



The United States cannot trace the fate of weapons delivered to Ukraine, but believes that such risks are justified

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The U.S. has few ways to trace the shipments of anti-tank, anti-aircraft and other weapons it has shipped across the border into Ukraine, according to CNN.

This is a conscious risk the Biden administration is willing to take.

In the short term, the US believes the transfer of hundreds of millions of dollars worth of equipment is vital to Ukraine's ability to deter Moscow's invasion. A senior Department of Defense official said on April 19 that it was "by far the largest recent transfer to a partner country in the conflict." But the risk, current US officials and military analysts say, is that in the long run some of these weapons could end up in the hands of other military forces and militias that the US had no intention of arming.

In deciding to send billions of dollars worth of weapons and equipment to Ukraine, the Biden administration considered the risk that some shipments could end up in unexpected places, a US Department of Defense spokesman said.

But now, according to official, the administration views failure to properly arm Ukraine as a greater risk.

With no US military on site, the United States and NATO are heavily dependent on information provided by the Ukrainian government. Privately, officials admit that Ukraine has an incentive to provide only information that will support their case for more aid, more weapons, and more diplomatic assistance.

"Everything they do and say in public designed to help them win the war. Every public statement is an information operation, every interview, every broadcast by Zelensky is an information operation," said another source familiar with Western intelligence. But he added that there is no reason not to believe these statements.

For months, US and Western officials have been offering detailed reports on what the West knows about the status of Russian forces on Ukrainian soil: how many casualties they have suffered, their remaining combat capability, weapons stockpiles, what types of ammunition they are using and how, but when it comes down to to Ukrainian forces, officials admit that the West, including the US, has information gaps.

Western estimates of Ukrainian losses are also vague, two sources familiar with US and Western intelligence say.

Visibility issues

The Biden administration and NATO countries say they are supplying Ukraine weapons on the basis that Ukrainian forces say they need man-portable systems such as Javelin and Stinger missiles, or the Slovak S-300 air defense system that was sent last week.

Javelin and Stinger missiles, rifles and ammunition are naturally harder to track than larger systems such as the S-300, which were delivered by rail. While the Javelins have serial numbers, there is little way to trace their transmission and usage in real time, according to sources familiar with the matter.

Last week, the US agreed to provide Kiev with powerful weapons that some in the Biden administration a few weeks ago deemed too much of an escalation risk, including 11 Mi-17 helicopters, 18 Howitzer 155mm cannons, and another 300 Switchblade drones.< /p>

“I can’t tell you where they are in Ukraine or whether Ukrainians are currently using them,” a senior Defense Department official told reporters last week. “They don’t tell us about every round they fire, or who fired the shot and when. We may never know exactly to what extent they use our weapons.”

According to Pentagon spokesman John Kirby, the Department of Defense does not allocate weapons to specific units.

Kirby said trucks loaded with pallets of weapons provided by the Department of Defense are being picked up by representatives of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, mainly in Poland, and then they are driven to Ukraine, “then the Ukrainians themselves determine where to send the weapons.”

A congressional source noted that while the US is not in Ukraine, the United States has the tools to find out what’s going on beyond what Ukrainians say because the US makes extensive use of satellite imagery.

Another congressional source said that the U.S. military considers the information it receives from Ukraine generally reliable, as the U.S. has been training and equipping the Ukrainian army for eight years now, developing a strong relationship. But this, according to the source, does not mean that there are no blind spots, for example, in such matters as the combat status of Ukrainian S-300s.

Jordan Cohen, a defense and foreign policy analyst at the CATO Institute that handles arms sales, believes the biggest danger associated with the flow of weapons heading to Ukraine is what will happen to them when the war ends or turns into a protracted stalemate.

Such a risk is part of any consideration of sending arms abroad. For decades, the US has been sending weapons to Afghanistan, first to arm the mujahideen in their fight against the Soviet army, and then to arm the Afghan forces in their fight against the Taliban.

Inevitably, some weapons ended up on the black market, including Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, the same ones the US is now supplying to Ukraine.

The United States famously struggled to get the Stinger back after the Soviet war in Afghanistan. They could not be found, and when the US itself invaded Afghanistan in 2001, some officials feared they could be used by the Taliban against the United States.

Much of what the US left behind to aid the Afghan forces became part of the Taliban's arsenal after the collapse of the Afghan government and military.

The problem is not unique to Afghanistan. Weapons sold to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have ended up in the hands of militants linked to al-Qaeda and Iran.

The risk of repeating a similar scenario in Ukraine also exists, as the representative of the defense department acknowledged. In 2020, the Inspector General of the Department of Defense released a report expressing concerns about end-use controls on weapons being shipped to Ukraine.

But given the near-insatiable short-term needs of Ukrainian forces for more weapons and ammunition, the long-term the risk of the weapons ending up on the black market or in the wrong hands is considered acceptable, the official said.

“It may become a problem in 10 years, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't think about it,” said Cohen, an analyst at CATO. – More than 50 million rounds of ammunition – all this ammunition will be used not only to fight the Russians. In the end, these munitions will be misused, whether intentionally or not.”

The Russian threat

Officials are less worried, at least for now, about the weapons falling into the hands of the Russians. A source briefed on the intelligence noted that Russia's failure to hold large swathes of territory or force the surrender of many Ukrainian units means that these weapons have either been used or remain in Ukrainian hands.

And it still seems that Russia struggled to intercept or destroy supplies. A third source familiar with the intelligence said that Russia did not appear to be actively attacking Western arms shipments entering Ukraine, although it is not clear why exactly, especially since the US has intelligence about what the Russians want and have discussed it &# 8211; public and private.

The person added that there are a number of theories as to why the shipments have not yet been destroyed or intercepted, including that Russian forces simply cannot find them – weapons and equipment are sent in unmarked vehicles and are often transported at night. . It's also possible that the Russian forces are running out of ammo and don't want to waste it on random trucks unless they're sure it's part of a convoy with weapons.

Although on April 18 Russia said it had destroyed a warehouse “near Lvov” where “large quantities” of weapons provided to Ukraine by the United States and European countries were stored.

But in general, Russia does not have a perfect intelligence overview of Ukraine, as noted this source, and its air capabilities over western Ukraine, where the cargoes arrive, are extremely limited due to Ukrainian air defense systems.

Publicly, the Pentagon says that it has not yet seen Russian attempts to interfere with the supply of weapons from outside or inside Ukraine.</p>

“Flights are still operated to transit points in the region. And still there is a land movement of this material inside Ukraine. Every single day Ukrainians get their hands on security assistance, weapons, materials and support equipment,” Kirby said on April 21.

“We will continue to do this as much as possible and as quickly as we can. We have not seen any attempts by Russia to cut off this flow. And so we will just keep doing it,” he stressed. “We are constantly looking at the progress of deliveries, every day we monitor, change, adapt it as necessary.”