

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## The United States Must Be Ready to Send Weapons to Ukraine

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As Russian-backed forces make territorial gains in eastern Ukraine, and as a ceasefire agreement was reached in Minsk, Belarus, between Kyiv and Moscow, there is intense debate in Washington about whether to send weapons to the Ukrainian military. There is no reason to believe that the ceasefire agreement will last when many such agreements have failed in the past. At this moment of crisis for Ukraine, the United States should be ready to help the people of Ukraine defend themselves by sending vital weapons and equipment if the government in Kyiv makes a request.

Any delivery of weapons to Ukraine must be part of a wider strategy led by Washington and its allies to rein in Russian ambitions in the region, including lifting restrictions on U.S. energy exports to Europe, withdrawing from the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), and strengthening the NATO alliance to head off any potential threat by Moscow to the Baltic States and allies in Eastern and Central Europe.

### Russia's Ambitions for Ukraine

There is nothing in Russia's recent past that leads one to believe it will stick to the ceasefire agreement. Almost seven years later, Russia still violates the

2008 ceasefire agreement with Georgia. The ceasefire agreement last September in Ukraine only lasted a few weeks. Ceasefire or not, Russia's ultimate goal is to keep Ukraine out of the transatlantic community. In the short term, Russia will help the separatists consolidate gains in Donetsk and Luhansk in order to create a political entity that becomes more like a viable state. This will include the capture of important communication and transit nodes, such as the rail link at Debaltseve, Mariupol and its port, and the Luhansk power plant—all of which are under Ukrainian government control.

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

### Why the Timing Is Right for Sending Arms

If the Ukrainian government makes a request for defensive weapons, there are three key reasons why now is the right time for the U.S. to comply:

1. Last year there was a slim hope that the conflict could be resolved peacefully. Now it is clear that Russia is only interested in escalating violence. The illusory peace sought by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande has merely bought Russia and the

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separatists more time. The idea that Moscow is committed to a peaceful resolution to the war in eastern Ukraine is fanciful. In fact, the only way out that Moscow sees is to defeat the Ukrainian military as quickly as possible, thereby compelling Kyiv to concede defeat.

2. In 2014, it was unclear in which direction Ukraine was heading. This is no longer the case. The Ukrainian people have demonstrated, whether on the streets of the Maidan or through the ballot box, that they see their future in the West, not under Russian domination. As recently as one year ago, closer ties with the West were discouraged by Ukraine's leaders. Since the disposal of Russian-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich last February this has all changed.
3. When Russia first started backing 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. Flooding the battlefield with advanced Western weaponry would have been dangerous. The situation is now different. There is a front line and a traditional linear battlefield. The Ukrainian military has been able to defend territory and in some cases retake land that was previously lost.

### Which Weapons Should the U.S. Send to Ukraine?

The exact types of weapons needed are best determined by experts on the ground who have 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. Generally speaking, the following defensive capabilities are urgently needed by the Ukrainian military:

- Anti-tank/armor weapons would be hugely beneficial, especially with the continued use of Russian T-72BM tanks by the separatists.
- As the indiscriminate use of artillery and rockets increases, counter-battery radars are vital. They would allow Ukrainian forces to determine the origin of artillery strikes so they can respond quickly and accordingly.
- Secure communications equipment and unmanned aerial vehicles would significantly improve situational awareness on the battlefield and the coordination of effective military actions to counter separatist efforts.

### A Broader Strategy Is Needed

Defensive weapons alone are not a panacea, but they can be an effective part of a larger strategy on the part of the West.<sup>1</sup> Since Ukraine is not a NATO member it does not enjoy a security guarantee from the United States. However, the situation is not black and white: The alternative to direct U.S. military intervention is not to do nothing. In addition to providing defensive weapons, the U.S. can help Ukraine by:

- **Expanding the target list of Russian officials under the Magnitsky Act.** Washington should implement a greater range of targeted sanctions aimed directly at Russian officials responsible for violating Ukrainian sovereignty, including freezing financial assets and imposing visa bans.
- **Developing a new diplomatic strategy for dealing with Russia.** The U.S. could start by acknowledging that the Russian “reset” is—and has long been—dead. Russia has already been expelled from the G-8, and NATO–Russia cooperation has been suspended. The U.S. should continue to marginalize Russia in other international fora, including the G-20.
- **Adopting a new global free-market energy policy.** The U.S. should work immediately and comprehensively to eliminate barriers to U.S. energy exports. The benefits are obvious—reducing Europe's dependence on Russia to keep the lights on and the fires burning.

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1. This larger strategy is outlined in greater detail in Nile Gardiner, Jack Spencer, Luke Coffey, and Nicholas Loris, “Beyond the Crimea Crisis: Comprehensive Next Steps in U.S.–Russian Relations,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2896, March 25, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/03/beyond-the-crimea-crisis-comprehensive-next-steps-in-usrussian-relations>.

- **Withdrawing from New START.**<sup>2</sup> New START is a fundamentally flawed treaty that dramatically undercuts the security of the United States and its allies. It does nothing at all to advance U.S. security, while handing Moscow a significant strategic edge in Europe. Russia's aggression in Ukraine jeopardizes the supreme interests of the United States, destabilizing a region crucial to the U.S. and the NATO alliance.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Robust Message to Moscow**

The West should arm the Ukrainians to give them a fighting chance to defend their homeland against external aggression. There are, of course, risks involved in providing military support, and Moscow will likely respond by further escalating its backing for the separatists. But the consequences of inaction are far greater, which would include the carving up

of Ukraine, an emboldened Kremlin, and a weakening of American credibility on the world stage.

It is in the U.S. national interest for Ukraine to stave off Russia's invasion, and to reassert its territorial integrity. By sending arms to Ukraine Washington will be sending Moscow a clear message that it cannot threaten its neighbors with impunity, and that there is a price to be paid for its blatant disregard for the principles of national sovereignty. Russian President Vladimir Putin's brutal and barbaric actions in Ukraine are unacceptable and must be met with strength and resolve by the free world.

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2. For further background on New START, see Michaela Dodge, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy: After Ukraine, Time to Reassess Strategic Posture," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4183, March 27, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/03/us-nuclear-weapons-policy-after-ukraine-time-to-reassess-strategic-posture>, and Baker Spring, "Twelve Flaws of New START That Will Be Difficult to Fix," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2466, September 16, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/09/twelve-flaws-of-new-start-that-will-be-difficult-to-fix>.
  3. Pursuant to Article XIV(3) of New START, the United States has the right to withdraw from the treaty "if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests." U.S. withdrawal from New START is justified because, inter alia, Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukraine qualifies as an "extraordinary event" that is related to the treaty's subject matter. See, for example, the Preamble's statements that the two nations were forging "a new strategic relationship based on mutual trust, openness, predictability, and cooperation," and desired "to bring their respective nuclear postures into alignment with this new relationship."