

The Defense News

Why Washington should provide ATACMS weapons to Ukraine by Ryan Brobst, John Hardie and Bradley Bowman

Wednesday, Aug 31, 2022

The Ukrainian military announced the beginning of a much-anticipated counteroffensive on Monday, aiming to retake territory in the country's south. Western weapons, which have helped Ukraine strike high-value targets behind the front lines as part of a strategy to degrade Russia's ability to hold the territory it has seized, have made Kyiv's counteroffensive possible and could be decisive in determining its outcome. That's why Washington should provide Ukraine with the Army Tactical Missile System without delay.

U.S. provision of ATACMS would allow Kyiv to strike key logistics nodes and other high-value targets beyond the range of Ukraine's current precision-strike capabilities. Some worry that providing the new capability to Ukraine could precipitate Russian escalation, but that risk is overstated and can be mitigated by requiring Kyiv to use ATACMS only against Russian military targets on Ukrainian territory, including the Donbas and Crimea.

Such a condition could accompany the shipment of ATACMS if the Biden administration deems it necessary. Kyiv has already proven it can responsibly and effectively employ U.S.-supplied systems ranging from Javelin missiles to the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, and Washington has good reason to believe Kyiv would employ ATACMS in the same manner.

ATACMS is a short-range ballistic missile that can be fired from HIMARS as well as from the multiple-launch rocket systems Ukraine has received from the United Kingdom and Germany. Modern ATACMS variants have a range of up to 300 kilometers (186 miles) and carry a 500-pound unitary warhead, which means they can hit targets at well over three times the range of the Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System rounds Ukraine is already using to great effect, with a warhead approximately 2.5 times bigger.

The additional capabilities provided by ATACMS would allow Ukraine to strike high-value targets farther behind the front lines with greater ease, frequency and effectiveness. The Aug. 9 attack on Saki air base in Crimea, which damaged or destroyed roughly half the combat aircraft of the Black Sea Fleet's 43rd Independent Naval Attack Aviation Regiment, shows the potential of deep strikes against Russian forces and facilities. Striking air bases and ammunition depots used by Russian forces in Ukraine (including in Crimea) would degrade Moscow's ability to sustain its forces and oppose Ukraine's new counteroffensive.

Additionally, ATACMS could help degrade Russia's long-range strike capabilities, which have been used to systematically target Ukrainian cities.

Likewise, Ukrainian forces could use ATACMS to hold at risk docked Russian naval vessels and infrastructure at Russia's base in Sevastopol, undermining Russia's ability to conduct sea-launched missile strikes and to enforce its blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports.

ATACMS strikes against higher-echelon Russian command-and-control nodes located beyond GMLRS range could disorganize Russian forces. And destroying S-300 and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems would enable the Ukrainian Air Force to operate more effectively.

Perhaps most important, the Ukrainian military could destroy railheads and bridges on which Russia depends to supply its forces. The Russian military relies heavily on railways to move supplies, and it lacks the truck capacity to replace rail transport, especially after Ukrainian forces have destroyed hundreds of Russian military trucks using weapons provided by the United States and its allies. Destroying these key logistical nodes could disrupt Russian logistics at the operational level, similar to what GMLRS strikes against Russian fuel and ammo depots have achieved at the tactical level.

Of course, a perceived lack of military utility is not why the Biden administration has declined to provide ATACMS to Ukraine; the White House fears Russian escalation in response to the provision of ATACMS. That is why President Joe Biden in May decided against sending ATACMS to Ukraine, saying the United States would give Ukraine the GMLRS but would not "send to Ukraine rocket systems that can strike into Russia."

There is good reason to believe these concerns are overstated. For one thing, Moscow's reaction to the provision of advanced Western military systems to Ukraine has so far featured lots of bark but little bite. Despite Russian saber-rattling, Moscow has refrained from attacking any NATO member — even as Western support helped Ukraine defeat Russia's assault on Kyiv and stymie Moscow's subsequent efforts in eastern Ukraine, killing or wounding an estimated 70,000-80,000 invading Russian troops in the process.

Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to want no part of a direct conflict with the United States, which is exactly what he would be risking if Russia attacked a NATO member. That's particularly true at a time when the bulk of Russia's military is tied down — and heavily degraded — in Ukraine. This calculus is unlikely to change with the introduction of ATACMS.

Moreover, it is important to note that on some parts of the battlefield, Ukrainian forces can already range Russian territory using GMLRS as well as fixed-wing aircraft that are maintained with Western support. Yet, Kyiv has respected U.S. requests not to use long-range, American-provided weapons to strike targets inside Russia itself. The Ukrainians can be expected to honor a similar request related to ATACMS, were the Biden administration to attach such a condition.

Some may argue Putin could respond by using or threatening to use chemical or tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Regarding chemical weapons, the specter of their use has loomed over the conflict since it began, given Russia's track record of using such weapons to target regime opponents around the world, as well as Moscow's efforts to cover up the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in Syria.

However, Russia has apparently refrained from employing chemical weapons in Ukraine, perhaps fearing their use would further isolate Moscow and galvanize additional international support for Ukraine while achieving little in terms of tangible battlefield results. That fundamental calculus is unlikely to change if Kyiv receives the ATACMS, particularly if used only inside Ukraine.

Potential Russian use of a tactical nuclear weapon against Ukraine — or, more plausibly, the threat to do so as a tool of coercive leverage — obviously carries profound risks. While this threat should be carefully monitored, it seems unlikely, especially since Ukraine reportedly has already conducted a number of drone, helicopter and sabotage attacks on Russian territory without triggering Russian escalation.

Moscow has given no indication it is contemplating nuclear use against Ukraine, and likely would not do so except in the most extreme circumstances. The likelihood of Russia using a nuclear weapon against a NATO member is even lower.

Admittedly, it hardly seems fair to ask Kyiv to refrain from cross-border ATACMS strikes when Putin continues to trample on Ukrainian sovereignty and kill Ukrainian citizens. But providing Kyiv with ATACMS while restricting their use to Ukrainian territory (including in Crimea) can both help Ukraine defeat — rather than manage — Putin's invasion while avoiding direct conflict between Russia and NATO.

Even with restrictions, providing Ukraine ATACMS is far better than not providing the weapons at all.

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