

INKSTICK

Cluster Munitions May Win a Battle But Not Ukraine's War

Jordan Cohen and Jonathan Ellis Allen

July 13, 2023

Last week, the Biden administration announced that it would send cluster munitions to Ukraine, despite opposition from scholars, nongovernmental organizations, foreign allies and partners, practitioners, and members of the Democratic Party. The administration's rationale is twofold. First, Ukraine's counteroffensive is not going well, and second, cluster munitions are what is available from US stockpiles. This policy is a reflection of how the Biden administration is succumbing to short-term thinking on Ukraine.

Whether it is announcing the F-16, ATACMS, or cluster munitions, the Biden administration seems like it wants to help Ukraine continue fighting the war while showing little-to-no concern about the country post-conflict. Furthermore, while cluster munitions may provide utility for Ukraine on the battlefield, the decision to transfer them gives a greater indication that US policymakers have no plans for how to sustain or end the war in Ukraine.

Not Just Your Regular Bomb

Cluster munitions are rockets, bombs, missiles, and other forms of artillery that disperse bomblets in midair over a wide area. From a military perspective, they can be an attractive choice as cluster munitions require fewer weapons systems to use, can hit a large number of targets, and ultimately act as an "economy of force" weapon.

Conversely, the major criticism of cluster munitions is that they cause disproportionate harm to civilians and civilian architecture. According to the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, 97% of those killed by cluster munitions are civilians. And because many of the bomblets fail to detonate immediately and are difficult to detect, they remain hazardous for decades after their initial use, making rebuilding cities destroyed by war more difficult. For these reasons, 123 countries have committed to the goals of the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which bans their use. However, the United States, Ukraine, and Russia are not signatories.

The potential for these weapons to cause long-term humanitarian issues helps explain the Biden administration's initial hesitation to send cluster munitions to Ukraine.

The potential for these weapons to cause long-term humanitarian issues also helps explain the Biden administration's initial hesitation to send cluster munitions to Ukraine. This concern is

understandable given that many of the cluster munitions the United States plans to send have a “dud rate” — or the rate at which weapons remain armed but fail to explode upon landing — that analysts estimate to be anywhere between 2.35-23%. Therefore, using them will make large swaths of Ukraine uninhabitable when the conflict ends.

The Rationale

In Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, cluster munitions dropped by the United States in the 1960s and 1970s still cause harm. It is likely that the same fate will await Ukraine if they deploy these systems, extending the pain Ukrainians will face from the conflict long after the shooting stops. However, there are two likely reasons the White House changed course.

First, the United States has nearly three million cluster munition rounds in its stockpiles and many of them do not meet the Department of Defense’s mandated minimum “dud rate” for use by the US military. In other words, many of these cluster munitions can never be used because the Pentagon has decided that they are too risky. However, the Pentagon is running low on other types of ammunition. President Joe Biden admitted as much when he stated, “This is a war relating to munitions. And they’re running out of that ammunition, and we’re low on it.” Therefore, sending cluster munitions became a more attractive option.

Second, Ukraine’s counteroffensive has so far failed to materialize, largely because Russia has strongly reinforced its trenches and fortifications in Ukraine and mined miles of already difficult-to-traverse territory that Ukraine must cross to retake land. Fortified trench lines require vast amounts of direct and indirect fire to break. Cluster munitions can help the Ukrainians overcome these problems because they impact a greater amount of territory than traditional artillery, using a smaller number of total shells.

Nonetheless, dud cluster munitions will eventually restrict movement of friendly forces and will not break through the current stalemate. In other words, they are not a game changer. A 2019 New York Times story actually details how the United States has killed its own troops through the use of cluster munitions. They may help attack Russian defenses, but cluster munitions are not a panacea. Even if the dud rate is as low as 1%, Ukraine is firing 5,000 rounds per day, meaning somewhere between 40 to 50 duds that can harm friendly forces in the future would be created every day.

Given these reasons and the risks, sending cluster munitions reads as a desperate move for the US government as it attempts to continue supporting Kyiv. If weapons that can create so much long-term damage are necessary to win the war, then it is likely that Ukraine is already in an unenviable position and one that it will struggle to escape from. Cluster munitions are a tool that can help the Ukrainian counteroffensive, but they are not the tool that can win the war.

This change in strategy from the Biden administration suggests a complete lack of long-term planning. Sending cluster munitions to Ukraine signals that not only does the administration seem to have no plan for how to help end this conflict, but also that they do not care about the level of destruction the Ukrainians will have to rebuild from after the conflict. No matter how

effective cluster munitions are, all sending them does is sustain the ongoing military stalemate and make post-conflict rehabilitation significantly more challenging.

Jordan Cohen is a policy analyst at the Cato Institute and holds a PhD in political science from George Mason University.

Jonathan Ellis Allen is a research associate and a producer of the "Power Problems" podcast at the Cato Institute.