

What US weapons tell us about the Russia-Ukraine war
Jonathan Guyer - Vox.com

In January, all of Washington seemed rapt with the question of whether the US and Europe would send tanks to Ukraine.



Spanish personnel rest on a Leopard 2E tank during a training exercise for the Ukrainian military at a base outside Zaragoza on March 13, 2023. © Paul Hanna/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Should they? Would they? Why weren't they? Was it too risky? But also, what was taking so long? Later that month, the US decided to send advanced Abrams tanks and Germany agreed to send Leopards, which cleared the way for other European allies to send military vehicles.

A similar dynamic had unfolded around [HIMARS](#) missile defense systems that the US sent to Ukraine last year, and it mirrored the protracted debates over lethal aid long before that. Now, it's playing out again, already, over [F-16 fighter jets](#).

I have felt uneasy about these weapons debates. It's not just the [memes](#) of Leopards and [Javelin missiles](#), or the [intimacy between the US arms industry and Ukraine](#). The debate around each new weapon has overshadowed the larger debate about the Ukraine war.

The constant shift, that once the Abrams decision was announced Washington moved on to talking about the next advanced system, irked me. Shouldn't experts, Congress, and the public argue over what the US's clearly defined interests are in Ukraine and how to achieve them — and how to make sure the war doesn't drag on and lead to unintended consequences — rather than cheer-leading weapons transfers? It seemed to me that the US was going to be debating which weapons systems the US would send to Ukraine every month.

But I've come to see the fact that there have been debates about each weapons system, with experts openly engaging in these questions in panels and policy papers, to be a good thing. It's not the only conversation that we should be having, but it serves as a proxy for a serious inquiry into what the US is doing in Ukraine. And, crucially, each tranche of weapons that the US has sent to Ukraine tells us a lot about the Biden administration's approach to the war at any given time.

US President Joe Biden has committed \$47 billion of military assistance to Ukraine, and the conversation is ongoing. More debate about arms may lead to more caution and deliberation.

What we talk about when we talk about weapons

In early 2022, or even prior, most experts would tell you that they never would have imagined that the US would send Abrams tanks to Ukraine. Ditto the HIMARS missile defense system. And even the sheer volume of weapons sent to Ukraine exceeds all other US security assistance.

The West — especially the US — has promised Ukraine billions in military aid

Committed arms and equipment in billions of US dollars, January 24, 2022 to January 15, 2023



*Includes the EU Commission, Council, EPF, and EIB

Source: Kiel Institute for the World Economy

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But the Biden administration, through an incrementalist approach, has so far charted a careful path.*

Its support for Ukraine has managed the escalation ladder to avoid nuclear conflict with Russia while keeping European allies largely united in support of Ukraine, ultimately trending toward just an incredible amount of advanced arms for the country. The public debates that have preceded these escalations aren't just glimpses of that deliberate cautiousness — they're integral to managing these risks.

The primary US interest in this conflict is averting nuclear use and avoiding a direct war between NATO and Russia. Yes, there are other goals: defending sovereignty and international law, as well as signaling to other competitors like China. But avoiding all-out war is an imperative and necessary precondition for that. The decisions to

send Ukraine certain classes of weapons speak to this goal, and each decision tells us a lot about how the Biden administration sees the state of the war.

Take the recent decision to send tanks.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had been *appealing* for tanks since the first months of Russian invasion. Initially, the idea seemed far-fetched and was thought to have dangerous knock-on effects, possibly leading Russian President Vladimir Putin to escalate *the war*.

The US also had concerns that the Ukrainian armed forces wouldn't be able to use the equipment effectively and that it would take at least a year to deliver them. Throughout the fall, Zelenskyy *renewed* calls for them in the US media and during his Washington visit pleaded for them *directly to the White House*.

By January, Chancellor Olaf Scholz had reportedly *said behind closed doors* that Germany would send Ukraine its *easier-to-operate* Leopard tanks — only if the US would send Abrams.

But the US Defense Department's policy leader, Colin Kahl, said that Abrams' complex jet engine made it a no-go. "I just don't think we're there yet," he *said* upon returning from a visit to Kyiv. The Pentagon also suggested that the tanks wouldn't make a huge difference for Ukraine on the battlefield.

After a rather *public discussion* about whether the US would send tanks over, the Biden administration changed its position, which led the way to Germany sending Leopard tanks. There was *excitement* in some quarters of Washington. The head of the usually dispassionate Brookings Institution's Europe program, Constanze Stelzenmüller, called it "*tanksgiving*" and tweeted that she would wear *leopard print* to celebrate.

On March 21, the Pentagon *announced* a sped-up timeline for their delivery. Some of this is about symbolism and the image of the US sending its most advanced systems to Ukraine. And some of it is very particularly about how it would shape Ukraine's defense and prospective counter-offensive likely to unfold in the coming weeks.

Staunch backers of Ukraine resented that it was even a discussion at all. *Former military leaders* and *national security leaders* have been *pushing* for a ramp-up of sending or producing more weapons, like *long-range missiles*, ASAP. The ideas vary, but generally argue that Ukraine needs the weapons to defeat Russia now to avoid a damaging protracted conflict. And that by taking an incremental approach or not providing the country with weapons like the *F-16s* *urgently*, Russia may gain an advantage.

The success of the Biden administration's relative cautiousness has led some more hawkish experts to invert the chain of events, and *argue* that the lack of Russian nuclear escalation signals that the US can send anything it wants to Ukraine without risking inadvertent expansion of the conflict.

But Russia still may escalate, says Miranda Priebe, a political scientist at the Rand Corporation. "It's the wrong lesson to take from what has happened so far that there

are no limits,” she told me. “Nuclear escalation isn’t the only thing I worry about. Russia still has a lot of cards to play.” Those may include increased strikes on civilians and Ukrainian infrastructure, or massive cyber attacks.

The US also needs to think about the sustainability of its involvement. Jeremy Shapiro, research director at the European Council on Foreign Relations, says the Biden administration is making good decisions about what to send at each phase of the war. But there are still dangers of a [quagmire](#).

“They’re creating a situation for themselves where they’re inexorably getting drawn in more and more, and that’s why they’re in a place right now that they didn’t want to be 12 months ago,” he says, “which is supplying weapons which are frighteningly escalatory and even more importantly, facing a weapons-supply future that will be extremely difficult to satisfy, and will drain them of the capacity to promote other priorities, such as Asia-Pacific.”

As yet, the Biden administration’s calibrated approach has worked, and it’s forced them to explain to the public what these weapons do and why they matter.

“What I would like the US debate about weapons systems to be is focused on what we’re trying to achieve in the war,” Shapiro, who served in the Obama State Department, told me. “We have to define our own interests, which will be distinct although overlapping with the Ukrainians, and then we have to tailor the weapons systems to what our goals are.”

Could the conversation on weapons lead to a more robust policy debate?

An enduring question is whether the Biden administration is fully in control of the sliding-scale dynamic, because as soon as there’s a big-deal announcement that the US will send a new advanced weapons system, immediately the debate shifts to the next one, and the next one.

When the White House convened one of its regular private Zoom calls with policy experts from outside of government on January 25, many participants applauded the administration for its tank moves. These background briefings for think-tankers have been described as cheer-leading sessions.

But, a familiar voice said that the tanks were not enough, according to three attendees who asked to remain anonymous. Alexander Vindman, the retired lieutenant colonel who served as a Trump White House official and was a star of former president’s first impeachment trial, has been a vocal proponent of arming Ukraine to the max.

On the January White House call, he asked about what more the US could do for Ukraine.

“They wanted a pat on the back. And, you know, I gave them that,” Vindman told me. But he calls the Biden administration’s caution “reactive” and “non-strategic,” explaining that getting Ukraine air defense systems and fighter jets quickly would hasten Russia’s defeat and thus the war’s end.

“It’s not that it’s been deliberative, it’s been plodding,” he said. “We’re going to eventually provide these long-range systems, it’s a matter of when. Ukraine is going to get jets, too. It’s a matter of when.”

It's true that much of Ukraine's battlefield success is dependent on Western military assistance. But there are a lot of other debates and strategic concerns that need to be as prominent as the weapons question.

"I think we too quickly jump to: Should we give them ATACMS, F-16s? What's the next move?" Charles Kupchan, a former adviser to then-Vice President Biden, recently [told](#) the Council on Foreign Relations. "And I think one of the key challenges we face moving forward is keeping American interest in sync with the nature of our commitment."

Maybe the weapons questions can get us there.

A year into this conflict, with [Republican members of Congress](#), former President Donald Trump, and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis questioning the Biden administration's policy, it may lead to a more serious conversation about the issues at stake. Republicans are forcing Biden to more clearly articulate the importance of Ukraine to the United States.

It's not yet clear whether the US or Ukraine would [accept a situation](#) in which Ukraine regains much of the territory it had lost since Russia's invasion started on February 24, 2022, but not the peninsula in the country's south, Crimea, which Russia has occupied since 2014. "The main issue here to debate, which I think the weapons question deflects from, is what we are satisfied with in terms of Ukraine regaining territory," says Stephen Wertheim of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

At the same time, there's a drumbeat for Ukraine to get some form of Western security guarantees that might ultimately include membership in NATO. That deserves as much consideration as the weapons debate.

As we look back two decades later at the [feverish support](#) for the US invasion of Iraq and its current [devastating impact](#) on the Middle East, the [perils of groupthink](#) are on display. We must make space for dissenters. And we may be entering a moment where weapons provisions become so normalized that the US ends up invariably playing a role in ratcheting tensions up further and further without the sort of cautious deliberation that the Biden administration has expressed so far.

Through specific weapons, the Biden administration is showing an increasing commitment to Ukraine. Still, attendees on the White House call in January told me that the White House pushed back against Ukraine's biggest boosters. It goes to show how US and Ukrainian interests are not identical. There does not seem to be consideration, for example, of giving nuclear weapons to Ukraine.

For now, the sometimes tiresome debates around weapons serve as a proxy for a bigger conversation, one that may ultimately serve to inform Americans about the risks and realities of war.