

Breaking Defense

Countdown to counteroffensive: Give Ukraine ATACMS before it's too late **By John Hardie, Bradley Bowman and Ryan Brobst** **February 14, 2023**

In a laudable but belated decision, the Biden administration earlier this month pledged to send Kyiv the Ground Launched Small Diameter Bomb, or GLSDB, a system with a far greater range than Ukraine's Western-supplied artillery rockets. The bad news: The first GLSDBs won't arrive until this fall, likely missing widely expected Russian and Ukrainian offensives that will determine the war's future trajectory.

Therefore, Washington should immediately grant Kyiv's request for the Army Tactical Missile System, or ATACMS, which the US military already fields and could give to Ukraine now. ATACMS would enable Ukraine to strike key targets currently out of reach, helping it blunt Russia's offensive and facilitate further Ukrainian gains. If the United States fails to act now, it risks allowing Moscow to regain the initiative or at least hampering Kyiv's efforts to reclaim Ukrainian territory.

The GLSDB is a precision-guided munition with a 36 pound warhead. It can strike targets up to 150 kilometers away, nearly double the range of the Guided Multiple Rocket Launch System rockets fired by Ukraine's Western-provided rocket artillery systems. But initial GLSDB deliveries won't begin for at least nine months, and it'll take even longer to field the system in substantial numbers. The Biden administration lost valuable time by taking months to decide whether to give Ukraine the GLSDB, further delaying delivery.

Kyiv can't afford to wait that long. With each passing day, Russia causes more death and destruction, entrenches its hold on the occupied territories, and prepares for a large-scale offensive that'll likely begin in the coming weeks or months. Meanwhile, Kyiv also is expected to launch a major counteroffensive this year, likely sometime this winter or spring. This next phase of the war could be decisive.

Giving Ukraine ATACMS now could help it enervate Moscow's looming offensive by degrading Russian logistics and command and control, and striking areas where Russia tries to mass forces. For example, Russia's logistics hubs in Dzhankoi and Luhansk city lie beyond GMLRS range but would be easy targets for ATACMS. The same goes for the thousands of troops Russia has reportedly massed in and around Mariupol. Ukraine

could also hit Russian air defense systems and airbases inside occupied Ukrainian territory from which Russian aircraft conduct combat air patrols or provide close air support for ground forces.

Moreover, and as we have previously argued, ATACMS, with a range of 300 kilometers (about 190 miles), could hit key targets beyond the GLSDB's reach. These include the Kerch Bridge, the main supply route for Russian forces in southern Ukraine, as well as the naval and air bases in Crimea from which Russia bombards Ukrainian critical infrastructure. ATACMS also has a much larger warhead, at 500 pounds, meaning Ukraine would need fewer successful strikes to destroy targets.

Just as it can help Kyiv blunt Russia's offensive, ATACMS would also undermine Russia's ability to resist attacking Ukrainian forces. Indeed, Ukraine's previous counteroffensives in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions succeeded in part thanks to GMLRS strikes that degraded Russian logistics and command and control. But while GMLRS remains a potent capability for Ukraine, Russia has adapted, including by moving depots and command-and-control posts beyond the system's range. Ukraine thus needs a longer-range system to achieve similar disruptive effects.

Weakening Russian defenses is especially key as Kyiv attempts to shift toward an emphasis on maneuver rather than artillery-centric attritional warfare, as Washington hopes. So far, Ukraine has conducted successful maneuver only where Russian defenses were weak. In recent months, however, Russia has built fortified defensive lines stretching from southern Ukraine up to the Russian-Ukrainian border in Luhansk Oblast. Meanwhile, Ukraine's intelligence chief claims mobilization has roughly doubled the number of Russian troops in Ukraine, who now have less territory to defend following Russia's retreats last fall. Moscow no longer faces a numerical disadvantage in manpower, the main factor behind Kyiv's stunning counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast last September.

If Ukraine fails to make this shift, the conflict will likely remain at best a grinding war of attrition. This could play to Moscow's advantages. Despite its apparent effort to conserve artillery shells, Russia retains a quantitative advantage in artillery fires, and Ukraine is unlikely to gain sufficient artillery superiority to make significant territorial gains through attrition. As Western munitions stocks dwindle, Washington fears this style of warfare will become unsustainable, especially if other industrial democracies don't quickly increase production. Despite aggressive Western sanctions, Russia's military-industrial complex is adapting and now running on a war footing, while much of Ukraine's own defense industry has been decimated by Russian strikes.

Vladimir Putin is likely betting that transatlantic resolve will wane if Ukraine fails to continue making significant gains and the war drags on with no end in sight. Some American voters are shortsightedly questioning whether to continue supporting Ukraine. Kyiv may face mounting pressure from France and Germany to reach a diplomatic settlement, allowing Moscow to freeze the conflict temporarily while it readies itself for a follow-on war.

Yet the White House continues to refuse Kyiv's repeated requests for ATACMS, arguing that the move could precipitate Russian escalation. But that risk is overstated. For one thing, Putin appears keen to avoid a direct military conflict with the United States, and that's precisely what he'd be risking if Moscow were to attack a NATO member.

Second, as the Biden administration has itself reportedly recognized, Ukrainian strikes on Russian military targets in Crimea likely wouldn't trigger Russian tactical nuclear use. Indeed, Putin has yet to resort to nuclear weapons even though Kyiv has conducted numerous strikes against airbases and other targets in Crimea. Despite Russian nuclear saber rattling, Moscow refrained from tactical nuclear use when Ukraine retook Kherson city, which Moscow officially declared to be part of Russian territory.

Moreover, Washington can mitigate the risk of escalation by conditioning the provision of ATACMS on a Ukrainian commitment to use the missiles only against targets in occupied Ukrainian territory, including Crimea. Admittedly, such a restriction hardly seems fair given that Russia continues to strike critical infrastructure across Ukraine, including using drones and potentially soon short-range ballistic missiles from Iran. But it would strike a balance between the twin goals of helping Ukraine defeat Russian aggression and avoiding direct conflict between NATO and Russia.

Doubling down on its refusal to provide ATACMS, the administration reportedly told Ukrainian officials in recent meetings at the Pentagon that it can't send the missiles because the U.S. does not have enough. That argument does not withstand scrutiny. The United States has produced thousands of ATACMS in various configurations and has only fired a small fraction of those, and a few dozen ATACMS could have an outsized benefit for Kyiv. Moreover, Congress authorized a multiyear procurement of 1,700 ATACMS in the most recent defense bill even as the Department of Defense begins to field a more capable replacement, the Precision Strike Missile. There is no doubt the United States is confronting a munitions production capacity crisis and must manage its inventories carefully to ensure sufficient stocks. But Congress would be wise to press the Pentagon to defend any assertion that it cannot send at least a few dozen ATACMS to Ukraine to help a beleaguered democracy defend its territory against the unprovoked Russian invasion.

The United States has invested tens of billions in helping Ukraine claw back territory. It would be foolish to withhold a critical capability that can help Kyiv make good on that investment. As the war enters a critical phase, Washington should move without delay to give Ukraine ATACMS.

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