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Arming Ukraine Is Unnecessary and Dangerous

By Andrew Monaghan

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The conflict in Ukraine poses a complex problem for Western policy-makers. Responses have included sanctions on Russia, the suspension of institutional formats for relations between the West and Russia, and a diplomatic effort resulting in the Minsk agreements.

There are also measures to assist the government in Kiev, such as financial support, the supply of non-lethal weapons, such as helmets, body armor and Humvees, and the training of Ukrainian National Guard units.

But as the conflict has dragged on, Moscow has not changed its position and there has been increased lobbying in the U.S. to supply lethal weapons to the Ukrainian government. Senior Ukrainian officials request "defensive" weaponry as a demonstration of "solidarity" from their European and American allies.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk stated that "Without weapons, we lost Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine. This is the lesson." Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has

stated that to "keep the peace, we should have the ability to defend ourselves" with lethal weapons, and requested 1,240 Javelin anti-tank missiles. "This would be absolutely fair," he claimed.

The call to arm Ukraine has also come from prominent U.S. officials such as Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and NATO figures such as Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Philip Breedlove, who have both argued for supplying lethal weapons to help the Ukrainians "defend themselves" and to "raise the costs" to Russian President Vladimir Putin of aggression in Ukraine.

Supplying lethal weapons to Kiev, however, would be a bad idea for several reasons. First, the "Ukraine should be able to defend itself" argument masks important considerations. The reason Ukraine could not defend itself in 2014 was because of a 20-year degeneration that saw the Ukrainian military decline from being one of the largest in the world to one which could field only a few thousand combat-ready troops.

This degeneration was caused by long-term lack of government support and leadership, a steep decline in investment in the military, the frequent changing of defense ministers and endemic corruption. Combat capacity declined precipitously, not least because for several years before 2014, no brigade or battalion level exercises were held. Without first addressing this strategic picture — which has no quick fix — U.S. weapons will make little positive difference.

Second, the influx of U.S. weapons alone will not help Ukraine defend itself, and increases the risk of the opposite effect. Though the Ukrainian leadership requests the weapons for defensive purposes, the situation will evolve. If the Minsk agreement holds, then Kiev will not need the weapons. But there are no such things as "defensive lethal weapons," and if Minsk collapses, they may be pressed into service as Kiev seeks to fulfill its stated aim to regain control over Donetsk and Luhansk (and even Crimea) which could trigger a larger and likely unwinnable conflict with Russia.

Furthermore, the suggestion that U.S. weapons will "raise the battlefield cost to Putin" also masks important considerations. U.S. weapons would provide the grounds for Moscow to escalate its own involvement in Ukraine.

Russian armed forces could relatively easily match (or better) the supply of weapons to Kiev with its own to the separatists, even providing them before the U.S. weapons arrive or could be effectively used. While Kiev's forces would need training to use U.S. weapons, the separatists are ready to use those that Moscow could supply.

A third objection to supplying lethal weapons is the ongoing instability in Ukraine. The government in Kiev faces not just serious economic, political and social problems, but also serious questions regarding control over the armed volunteer battalions and the Right Sector, of which the recent violence in the city of Mukachevo in western Ukraine is only one dramatic example.

The risk that weapons might fall into the wrong hands once in Ukraine was acknowledged by the (unanimous) passing of amendments on June 10 in the U.S. House of Representatives to the defense spending bill to protect civilians from the dangers of arming and training

foreign forces.

The amendments block the training of the Azov volunteer battalion by U.S. troops. They also made explicit the dangers of supplying shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine (and Iraq), and their concern about the unintended consequences of "overzealous" military assistance or the "hyper-weaponization" of conflicts, and the possibility of radical groups acquiring them.

In the past, the U.S. has supplied weapons to unstable and war-torn areas. Such conflicts evolve quickly and the weapons fall into the wrong hands as interests and alliances change. In Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, the Taliban and the Islamic State have gained possession of U.S. weapons, even using them against U.S. forces.

This is important in the Ukrainian case, where problems such as low pay, desertion, corruption and the black market sale of weapons are rife. It is likely that at least some of those supplied by the U.S. would fall into the wrong hands.

The White House is among those who have opposed the idea. Officials have suggested that providing lethal weapons would inflame the situation and escalate the bloodshed.

Furthermore, the idea is very divisive in the West, splitting the U.S. from major European partners who oppose it, and, as a recent poll by the Pew Research Center suggested, there is limited popular support for the measure throughout NATO: in the U.S., fewer than 50 percent supported the idea, in Germany just 19 percent.

Measures in support of Kiev may evolve. It may be, for instance, that the U.S. supplies counter-artillery and rocket radars that have a longer range than the counter-mortar radars already supplied. But the downsides of the U.S. providing lethal weaponry considerably outweigh possible gains.

Instead, diplomacy should remain the primary approach. This can be supplemented by two other measures that, in due course, will assist the Ukrainians more effectively to defend themselves. First, the U.S. and the EU could increase support to address corruption, smuggling and the black market in weapons. Second, the U.S. and NATO could consider where and how best to assist with more strategic education of the Ukrainian military leadership and the reform and reorganization of the Ukrainian forces.

Equally important, however, is that U.S. and European leaders begin to work out desired (and realistic) strategic aims and timelines, both in Ukraine and with Russia.

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