



U.S. and NATO scramble to arm Ukraine and refill their own depleting arsenals

Description

USA/EU: When the Soviet Union collapsed, European nations grabbed the “peace dividend,” drastically shrinking their defense budgets, their armies and their arsenals.

With the rise of al-Qaida nearly a decade later, terrorism became the target, requiring different military investments and lighter, more expeditionary forces. Even NATO's long engagement in Afghanistan bore little resemblance to a land war in Europe, heavy on artillery and tanks, that nearly all defense ministries thought would never recur.

But it has. In Ukraine, the kind of European war thought inconceivable is chewing up the modest stockpiles of artillery, ammunition and air defenses of what some in NATO call Europe's “bonsai armies,” after the tiny Japanese trees. Even the mighty United States has only limited stocks of the weapons the Ukrainians want and need, and Washington is unwilling to divert key weapons from delicate regions like Taiwan and Korea, where China and North Korea are constantly testing the limits.

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Now, nine months into the war, the West's fundamental unpreparedness has set off a mad scramble to supply Ukraine with what it needs while also replenishing NATO stockpiles.

As both sides burn through weaponry and ammunition at a pace not seen since World War II, the competition to keep arsenals flush has become a critical front that could prove decisive to Ukraine's effort.

The amount of artillery being used is staggering, NATO officials say. In Afghanistan, NATO forces might have fired even 300 artillery rounds a day and had no real worries about air defense.

But Ukraine can fire thousands of rounds daily and remains desperate for air defense against Russian missiles and Iranian-made drones.

“A day in Ukraine is a month or more in Afghanistan,” said Camille Grand, a defense expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations, who until recently was NATO’s assistant secretary-general for defense investment.

In the summer in the Donbas region, the Ukrainians were firing 6,000 to 7,000 artillery rounds each day, a senior NATO official said. The Russians were firing 40,000 to 50,000 rounds per day.

By comparison, the United States produces only 15,000 rounds each month.

So the West is scrambling to find increasingly scarce Soviet-era equipment and ammunition that Ukraine can use now, including S-300 air defense missiles, T-72 tanks and especially Soviet-caliber artillery shells.

The West is also trying to come up with alternative systems, even if they are older, to substitute for shrinking stocks of expensive air-defense missiles and anti-tank Javelins. It is sending strong signals to Western defense industries that longer-term contracts are in the offing – and that more shifts of workers should be employed and older factory lines should be refurbished.

It is trying to purchase ammunition from countries such as South Korea to “backfill” stocks being sent to Ukraine.

There are even discussions about NATO investing in old factories in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria to restart the manufacturing of Soviet caliber 152 mm and 122 mm shells for Ukraine’s still largely Soviet-era artillery armory.

But the obstacles are as myriad as the solutions being pursued.

NATO countries – often with great fanfare – have provided Ukraine some advanced Western artillery, which uses NATO-standard 155 mm shells. But NATO systems are rarely certified to use rounds produced by other NATO countries, which often make the shells differently. (That is a way for arms manufacturers to ensure that they can sell ammunition for their guns, the way printer manufacturers make their money on ink cartridges.)

The Russians, too, are having resupply problems of their own. They are

now using fewer artillery rounds, but they have a lot of them, even if some are old and less reliable.

Facing a similar scramble, Moscow is also trying to ramp up military production and is reportedly seeking to buy missiles from North Korea and more cheap drones from Iran.

Given the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in the Donbas region, NATO's new military spending goals – 2% of gross domestic product by 2024, with 20% of that on equipment instead of salaries and pensions – seem modest. But even those were largely ignored by key member countries.

In February, when the war in Ukraine began, stockpiles for many nations were only about half of what they were supposed to be, the NATO official said, and there had been little progress in creating weapons that could be used interchangeably by NATO countries.

Even within the European Union, only 18% of defense expenditures by nations are cooperative.

Washington is also looking at older, cheaper alternatives like giving Ukraine anti-tank TOW missiles, which are in plentiful supply, instead of Javelins, and Hawk surface-to-air missiles instead of newer versions. But officials are increasingly pushing Ukraine to be more efficient and not, for example, fire a missile that costs \$150,000 at a drone that costs \$20,000.

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