will only increase.

---

**OPINIONS ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE**



Painful choices lie in the path to peace in Ukraine

Opinion • April 1, 2022

A madman threatens to use nukes. It’s just not the madman we expected.

Opinion • April 1, 2022

Too many conservatives oppose support for Ukraine.

What’s their...

Opinion • April 1, 2022

**View 3 more stories** ▼