



## State Dept. plan to track weapons for Ukraine should be starting point

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Late last month, the State Department issued a proactive policy to track weapons being sent to Ukraine that are highly portable, highly lethal, and contain advanced technology. In essence, this means that they are tracking man-portable air defense systems and anti-tank guided missiles.

These weapon systems are still effective against things like Iranian drones, so ensuring that Ukraine can use them safely is in Washington's interests. But while this proactive approach is a good start to monitoring, the already-existing loose weapons in Ukraine mean that the new policy is nothing but a small start to solving a larger issue.

Tracking weapons sent to Ukraine was a problem before Russia's invasion, but since then it is even more of one. In the factsheet for the new policy, the State Department notes that "conducting [end-use monitoring] in an active war zone such as Ukraine requires different approaches, as the conflict makes it impractical to request the return of equipment from the front lines to depots or other locations where U.S. government personnel can inspect them in a safer environment."

The State Department's plan is made up of three sub-strategies. First, it will seek to increase accountability of state-held weapons stocks by improving the ability of Ukraine's security forces to safeguard their arms during transfer, storage, and deployment.

Second, it will strengthen border management and security of loose weapons in Ukraine and its neighboring states. Third, it will provide training and infrastructure to Ukrainians for deterrence, detection, and interdiction of illicit weapons trafficking.

Overall, this plan will work to prevent misuse of this advanced technology as it is dispersed across borders, which, as history suggests, is a good decision.

In the 1980s and 1990s, MANPADS in Afghanistan were provided by the United States to fight the Soviet Union. In the subsequent decades, these exact weapons were sold around the world, helping arm U.S. adversaries in their wars in the Middle East during the 21st century. Beyond that, Russia and China sold more MANPADS than any other countries, meaning it would be dangerous for future dispersion risks if Russia got hold of U.S.-supplied MANPADS.

Beyond that, Finnish media is reporting that criminal organizations could be trafficking weapons from Ukraine – including U.S. weapons – into EU countries. It is therefore a relevant issue to U.S. foreign policy in Europe.

Still, this strategy will not immediately solve the inner-state weapons dispersion happening in Ukraine because it mainly focuses on cross-border trafficking, which means many weapons will continue to be unaccounted for.

According to the 2021 Global Organized Crime Index, Ukraine has one of the largest illegally trafficked arms markets in Europe, especially when it comes to small arms and ammunition. About 300,000 small arms and light weapons were reported lost or stolen between 2013 and 2015. Of these, only slightly more than 13 percent are recovered, while the vast amount remains in circulation in the black market.

More recently, but still prior to February 2022, the Ukrainian government even said untraceable weapons would be good if Russia invaded. Valerii Zaluzhnyi – Ukraine’s Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces – refused to tell his U.S. counterpart, Mark Milley, where arms caches would be in conflict because he wanted them to be “constantly moving” to “keep them from being destroyed or captured by the Russian Army.”

This situation was addressed earlier this year at a Cato Institute policy forum on the risk of weapons trafficking in Ukraine. Reflecting on Ukraine after her January 2022 visit, Rep. Sara Jacobs (D-CA), noted that after the conflict started in February, the U.S. did not “have the capacity to do the end-use monitoring we were doing before” because monitoring changes when you begin to “arm an insurgency.”

Given the amount of weapons Washington has sent to Kyiv, this is alarming. Since the conflict began, the U.S. has provided more than \$17.6 billion in security assistance to Ukraine, which according to Elias Yousif of the Stimson Center, is “more than six times what the United States provided in all eight years following Russia’s annexation of Crimea.”

Moreover, the State Department authorized more than \$300 million in private deals to Ukraine, twenty times more than in the entirety of 2021. Unlike regular weapons transfers, private ones lack the stringent trafficking requirements from government arms transfers. In these private sales, the buyers, sellers, and the weapons are kept out of public view.

Over time, the goal is to eventually “continue end-use verification checks consistent with Section 40A of the Arms Export Control Act.” It is conceivable that the increase in training and capabilities of Ukrainian security forces to interdict illicit weapons trafficking will help prevent the spread of weapons, but this does not solve Washington’s current inability to send officials to track most other U.S. weapons, a problem in most conflicts occurring on a weak state’s territory.

The State Department plan to prevent dispersion of highly mobile and lethal advanced U.S. weapons systems will decrease risks of their dispersion. Still, dispersion of all weapons in Ukraine remains something that U.S. policymakers need to vigilantly account for when choosing to perpetually send weapons.

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