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US failure to track weapons for Ukraine has consequences

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On June 12, 2023, the Department of Defense's Office of Inspector General released a report evaluating the quality of the accountability controls for U.S. weapons sent to Ukraine through Poland.

The report's findings suggest the lack of accountability is even worse than skeptics imagined.

Instead of losing the ability to monitor weapons once they arrive in Ukraine, as many assume, the accountability problems begin before they leave the United States. The lack of accountability can lead not only to weapons dispersion to criminal organizations but also reduces the ability for DoD to track the financial value of weapons sent – all of which potentially risks the security and prosperity of Americans.

The OIG report finds that the lack of accountability occurs for two reasons. First, the agencies responsible for transferring equipment were working at such a high speed they did not provide required information to the recipients in Poland, who are then supposed to send them in transit to Ukraine.

Second, the DoD personnel whose responsibility it was to ensure that transfers meet the accountability thresholds were given no “guidance to training” even when they “lacked logistics subject matter expertise.” As a result, DoD has incomplete documents and an inability to accurately count the number of small arms and light weapons that are being sent to Poland, making accounting for them upon their arrival impossible.

The lack of accountability over these weapons transfers has created two pressing consequences. First, it can lead to misdelivered and unaccounted for weapons. The report notes that this is especially true of items like small arms and ammunition that are smaller and delivered in larger quantities.

This is not inherently surprising as the size and quantity of these items make them harder to track compared to something like a tank or aircraft.

Beyond the likelihood of inaccurate counting, the size and quantity of these items also means they are the most likely to be dispersed to unsavory actors. This means that not only can criminals and terrorists potentially get their hands on U.S. weapons, but also that Ukrainian soldiers are not receiving the weapons they need.

The U.S. government unwisely does not take dispersion seriously. Over the last month, the Ukrainian government has denied responsibility for attacks in which U.S. weapons destined for Ukraine were used against Russia. On one hand, it is a relief that Kyiv is not escalating the war with U.S. weapons. On the other hand, these attacks point to the folly of assuming that loose weapons will be harmless.

In Mexico, Central America, and Afghanistan, loose weapons have cost the U.S. substantial money and manpower. In Ukraine's warzone, loose weapons can deepen tensions between Moscow and Washington to the point of entangling the United States in the conflict and endangering the lives of ordinary Americans.

The second consequence to the lack of accountability is that it can lead to misvaluing what the U.S. has sent to Ukraine. As strange as it may sound, the Pentagon has revealed that these problems already led to a \$3 billion accounting error. To make matters worse, Congress is trying to create a supplemental budget for Ukraine that would be immune from accountability and spending cuts.

In other words, miscounting weapons that are being sent to Ukraine can be written off by Congress as an undemocratic tool at a cost to U.S. taxpayers.

Problems with weapons monitoring in Ukraine did not begin with the start of the war last February. Instead, this has been a problem for decades.

But the extent of poor U.S. weapons supervising seems stuck in a cycle of infinite regress. Every time U.S. arms tracking seems like it is failing, new evidence emerges suggesting that the flaws are worse than anyone imagined. If failures in U.S. weapons monitoring are really, as the saying goes, "turtles all the way down," the consequences are equally unimaginable.

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