

Escalation in Ukraine War, Massive Influx of Heavy Weapons. Was Russian Warship Sunk by U.S. Harpoon?

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In a significantly escalatory move, Ukraine’s Operational Command South [announced Thursday](#) that it hit a Russian warship with a “Ukrainian-made Neptune anti-ship missile” that was operating roughly 60 miles south off the coast of Odesa in southeast Ukraine and that it had started to sink.

“In the Black Sea operational zone, Neptune anti-ship cruise missiles hit the cruiser Moskva, the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet—it received significant damage,” the Ukrainian statement said. “A fire broke out. Other units of the ship’s group tried to help, but a storm and a powerful explosion of ammunition overturned the cruiser and it began to sink.”

Russia’s defense ministry claimed the “accidental fire” on the Soviet-era guided-missile cruiser Moskva had been contained, but left the ship badly damaged. Though the Russian statement initially claimed the cruiser “remained afloat” and measures were being taken to tow it to port, it later admitted the warship had sunk as four Russian ships that had gone to the Moskva’s rescue were hampered by bad weather and by ammunition exploding on board.

Late on Thursday, the Russian ministry said in a statement:

“The cruiser ship Moskva lost its stability when it was towed to the port because of the damage to the ship’s hull that it received during the fire from the detonation of ammunition. In stormy sea conditions, the ship sank.”

The statement added the crew had been safely evacuated to other Black Sea Fleet ships in the area.

Russian news agencies said the 611-foot-long (186 meters) Moskva, with a crew of almost

500, was commissioned in 1983 and refurbished in 1998. It was one of the three cruisers in Russia's formidable Black Sea Fleet. The Moskva was armed with a range of anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles as well as torpedoes and naval guns and close-in missile defense systems, including 16 anti-ship Vulkan cruise missiles with a range of at least 700 km (440 miles).

Reportedly, the warship was also carrying S-300 anti-air missiles, captured by Russian troops in early days of the military campaign. It is the first time Moscow has lost a cruiser since German planes sank the Chervona Ukraina (Red Ukraine) in 1941 at Sevastopol – the Crimean naval base to which the Moskva was being towed when it sank.

Maksym Marchenko, the Ukrainian governor of the region around Odessa, said the Moskva had been hit by two cruise missiles. "Neptune missiles guarding the Black Sea caused very serious damage," he said. The Neptune missile that is claimed to have punched a hole in the Moskva's hull was developed and upgraded by Ukraine from a Soviet missile design. It is fired from a mobile launcher with a range of 100 km.

Western officials reportedly described the Ukrainian claims to have hit the Moskva with anti-ship missiles as "credible". A senior US defense official noted that five other Russian vessels that had been as close as or closer to the Ukrainian coast than the Moskva had moved at least another 20 nautical miles offshore after the explosion, suggesting an effort to get out of range of Ukrainian missiles.

"In the wake of the damage that the Moskva experienced, all of the northern Black Sea ships have now moved out, away from the northern areas they were operating in," the defense official [told Guardian](#).

In retaliation for sinking the warship, Russian forces for the first time, since scaling back Russia's offensive north of the capital announced at the Istanbul peace initiative on March 29, [struck military targets](#) in Kyiv, Kherson in the south, the eastern city of Kharkiv and the town of Ivano-Frankivsk in the west, though there were no immediate reports of casualties.

Although Ukraine claimed the Russian warship was struck by a "Ukrainian-made Neptune anti-ship missile," developed domestically based on the Soviet KH-35 cruise missile that became operational in the Ukrainian naval forces just last year, [Politico reported](#) on March 16 that Kyiv had specifically demanded "long-range anti-ship missiles" from Washington.

"A Western diplomat familiar with Ukraine's requests said Kyiv specifically has asked the US and allies for more Stingers and Starstreak man-portable air-defense systems, Javelins and other anti-tank weapons, ground-based mobile air-defense systems, armed drones, long-range anti-ship missiles, off-the-shelf electronic warfare capabilities, and satellite navigation and communications jamming equipment."

Lending credence to the reports the United States has already delivered Harpoon anti-ship missiles to Ukraine, the [Washington Post reported](#) on March 5:

"During an official visit, a Ukrainian special operations commander told Rep. Michael Waltz (R-Fla.), Rep. Seth Moulton (D-Mass.) and other lawmakers that they were shifting training and planning to focus on maintaining an armed opposition, relying on insurgent-like tactics.

“Ukrainian officials told the lawmakers that they were frustrated that the United States had not sent Harpoon missiles to target Russian ships and Stinger missiles to attack Russian aircraft, Moulton and Waltz said in separate interviews.”

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on April 7, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Mark Milley revealed that US and NATO countries have [collectively provided](#) roughly 60,000 anti-tank weapons and 25,000 anti-aircraft weapons during NATO’s “weapons for peace” program to Ukraine since Russia’s invasion on Feb. 24.

Although Milley did not specifically mention providing Harpoons to Ukrainian forces, according to informed sources, caches of anti-ship missiles had also been provided to Ukraine’s naval forces deployed in Odessa in southeast Ukraine.

In addition to the CIA’s [clandestine program](#) for training Ukraine’s largely conscript military and allied neo-Nazi militias in Donbas in east Ukraine aimed at cultivating an anti-Russian insurgency in Ukraine, and the US Special Forces program for training Ukraine’s security forces at Yavoriv Combat Training Center in the western part of the country bordering Poland that was [hit by a barrage](#) of 30 Russian cruise missiles killing at least 35 militants on March 13, the [Pentagon revealed](#) last week that it had also been training Ukrainian troops that were inside the US before Russia launched its invasion.

The Ukrainian soldiers were participating in a pre-scheduled professional military education program at the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School in Biloxi, Mississippi, when Russia’s invasion of Ukraine began on Feb. 24, according to Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby.

That school is a security cooperation school, operating under the US Special Operations Command in support of “foreign security assistance and geographic combatant commanders’ theater security cooperation priorities.” The Ukrainian forces received “training on patrol craft operations, communications and maintenance,” Kirby said.

Since the conclusion of the course in early March, the Department of Defense provided the group “additional advanced tactical training” on the systems the United States has provided to Ukraine, including on “the Switchblade unmanned aerial vehicle,” Kirby said.

Several batches of Ukrainian naval cadets trained at the Naval Training School in Biloxi, Mississippi, have already returned home to Ukraine and were deployed in Odesa and the rest are now headed back to Ukraine.

Besides receiving advanced tactical training on operating the Switchblade kamikaze drones and unmanned coastal defense boats, included in the additional \$800 million in military assistance to Ukraine [announced](#) by the Biden administration on Wednesday, the Ukrainian naval cadets also received training on operating long-range anti-ship missiles in the United States.

Reportedly, the US-trained Ukrainian naval forces deployed in Odessa in the southeast scored two hits of Harpoon anti-ship missiles on the Russian guided-missile cruiser Moskva operating 60 miles south off the coast of Odesa that punched a hole in the warship’s hull and ignited a blaze that, in turn, caused the massive amount of ammunition loaded on the cruiser to explode, and the battleship subsequently sank to the bottom of the Black Sea.

To return the favor of halting Russian military campaign north of the capital and focusing on

liberating Russian-majority Donbas in east Ukraine, practically spelling an end to Russia's month-long offensive in the embattled country, NATO powers have announced transferring heavy weapons, including combat tanks, armored personnel carriers, long-range artillery and even helicopters and [Soviet MiG](#) aircraft, to Ukraine to escalate the conflict.

The latest \$800 million military assistance package to Ukraine [announced](#) by the Biden administration on Wednesday includes 11 Mi-17 helicopters that had been earmarked for Afghanistan before the US-backed government collapsed last year. It also includes 18 155mm howitzers, along with 40,000 artillery rounds, 10 counter-artillery radars, 200 armored personnel carriers, 500 Javelin anti-tank missiles, and 300 additional Switchblade drones.

Besides direct military assistance from the United States, the rest of NATO member states are also pouring in significant amount of heavy weapons in Ukraine. Czechoslovakia used to have the most advanced military-industrial complex in Central Europe during the Soviet era. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and subsequent separation of the "conjoined twins" in 1993, the Czech Republic has inherited the Soviet weaponry. Famous of its arms black market, Czech weapons have been found in war theaters as far away as Syria, Libya and South Sudan.

The Czech Republic had delivered tanks, multiple rocket launchers, howitzers and infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine among military shipments that had reached hundreds of millions of dollars and would continue, two Czech defense sources [confided to Reuters](#).

Defense sources confirmed a shipment of five T-72 tanks and five BVP-1, or BMP-1, infantry fighting vehicles seen on rail cars in photographs on Twitter and video footage last week. "For several weeks, we have been supplying heavy ground equipment - I am saying it generally but by definition it is clear that this includes tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, howitzers and multiple rocket launchers," a senior defense official said.

"What has gone from the Czech Republic is in the hundreds of millions of dollars." The senior defense official said the Czechs were also supplying a range of anti-aircraft weaponry. Independent defense analyst Lukas Visingr said short-range air-defense systems Strela-10, or SA-13 Gopher in NATO terminology, had been spotted on a train apparently bound for Ukraine.

One agreed shipment authorized by the German government includes 56 Czechoslovak-made infantry fighting vehicles that used to be operated by East Germany. Berlin passed the IFVs on to Sweden at the end of the 1990s, which later sold them to a Czech company that now aims to [sell them to Kyiv](#), according to German Welt am Sonntag newspaper.

After the scuttled [aircraft-transfer deal](#) that would've seen Poland handing over its entire fleet of 28 Soviet-era MiG-29s to Ukraine in return for the United States "backfilling" the Polish Air Force with American F-16s last month, now Slovakia was in talks with NATO about an arrangement that could allow Bratislava to send fighter jets to Ukraine, Prime Minister Eduard Heger [told reporters](#) on April 11.

Considering that the Biden administration has already [announced](#) delivering 11 Mi-17 helicopters in its latest \$800 million military assistance package to Ukraine, therefore in all likelihood the Slovak aircraft-transfer deal is also going to go through. The Slovak prime minister did not put a number on how many MiG-29 aircraft Slovakia would provide to

Ukraine, but the country is reported to have around a dozen.

Eduard Heger said his government wanted to “move away from reliance on the Soviet MiGs” in any case. “This is equipment that we want to finish anyway, because we’re waiting for the F-16s,” he added, referring to US-made jets that Slovakia was scheduled to receive in 2024, though Bratislava could receive American fighter jets earlier as soon as it transfers the MiG fleet to Ukraine.

Asking for permanent [US military presence](#) in Central Europe to deter Russia, though making an artificial distinction between “permanent deployment” vs. “rotational deployment at permanent bases” in order to sound like a peacenik, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley proposed before the House Armed Services Committee:

“My advice would be to create permanent bases but don’t permanently station (forces), so you get the effect of permanence by rotational forces cycling through permanent bases,” he said.

“I believe that a lot of our European allies, especially those such as the Baltics or Poland and Romania, and elsewhere — they’re very, very willing to establish permanent bases. They’ll build them, they’ll pay for them.”

“I do think this is a very protracted conflict and I think it’s at least measured in years. I don’t know about decades, but at least years for sure,” said Milley. “I think that NATO, the United States, Ukraine and all of the allies and partners that are supporting Ukraine are going to be involved in this for quite some time.”

“We are now facing two global powers: China and Russia, each with significant military capabilities both who intend to fundamentally change the rules based current global order. We are entering a world that is becoming more unstable and the potential for significant international conflict is increasing, not decreasing,” ([Gen. Milley said](#), emphasis added).

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