

Ukraine's Tank Problem

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It seems to be a case of little provision for so much supposed effect. The debates, the squabbles, the to-and-fro about supplying Ukraine with tanks from Western arsenals has served to confirm one thing: this is an ever-broadening war between the West against Russia with Ukraine an experimental proxy convinced it will win through. Efforts to limit the deepening conflict continue to be seen as the quailing sentiments of appeasers, the wobbly types who find democracy a less than lovable thing.

So far, promises have been made to ship the US M1A2 Abrams, Germany's Leopard 2 and the UK's Challenger. Others have alluded to doing the same thing - including France regarding its Leclerc tanks - but tardiness fills the ranks, and logistics will make the provision of such weapons a long affair. Re-export licenses will have to be issued, notably regarding the Leopard 2; training Ukrainian tank crews will also need to be undertaken.

All in all, the picture is not as rosy as those in Kyiv think, despite the confident [assessment](#) from Ukraine's Deputy Foreign Minister, Andriy Melnyk that his country's defence forces would have access to "at least a hundred tanks" within three months.

The US tanks are, for the most part, still grounded in their country of origin, with their deployment potentially delayed for months, if not years. Pentagon deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh was frank in [admitting](#) that, "We just don't have these tanks available in excess in our US stocks, which is why it is going to take months to transfer these M1A2 Abrams to Ukraine." Singh, it should also be remembered, [expressed](#) the department's view earlier this month that the tank was hardly suitable for Ukrainian needs, given how its jet turbine engine hungers for JP-8 jet fuel, unlike the diesel engine used by the Leopard and Challenger counterparts.

The engine is also [rather tricky to maintain](#) for crews, leaving it susceptible to blowing in the event of error. No less an authority than the Pentagon press secretary US Air Force brigadier general Pat Ryder, admitted that the M-1 "is a complex weapons system that is challenging to maintain, as we've talked about. That was true yesterday; it's true today; it

will be true in the future.”

There is also a [backlog of orders](#) for the tank. The Lima facility in Ohio, operated by General Dynamics, is the only facility that assembles the Abrams. It can produce a mere 12 tanks per month and must fulfill orders to supply 250 A2 tanks for Poland starting in 2025 to replace the same number of Soviet-era T-72 tanks Warsaw supplied to Kyiv last year. Taiwan also put in an order for 108 M1A2 tanks in 2019. Even getting to work on the 31 units promised by the Biden administration for Ukraine looks to be ambitious.

The wrangling over supplying Ukraine with tanks has been an at times acrimonious affair. This is hardly surprising. European states have their own specific readings, however dark or cautious, about how to approach the supply issue. The magic number being sought by Kyiv is 300. After initial resistance, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave in to his peers, both in his coalition outside, to send a company of Leopard 2 tanks and permit countries with the same tanks in their inventories to supply them to Kyiv. A fortnight of aggressive chatter at a number of venues, including Ramstein Air Base, pressing the flesh and breathing down various necks, saw a change of heart and, it has to be said, weak will on the part of the Chancellor.

It is impossible to see how the provision of such weapons, against a larger enemy with no evident sign of capitulation and determined to maintain the fight in the field, however slapdash and ailing, will be a “gamechanger”. That word ought to be scrapped from any credible analysis, but we see it used repeatedly in the tabloid certitude of final victory.

There is Ed Arnold of the Royal United Services Institute, who is confident that this tank transfer “will make a real difference.” But even Arnold attaches a few caveats, [noting](#) that much will depend on how Ukraine uses them. “Do they put them straight into the fight as soon as they’re available? Or do they integrate them into larger formations, train and rehearse those larger formations, and spend a bit more time integrating them into the way that they fight to then potentially use in the summer?”

Whatever the answer to such questions, this is a war that will yield no victors and will, in guaranteed fashion, make a mockery of victory. And the only cruel reality here, short of needless oblivion through imbecilic error of judgment, is to get the warring parties to the table to reach an agreement that is bound to cause despair as much as relief. It might, as unpalatable as it seems, require Ukraine to surrender a portion of devastated earth in the east. The unthinkable will have to be entertained.

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