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Russia Warns of Escalation As Germany Greenlights Leopard Tanks for Ukraine

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A Polish Leopard 2A5 in service. **7th Army Training Command**

Russian officials warned of a possible escalation in its war on Ukraine as Germany agreed to supply Leopard tanks to Ukraine following weeks of pressure from Kyiv and its allies.

"This extremely dangerous decision takes the conflict to a new level of confrontation," Russia's Ambassador to Germany Sergei Nechayev said in a statement Wednesday.

Nechayev claimed that the transfer will inevitably lead to "the death of not only Russian soldiers, but also the civilian population."

"Once again, we are convinced that Germany, like its closest allies, is not interested in a diplomatic solution to the Ukrainian crisis," Nechayev said, adding that by supplying heavier weapons to Ukraine, Berlin "destroys the remnants of mutual trust and causes irreparable damage to the already deplorable state of Russian-German relations."

Berlin said it will provide a company of 14 Leopard 2 A6 tanks from the Bundeswehr stocks

and is also granting approval for other European countries to send tanks from their own stocks to Ukraine.

"The aim is to quickly assemble two tank battalions with Leopard 2 tanks for Ukraine," government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said in a statement.

Kyiv welcomed Germany's decision, calling it the "first step" in the process of arming Ukraine with the advanced battle vehicles.

"The first step on tanks has been taken. Next — the 'tank coalition.' We need a lot of Leopards," the head of Ukraine's presidential administration Andriy Yermak said on social media, referring to other countries such as Poland that have said they would also send the tanks with Berlin's approval.

Britain, France and Poland similarly hailed Germany's move following the announcement.

Ukraine has called on its allies in the West to supply it with advanced tanks as they predict a fresh offensive by invading Russian forces in the spring.

But Berlin and Washington have been hesitant to meet Kyiv's requests.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz had reportedly come under increasing pressure from his Green and Free Democrat government coalition partners to approve the tank delivery for Ukraine in recent days.

The decision also was preceded by intensive discussions with Germany's U.S. allies, according to a Tuesday report by Der Spiegel, as Scholz was determined not to go ahead with the transfer unless the U.S. also supplied Ukraine with its own battle tanks.

This week, The Wall Street Journal reported that Washington appeared to have dropped its opposition to supplying Ukraine with Abrams tanks, while Reuters reported that France was ready to supply Kyiv with its own tanks.

The German-made Leopard 2 is seen as one of the best-performing models worldwide and is used across Europe, meaning spare parts and ammunition can be easily obtained.

Berlin said training of Ukrainian forces on using the tanks will “begin quickly” in Germany.

Analysts believe it will take several weeks to give troops basic training on the equipment, which is more complex than the Soviet-era tanks they are used to.

Experts are nevertheless convinced the Leopards can make a difference.

If Kyiv receives about 100 of them, the effect could be “significant,” according to a recent analysis from IISS.

Equipped with the Leopard 2, “an army can break through enemy lines and put an end to a long period of trench warfare,” Armin Papperger — CEO of Rheinmetall, which supplies the tank’s cannon — told Germany’s Bild newspaper.

“With the Leopard, soldiers can advance dozens of kilometers at a time.”

Earlier Wednesday, the Kremlin vowed that Western-supplied tanks would be destroyed on the battlefield if sent to Ukraine.

"Technologically, this is a failed plan. This is an overestimation of the potential that this will add to the Ukrainian army. These tanks burn like all the rest. They are just very expensive," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

AFP contributed reporting.

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