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WORLD | EUROPE

# Poland to Make MiG-29 Combat Jets Available to U.S.

Offer comes after talks about how to deliver planes to Ukraine



The Polish government called on other NATO members with MiG-29s in their inventory to follow its lead.

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WARSAW—Poland said it would make its Soviet-made MiG-29 combat jets available to the U.S., after [days of talks](#) about how to get such planes into the hands of Ukraine as it tries to fend off [Russia’s offensive](#).

The Polish government on Tuesday said the planes “are ready to deploy —immediately and free of charge.” The aircraft would be flown to the American Ramstein Air Base in Germany, where they would be at the disposal of the U.S., Poland’s Foreign Ministry said.

The Polish government called on other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization with MiG-29s in their inventory to follow its lead and asked the U.S.

to provide Poland with used combat planes to replenish the capability lost by relinquishing the MiGs.

The Pentagon said it wasn't clear that there was a "substantive rationale" for having Polish jets intended for Ukraine at an American air base, saying such a proposal raised concerns for NATO.

"We will continue to consult with Poland and our other NATO allies about this issue and the difficult logistical challenges it presents, but we do not believe Poland's proposal is a tenable one," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said in a statement.

U.S. military officials appeared surprised Tuesday afternoon by Poland's statement.

Victoria Nuland, the under secretary of state for political affairs, said Tuesday while appearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that she wasn't aware of Poland coordinating with the U.S. ahead of the announcement.

"To my knowledge, it wasn't pre-consulted with us that they planned to give these planes to us," Ms. Nuland told hearing Tuesday. "So I think that actually was a surprise move by the Poles," she said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Saturday made an impassioned plea to Capitol Hill for assistance in obtaining more lethal military aid, especially Russian-made jet fighters that Ukrainian pilots can fly. Ukraine's military has largely relied on surface-to-air missiles to challenge Russian military planes flying over the country, with some apparent success.

Giving Ukraine combat jets would mark the highest-profile step in a massive effort by NATO members and other allies to supply weapons to the embattled country as it tries to repel Russian troop advances. Mr. Zelensky has been pushing for planes and missiles that can shoot down Russian planes and helicopters, which have been carrying out attacks on civilians.

But it is unclear how many MIG-29s the Poles would provide, what kind of U.S. aircraft they would receive in exchange and when.

Poland had emerged as the leading Western contender to provide planes to Ukraine because the country operates modernized MiG-29 fighter planes that Ukrainian pilots likely could operate. Mr. Zelensky on Saturday lobbied members of Congress for a deal for planes and other military equipment to help the country battle invading Russian forces.

A Polish diplomat said that Warsaw has agreed with the U.S. to transfer the planes and has the full support from the Biden administration for the move.

“They’re our fighters and we are transferring them, but through the U.S. and through U.S. infrastructure,” he said. “We wanted the certainty that in six months or two years everyone will be comfortable that this was a NATO idea, a Western idea,” he said.

The move marks somewhat a reversal for Warsaw. Polish officials had been lukewarm to the idea of the planes going to Ukraine, in part out of concern it could invite an attack on the country from Russia. On Sunday, Poland’s prime minister’s office dismissed reports of a potential arrangement for the country to hand over combat planes, though two Polish officials close to the issue said Poland would at least consider the proposal Washington was willing to put together. Handing the planes to the U.S. first removes Poland one step from its involvement in any handover to Ukraine.

In a statement Tuesday, the Polish government also said it requests “other NATO Allies—owners of MIG-29 jets—to act in the same vein.”

Bulgaria and Slovakia are other NATO members operating the plane type. Slovakia’s defense minister had a call with U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Tuesday, a senior Slovak official said. Slovakia is exploring a similar arrangement to that of Poland, the official said.

Representatives for the Bulgarian government didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Polish diplomat said earlier Tuesday that “there is a lot of will” in Poland to help Ukraine fight the Russians.

“But there has to be a consensus over it in the Western community,” he added.

“We can act on behalf of NATO, but we need support in doing so. And not every Western country feels safe or comfortable with that. What we would really like to avoid is providing jets to Ukraine and then being left alone because it was ‘our call.’”

The Polish decision comes a day after the White House warned of complexities in getting the planes to Ukraine. “Where will they depart from, where will they land?” White House press secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday. “There are a number of challenging practical questions.”

Republican Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, urged the Biden administration to get the Polish planes to Ukraine “as soon as possible.”

A European diplomat said it appeared the Pentagon was caught off guard by the announcement from Warsaw, adding that the transfer of the aircraft could pose security challenges for Poland and risk the appearance of direct NATO involvement in the war.

“I think there’s a very real question about how quickly could the backfilling be got to Poland and any other ally who sent them? Because you wouldn’t want to create a capability gap in Poland that the Russians might think made it possible to do something nasty out of Kaliningrad,” the diplomat said. “On the face of it, it looks like an easy problem to solve. But I think actually it’s not.”

The Polish air force inventory still includes just under some 30 Soviet-made MiG-29 combat jets, according to Jane’s World Air Forces. The country also has U.S. F-16 combat jets in its fleet, made by Lockheed Martin Corp. Poland also has agreed to buy American F-35 combat planes.

One of the questions for the White House now is how to get replacement planes to Poland. “Procuring new planes and transferring serious weapon systems often take years to do,” Ms. Psaki. “We are working through some pretty complicated logistics on that front as well.”

At an afternoon press conference Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) said he expects the fiscal 2022 spending bill that Congress aims to pass this week will include loan guarantees that would allow Poland or other Eastern

European allies to buy U.S.-made F-16 fighter jets. “That’s my expectation,” he told reporters.

Lawmakers are looking at spending roughly \$14 billion on additional Ukraine aid as part of that package.

—*Courtney McBride in Washington contributed to this article.*

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