



Lack of traceability of weapons supplied to Ukraine could be a concern for US

With no American or Nato troops on the ground, the Joe Biden-led US administration has no way of knowing how the arms it is supplying to Ukraine are being used. It depends largely on information provided by Kyiv to keep track of its supply. This could become a headache for the US as in case of Afghanistan.

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The US on Wednesday, April 20, sent another batch of combat aid to help Ukraine in its fight against Russia. Just a week after US President Joe Biden announced an \$800 million military aid package for Ukraine, the Pentagon said that it has sent a batch of fighter aircraft to Kyiv.

WESTERN AID TO UKRAINE

The White House said, since the time when Biden assumed Presidency, the US has provided a total of \$3.2 billion to Ukraine and has deployed more than 1,00,000 troops to countries that are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24. It has also sent \$2.6 billion in security assistance. The US is the largest supplier to Ukraine among all the 30 nations that are providing arms and ammunition amid the Russian invasion.

But for all its aid and weapons supply to Ukraine, the Biden administration has no way to track the use of the anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and other weaponry it has sent to help President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in his fight against Russia.

According to CNN, this is due to a lack of US boots on the ground in the country and the easy portability of many of the smaller systems, like Javelins, now being sent by the US.

The US has supplied Kyiv with Stinger anti-aircraft systems, Javelin anti-armour systems, Switchblade drones, air surveillance radars, Mi17 helicopters, 155mm Howitzers, etc. According to the Ukrainian Army, US Javelins, "causes panic" among Russian troops.

US aid for Ukraine also includes a wide range of military equipment, ranging from 25,000 sets each of body armour and helmets to rifles and grenade launchers, thousands of other anti-tank weapons and more than 20 million rounds of ammunition.

A CALCULATED RISK

However, is the Biden administration to worried about the lack of traceability of the weapons it is supplying to Ukraine?

The answer may not be that simple. In the short run, the US sees the transfer of hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of equipment to be vital to the Ukrainians' ability to hold off Moscow's

invasion. But in the long run, the lack of traceability could mean that some of these weapons may end up in the hands of other militaries and mercenaries that the US did not intend to arm.

"We have fidelity for a short time, but when it enters the fog of war, we have almost zero," said a source briefed on US intelligence. "It drops into a big black hole, and you have almost no sense of it at all after a short period."

A defence official said that when the US started supplying military aid to Ukraine, it took a calculated risk of the shipments ending up in the wrong hands. After all the weaponry that has been pumped in for Kyiv's aid, a failure to adequately arm Ukraine against Russia could become a greater threat.

With no boot on the ground, the US and Nato are mostly dependent on Ukraine's government for battle information. Officials feel that Ukraine sees an incentive to provide information that would only boost their case for more aid, more arms, and more diplomatic assistance.

"It's a war — everything they do and say publicly is designed to help them win the war. Every public statement is an information operation, every interview, every Zelenskyy appearance broadcast is an information operation," said another source familiar with western intelligence. "It doesn't mean they're wrong to do it in any way."

For months, the US and western officials have put out details of what the West knows about the status of Russian forces inside Ukraine, such as how many casualties they've taken, their remaining combat power, their weapons stocks, what kinds of munitions they are using and where.

INFORMATION GAPS

But the West has large information gaps when it comes to the activities of the Ukrainian forces. According to at least two sources familiar with US and western intelligence development, even estimates of Ukrainian casualties are unclear.

While the Biden administration and the Nato are providing assistance to Kyiv based on what Ukrainian forces claim they need, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy has continued to accuse Europe, particularly Germany and Hungary, of continuing to boost Russia's economy by buying oil.

Javelin and Stinger missiles and rifles and ammunition sent by the West are naturally harder to track than larger systems like the S-300, which was shipped to Ukraine by rail. Although Javelins have serial numbers, there is little way to track their transfer and real-time use.

Last week, the US said that it would bolster Zelenskyy's army with high-power capabilities. However, a few officials believe that this would be too much of a risk. The capabilities assured included 11 Mi-17 helicopters, 18 155 mm Howitzer cannons, and 300 more Switchblade drones. Although much of that support is yet to see the ground, the weaponry, especially the highly mobile, one-time use Switchblade drones, is likely to be difficult to track.

"I couldn't tell you where they are in Ukraine and whether the Ukrainians are using them at this point," a senior defence official told reporters last week. "They're not telling us every round of ammunition they're firing and at whom and when. We may never know exactly to what degree they've been using the Switchblades."

According to Pentagon press secretary John Kirby, the US Department of Defence doesn't earmark the weapons it sends for particular units.

“Trucks loaded with pallets of arms provided by the department are picked up by Ukrainian armed forces — primarily in Poland — and then driven to Ukraine, Kirby said. “Then it's up to the Ukrainians to determine where they go and how they're allocated.”

A congressional source pointed out that while the US is not on the ground in Ukraine, the US has tools to learn what's happening beyond what the Ukrainians are saying, noting the US has extensive use of satellite imagery and both the Ukrainian and Russian militaries appear to be using commercial communications equipment.

BUT WHY TRUST THE UKRAINIANS?

Despite the risks, why does the US trust the Ukrainian military? A congressional source said the US military's trust in the information supplied by Ukraine stems from the fact that the US has trained and equipped the Ukrainian military for nearly eight years, developing strong relationships. But despite that, the blind spots remain. One such issue is the operational status of Ukraine's S-300s, the source said.

Jordan Cohen, a defence and foreign policy analyst at the CATO Institute, who focuses on arms sales, cited the ‘Afghanistan example’. He said that the biggest danger would come up if and when the Russia-Ukraine war arrives at a stalemate or goes in favour of Russia.

“Such a risk is part of any consideration to send weapons overseas,” he said. The US sent arms to Afghanistan for decades. The US's move first armed the Mujahideen in their fight against the Soviet army, and later the Afghan forces against the Taliban.

However, owing to a lack of traceability, the weapons, including Stinger missiles, the same kind the US is now providing to Ukraine, ended up on the black market.

The US wasn't successful in recovering all the weapons and, later, it was feared that they could be used against American troops on Afghanistan soil.

And when the Afghanistan government collapsed in 2021, the Taliban took over whatever the US left behind to help Afghan forces.

The same happened when weapons sold to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates found their way into the hands of fighters linked to al-Qaeda and Iran.

Hence, analysts are worried that a similar scene could play out in the Ukraine case as well.

US CAN PUT ITS WORRIES TO REST FOR NOW

As of now, Russia's failure to hold on to any land west of the eastern part of Ukraine has the US reassured. Depending on Ukraine's information, it appears that Russia has struggled to intercept or destroy the supply shipments so far. Another source told CNN that it does not appear that Russia has been actively attacking western weapons shipments entering Ukraine — although it is unclear exactly why, especially since the US has intelligence that the Russians want to and have discussed doing so both publicly and privately.