



‘We haven’t got any f***ing jets to give’: Doubts over how Rishi Sunak could help Ukraine with air power

Description

The UK is weighing up whether to send fighter jets to Ukraine in a move that would pile pressure on other Western countries to step up their military support for Kyiv.

On a visit to Britain on Wednesday, Ukraine’s leader Volodymyr Zelensky requested “wings for freedom”, arguing that donations of planes would help Ukraine defeat Russia and restore its legal borders.

Rishi Sunak has asked the Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, to examine whether the RAF can spare Typhoon fighters in the coming months. Ukrainian pilots will soon come to Britain for training on the Nato-standard jets, although it is currently unclear when they will be fully qualified to fly them.

Speaking at a press conference in Dorset on Wednesday evening, the Prime Minister said that the possibility of sending combat aircraft was “part of the conversation” and added that “nothing is off the table”.

Mr Zelensky said: “This day has become very fruitful and I’m grateful to the Prime Minister for understanding our needs and for his helpful advice.” The President also suggested that Ukrainian pilots could be trained in a matter of months, rather than the three to five years previously claimed by the UK Government.

Government insiders acknowledge that it may not be possible to send jets in time to make a difference to the current war but **i** understands that one motivation is to bolster Ukraine’s military capabilities for the long term so that Russia and other potential aggressors never again try to capture its territory.

Mr Sunak also hopes that by becoming the first major Western power to despatch fighter aircraft to Ukraine, the UK may encourage other allies such as the US and Germany to follow suit.

“Impact of numbers is an important aspect of this,” a source close to the Prime Minister said. Another insider added: “We were among the first to say we would send Challengers (tanks) and others followed

us.”

But some in the Government remain sceptical about the idea. One Cabinet minister told **i**: “We haven’t got any f***ing jets to give!”

Joe Biden has so far ruled out sending US F-16 jets but some of his allies are pushing for a change of heart. A Washington source said: “There’s nothing firm yet, but mood is certainly shifting towards providing F-16s to Ukraine. The generals are beginning to push talk about it more, and if we can provide tanks along with many allies, then there’s a growing argument that we can provide jets. They are just another piece of kit after all.”

The Russian Embassy in the UK hit out at Mr Sunak’s announcement, saying that jet deliveries would have “military and political consequences for the entire European continent”.

How many jets could the UK send to Ukraine?

It is unclear and would depend on talks with the Ukrainian military and other allies. The RAF has more than 130 Typhoon fighters, of which around 30 are currently due to be decommissioned in 2025, even though they will have around half of their notional maximum flying time left, potentially making them the top candidates to be sent to the front line.

When could this happen?

Not for several months at least. One of the major issues is the need to train Ukraine’s pilots to fly British jets, which will take months or even years. It is also unlikely that the UK would act without the support of other key allies such as the US and Germany, which have ruled out sending their own jets – for now. If Ukraine did receive Western jets it would also need other infrastructure such as ground support to enable its air force to use them properly.

What difference could the jets make to Ukraine’s war efforts?

Kyiv’s troops have largely matched the Russians on the ground, and their ability to deploy deadly missiles is growing. But Moscow is still winning the air war, preventing Ukraine from pushing its army far back from the current front lines; a squadron of fighter jets could tip the balance.

How much would this cost the UK?

Almost certainly hundreds of millions of pounds, although it is difficult to put an exact price tag on it.

by Hugo B.

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