



Commentary

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Ukraine's New Diplomatic Battlefronts: U.S. Weapons, UN Peacekeepers

The front lines between the Ukrainian army and Moscow-backed forces in eastern Ukraine may be static but see frequent and violent firefights. Diplomatic manoeuvring over new U.S. lethal weapons for Kyiv risks aggravating the conflict and Russia's UN peacekeeping proposal could prove a distraction from a genuine solution.

Washington is considering providing Kyiv with lethal weapons, worrying many residents of eastern Ukraine – and not just separatist rebels or pro-Russian sympathisers. “Most people here don’t think about what these weapons would mean in practice – but of course I am scared”, an outspoken city council member generally loyal to Kyiv told me in Severodonezhsk. The town has been Kyiv’s administrative centre for the Luhansk oblast since 2014 when its main city and former administrative centre, Luhansk, fell into Russia-backed rebel hands.

Another new dimension to the international struggle over Ukraine are competing proposals from Moscow and Kyiv for a new UN peacekeeping operation that would keep armed forces apart in the main conflict areas in eastern Ukraine. So far, however, it is unclear whether these are schemes designed to sow confusion or genuinely intended to lead to a separation of forces.

Not much is known either about what weapons the U.S. might provide to Ukraine, although media reports suggest it could be a \$50 million package featuring shoulder-mounted Javelin anti-tank missiles. U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis reconfirmed

U.S. backing for Ukraine’s territorial integrity on a visit to Kyiv on 24 August, a welcome signal of support after the uncertainties of the early days of the Trump administration. At the same time, Mattis said the U.S. was reviewing the provision of lethal weapons. President Trump’s approval of any arms deal would be a sharp change of direction after years of refusal by the Obama administration.

Opinion is sharply divided over what impact – military or political – the provision of lethal weapons would have on a war that has killed more than 10,000 people since 2014. Sceptics in this highly polarised debate cannot be written off merely as Russia appeasers; the military and political pressure such an arms deal could provide is limited. This is why it is all the more important to consider how the lethal arms provision would affect the humanitarian situation on the ground.

Meaningful Defence or Pouring Oil on the Fire?

In military terms, those in favour say the weaponry would be solely defensive and would improve Kyiv’s chances to push back against Russia’s continued aggression in eastern Ukraine. They say the arms package would allow Ukraine’s armed forces to face the volatile

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situation along the line of separation with more confidence and the most optimistic argue the mere presence of such weaponry would deter any attempts by Russian and separatist forces to shift the front line and acquire more territory. The newly-appointed U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine, Kurt Volker, has dismissed the Obama-era argument that supplying weaponry to Kyiv would likely provoke an escalation by the Kremlin, calling the logic “backwards” and stressing deterrence.

Those who oppose such a move warn it would give Kyiv little military advantage or deterrence capability. First, they point to the current situation on the ground. The conflict generally is stable: positions along the line of separation are static and neither side is pushing for more territory, even if the sides have moved farther into the so-called grey zone over the past months. But there are still frequent and heavy exchanges of fire, which claim both military and civilian casualties. Some fear that this deadly stalemate could settle into protracted conflict, as in other disputes in Russia’s neighbourhood. But providing lethal weapons would do little if anything to change the situation on the ground or deter the most frequent kind of military action now taking place, the tactical use of rockets and other artillery to test the adversary’s resolve.

The most commonly discussed weapon – Javelin anti-tank missiles – illustrates this point. Kyiv first asked its partners for these portable missiles in 2014 when battles were raging and they arguably could have strengthened Ukraine’s positions. But today, provision of Javelins would constitute little more than political symbolism. As a Western diplomat commented: “Kyiv wants a decisive show of support from the West. Whether this is the right form now is not relevant: Ukraine has been wedded to this request for the past three years, so backing down is politically inopportune. Getting the weapons will be a powerful signal”.

Opponents of the lethal weapons package point to another issue, which relates to broader

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strategic calculations. Pouring \$50 million worth of lethal arms into an already heavily militarised conflict zone likely will be met by matching Russian support for the rebels. The result would be an increasingly militarised zone of conflict, and more fighting. This is why Europeans generally have pushed against such a decision, with the exception, among NATO allies, of Lithuania, though many provide other forms of military aid. One could argue that the West should give Kyiv the weaponry it needs to take on the rebels and their Russian supporters. But this would be a risky, costly and uncertain gamble, and something for which few if any Western countries have an appetite.

That Ukraine has the right to defend itself is beyond dispute. Kyiv has been understandably unhappy about its Western partners’ emphasis on strengthening the government’s long-term resilience rather than its military arsenal. “We feel left alone with Russia and don’t see the focus on resilience as something that is helping us”, a Ukrainian security analyst told me in June. But tactical military escalation is hardly the answer to a conflict that has no military solution. Under the circumstances, the West can be most effective by maintaining sanctions on Russia while helping Ukraine build robust institutions and professionalise its armed forces.

Encouraging Negotiations or More Conflict?

The political, not the military, impact of providing lethal weapons is the real issue. Here too there are stark differences between assessments of how it would affect negotiations. Supporters claim provision of these weapons would strengthen Ukraine’s hand in the Normandy Format and Trilateral Contact Group negotiations, the main settlement venues for the conflict, giving Kyiv a better chance to achieve stronger security and political outcomes.

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But others consider this too optimistic. Critics, and not only pro-Russian ones, warn that providing lethal weapons could further aggravate a zero-sum negotiation process that has failed to address issues central to a future settlement. “Power and perceptions of power are used as a negotiating chip in the talks”, commented a senior diplomat involved with the process, adding that neither side can afford to give in to a show of force and therefore each would respond with counter-measures of its own. Indeed, ever since active fighting for territorial gains ceased, the application of force by one side or the other has never helped efforts to end the conflict. Such a logic arguably could change if the balance of power were to shift substantially. But that does not appear to be in the cards for the foreseeable future.

A lethal weapons package that Russia could easily match is unlikely to have any political impact. It will not address the imbalance between Ukraine’s and Russia’s military capacities, nor the mismatch between the level of Western and Russian interest in Ukraine. The West does not want to engage in an armed proxy confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, a reality both Moscow and Kyiv understand. While the provision of lethal weapons could boost Ukraine’s confidence and tactical posture in the talks, it is unlikely to change their course, even if accompanied by a strong push by the West for diplomatic progress.

“Beating down the Temperature”

The conflict’s centre of gravity is not in eastern Ukraine, but that is where the situation is most unstable. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission reports anything from dozens to thousands of ceasefire violations each

day. Ceasefire commitments periodically are renewed – at Christmas, Easter, for the harvest or the start of the school year – to give those living in the conflict zone a sense of normalcy. But these pauses invariably fizzle out, making way for new hostilities.

Constant insecurity aggravates the humanitarian situation. Front line villages are especially vulnerable given the intermixing of civilians with armed actors on both sides. Shelling of vital infrastructure is common. Interruptions of water and electricity supplies heighten the crisis, especially in the summer and winter months. Infrastructure also suffers from tremors caused by recurrent shelling and needs frequent repair.

“Windows of silence”, or humanitarian ceasefires, have been hard to negotiate, although they periodically allow repair teams to weld leaking pipes or reconnect broken wires. Recent rounds of talks offer hope for establishing safety zones around key infrastructure hubs, such as the Donetsk Filtration Station that provides water to over 345,000 people.

Negotiating these safety zones or implementing the last of three agreed disengagement areas would improve civilian lives in parts of the war zone, but these are small steps. Destructive weaponry still would remain within firing range, and the disengagement areas do not cover the most pernicious hotspots along the line. The systemic malaise would remain unaddressed. A diplomat involved with the settlement talks said: “We are beating down the temperature”, not healing the illness.

Focusing on the Bigger Picture

In this context, adding lethal U.S. weaponry risks shifting the focus away from what ought to be the priority: fashioning short- and long-term steps to settle or at least manage the conflict. While a comprehensive political solution is not within immediate reach, much could be done to minimise the conflict’s human cost. The greatest immediate danger is the deployment of weapons systems and hostile forces close to the line of separation.

Ceasefires are already hard to arrange and implement. They require all sides to make tough decisions, pass orders to all forces in the field and discipline those who do not comply. A diplomat told me that when Ukrainian soldiers were asked how they heard about the latest ceasefire, called ahead of the start of the school year, some answered that they had learned about it from TV.

Although Moscow bears significant responsibility for the conflict, Ukrainian authorities also need to take difficult steps to stabilise the east and better manage the humanitarian situation. Demonstrating full commitment to the ceasefire, disengaging forces, and formulating an inclusive vision for the reintegration of the divided region's populations would be a good start, particularly as positions harden on both sides. Kyiv's Western partners need to press Ukraine to implement such measures before the country's 2019 presidential election. In the run up to that poll, Kyiv also should redouble its reform efforts, especially regarding systemic and high-level corruption.

While maintaining sanctions is important to convince Moscow its engagement in eastern Ukraine is costly and dangerous, the U.S. and the European Union (EU) also need to increase pressure on the Russian Federation, including in the OSCE, to allow monitoring of the Russian-Ukrainian border in rebel-controlled areas. This would allow the movement of weapons and supplies across those border segments to be tracked. The debate in the UN over different draft proposals by Moscow and Kyiv for a peacekeeping force in Ukraine is also a good opportunity for Ukraine's Western partners to insist that Moscow allow for

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transparency along the Russian-Ukraine border as a first step. Meanwhile, Moscow should press its allies in rebel-held areas to urgently comply with their ceasefire commitments and withdraw heavy weapons.

The idea of a peacekeeping operation is well worth pursuing, even if Moscow's intentions appear to be to create a diversion rather than seek a genuine solution. Though likely to stumble on difficult issues such as mandate, area of deployment and composition – to cite just a few – it ultimately could help “unzip” the line of separation and facilitate a genuine disengagement of forces.

Providing lethal weapons to be deployed in the conflict zone should not be a priority for Kyiv's partners. Such a step could upend the status quo, which, however imperfect, is preferable to escalating violence; nor would it produce substantive progress toward settlement. In Kramatorsk, a local humanitarian worker showed me pictures of Soviet-era shells, recently fired at front-line villages, enhanced in makeshift ways for more lethal impact. He said the sides were copying one another in their use. New weapons in the area are unlikely to affect the sides' broader calculations, but are sure to impact or even end the lives of those who live along the line of separation. This can and should be avoided.