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## The American Conservative

# Washington Quietly Increases Lethal Weapons to Ukraine

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For all of the loose (frequently hysterical) talk in Congress, the foreign policy community, and the news media about President Donald Trump's alleged eagerness to appease Vladimir Putin, U.S. policy remains as confrontational as ever toward Russia.

Among other actions, the Trump administration has involved U.S. forces in NATO military exercises (war games) in Poland and other East European countries on Russia's border, as well as in naval maneuvers in the Black Sea near Russia's sensitive naval base at Sevastopol. Washington has even sent U.S. troops as participants in joint military exercises with Ukrainian forces—an act that Moscow considers especially provocative, given its tense relations with Kiev.

On no issue is the administration's risky course more evident than its military policy toward Ukraine. Recent measures are certain to provoke Moscow further, and entangle the United States to an unwise extent with an extremely murky, ideologically troubling Ukrainian regime.

Secretary of Defense James Mattis acknowledges that U.S. instructors are training Ukrainian military units at a base in western Ukraine. Washington also has approved two important arms sales to Kiev's ground forces in just the past nine months. The first transaction in December 2017 was limited to small arms that at least could be portrayed as purely defensive weapons. That agreement included the export of Model M107A1 Sniper Systems, ammunition, and associated parts and accessories, a sale valued at \$41.5 million.

A transaction in April 2018 was more serious. Not only was it larger (\$47 million), it included far more lethal weaponry, particularly 210 Javelin anti-tank missiles—the kind of weapons that Barack Obama's administration had declined to give Kiev. Needless to say, the Kremlin was not pleased about either sale. Moreover, Congress soon passed legislation in May that authorized \$250 million in military assistance, including lethal weaponry, to Ukraine in 2019. Congress had

twice voted for military support on a similar scale during the last years of Obama's administration, but the White House blocked implementation. The Trump administration cleared that obstacle out of the way in December 2017 at the same time that it approved the initial small-arms sale. The passage of the May 2018 legislation means that the path is now open for a dramatic escalation of U.S. military backing for Kiev.

On September 1, former U.S. Ambassador to NATO Kurt Volker disclosed during an interview with *The Guardian* that Washington's future military aid to Kiev would likely involve weapons sales to Ukraine's air force and navy as well as the army. "The Javelins are mainly symbolic and it's not clear if they would ever be used," Aric Toler, a research scholar at the Atlantic Council, asserted. One could well dispute his sanguine conclusion, but even Toler conceded: "Support for the Ukrainian navy and air defence would be a big deal. That would be far more significant."

Volker's cavalier attitude about U.S. arms sales to a government locked in a crisis with Russia epitomizes the arrogance and tone-deaf nature of the views that too many U.S. foreign policy officials exhibit regarding the sensitive Ukraine issue. "We can have a conversation with Ukraine like we would with any other country about what do they need. I think that there's going to be some discussion about naval capability because as you know their navy was basically taken by Russia [when the Soviet Union dissolved]. And so they need to rebuild a navy and they have very limited air capability as well. I think we'll have to look at air defence."

One suspects that Americans would be incensed at comparable actions by Moscow if the geo-strategic situations were reversed. Imagine if Russia (even a democratic Russia) had emerged from the wreckage of the Cold War as the undisputed global superpower, and a weakened United States had to watch as the Kremlin expanded a powerful, Russian-led military alliance to America's borders, conducted alliance war games within sight of U.S. territory, interfered in Canada's internal political affairs to oust a democratically elected pro-American government, and then pursued growing military ties with the new, anti-U.S. government in Ottawa. Yet that would be disturbingly similar to what Washington has done regarding NATO policy and U.S. relations with Ukraine.

Moreover, although Kiev's cheerleaders in the Western (especially U.S.) media like to portray Ukraine as a beleaguered democracy that plays the role of David to Russia's evil Goliath, the reality is far murkier. Putin's government overstates matters when it alleges that Ukraine's 2014 Maidan revolution was a U.S.-orchestrated coup that brought outright fascists to power in Kiev. Nevertheless, that version contains more than a little truth. Prominent, powerful U.S. figures, most notably the late Senator John McCain and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland, openly sided with demonstrators seeking to unseat Ukraine's elected government. Indeed, Nuland was caught on tape with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt scheming about the desired composition of a new government in Kiev.

It is unfair to portray Ukraine's current administration led by President Petro Poroshenko as a neo-fascist regime. Post-revolution elections appear to have been reasonably free and fair, and there are major factions that are committed to genuine democratic values. But Ukraine also is

hardly a model of Western-style democracy. Not only is it afflicted with extensive graft and corruption, but some extreme nationalist and even neo-Nazi groups play a significant role in the “new” Ukraine. The notoriously fascist Azov Battalion, for example, continues to occupy a prominent position in Kiev’s efforts to defeat separatists in Ukraine’s eastern Donbass region. Alexander Zakharchenko, prime minister of the self-declared Donetsk People’s Republic in the pro-Russia rebel-occupied city of Donetsk, was assassinated on September 1 and officials there and in Russia are blaming Kiev. The Ukrainian government has denied involvement.

Other ultranationalist factions act as domestic militias that attempt to intimidate more moderate Ukrainians. Even the Poroshenko government itself has adopted troubling censorship measures and other autocratic policies. Officials in both the Obama and Trump administration have taken a much too casual attitude toward U.S. cooperation with extremist elements and a deeply flawed Ukrainian government.

Both the danger of stoking tensions with Moscow and becoming too close to a regime in Kiev that exhibits disturbing features should caution the Trump administration against boosting military aid to Ukraine. It is an unwise policy on strategic as well as moral grounds. Trump administration officials should refuse to be intimidated or stampeded into forging a risky and unsavory alliance with Kiev out of fear of being portrayed as excessively “soft” toward Russia. Instead, the president and his advisers need to spurn efforts to increase U.S. support for Ukraine. A good place to start would be to restore the Obama administration’s refusal to approve arms sales to Kiev. Washington must not pour gasoline on a geo-strategic fire that could lead to a full-blown crisis between the United States and Russia.

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