

Ukraine military briefing

Military briefing: Ukraine pleads for missiles as air defence stocks run

low



Some allies fear Kyiv's planned counter-offensive will falter if Russian air power is left unchecked

Henry Foy in Brussels, **John Paul Rathbone** in London, **Felicia Schwartz** in Washington and **Roman Olearchyk** in Kyiv 3 HOURS AGO

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Ukraine will plead for urgent shipments of surface-to-air missiles at a meeting of its western allies this week, fearful that an acute shortage could allow Russia to launch widespread bombing attacks.

Kyiv will press allies to bolster their dwindling stocks at the so-called Ramstein military co-ordination group on Friday, according to three officials briefed on the preparations. Without adequate air defences, western capitals fear a [long-planned counter-offensive](#) against occupying Russian troops could falter.

Recent shipments of Soviet-designed MiG fighter jets to Ukraine are in part intended to mitigate the threat of Russia's large, yet so far underused, air power. But Kyiv is desperate for more missiles capable of shooting down fighter jets having used large quantities to counter [barrages of Moscow's drones and missiles](#).

"Short-range air defence has been a topic that has been raised increasingly by the Ukrainians," said one European official. "If they use them all up, it opens the space up for air forces."

"If Russia can get in with dumb bombers, Ukraine will be in trouble," they added, referring to unguided munitions dropped from planes. "It's looking grim."

Western intelligence shared among Nato allies earlier this year warned that Russia was amassing fighter jets and attack helicopters close to the front line in [Ukraine](#).

That prompted an immediate surge of air defence assets, including via a \$2bn US support package announced in late February.

Ukraine's defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov said on Wednesday that his country had started receiving US-made Patriot missile systems, the most advanced air defence systems provided by western backers so far.

"Today our sky becomes more secure," Reznikov said in a post on Twitter in which he expressed gratitude to the US, Germany and Netherlands.

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The three countries have pledged several kits to Ukraine. Reznikov and other Ukrainian officials would not reveal how many are needed to conduct an effective counteroffensive this spring.

But officials said the continuing need to defend against Russian missile and drone attacks had systematically depleted Ukraine's stockpiles — a warning backed up by [US intelligence documents leaked online](#) this spring that suggested Kyiv might run out of ammunition for five critical air defence systems.

According to documents reviewed by the Financial Times, the US assessed in late February that Ukraine's ability to protect its troops on the front lines would be "completely reduced" by May 23.

"If it turns out to be true that Ukraine's air defence, which relies heavily on Russian-pattern equipment and ammunition, is running short of ammunition, then this type of material cannot be replaced by the west easily or quickly," Sir Richard Barrons, former head of the British armed forces, told the FT.

"This raises the risk that just as the Ukrainian counter-offensive gets under way Ukraine is not as capable as it needs to be in maintaining control over its own skies," he said. That would make its forces "very vulnerable" and, just as significantly, allow the Russian air force to "penetrate anywhere it chose to in Ukraine".

Defence officials from about 50 nations providing support to Ukraine will meet at the US air base in Ramstein, Germany, on Friday for a regular meeting of a group formed to co-ordinate military supplies.





US Air Force transport planes at the Ramstein base in Germany © Ronald Wittek/EPA-EFE

Previous meetings had focused on Ukrainian demands for western battle tanks, fighter jets and, most recently, artillery ammunition, but the officials said air defence was the most pressing.

“[Air defence supplies] is a problem which is constantly raised by Ukraine,” said a second European official, who declined to be identified because of the sensitivity of the issue. “The delivery of [MiG] fighters is aimed at preparing it for air fighting . . . against Russian sorties.”

Even with adequate supplies of air defence munitions, Ukraine would still face a daunting challenge to execute its counter-offensive aimed at pushing Russia out of the south-eastern areas of the country.

Substantial aerial cover is a critical element of any successful ground offensive, military experts say, given the danger that Russia’s jets and bombers pose to any massed Ukrainian forces attempting to punch through the front line.

Colin Kahl, US under-secretary of defence for policy, said air defence was a pressing concern for the Ukrainians. “Their three top priorities are our three top priorities: air defence, artillery and mechanised and armoured forces and everything that’s needed to maintain and sustain those vehicles,” Kahl said at an event hosted by Foreign Policy magazine this week.





Colin Kahl, US under-secretary of defence for policy, says air defence is a pressing concern for Kyiv © Tom Williams/CQ-Roll Call, Inc via Getty Images

For now, some western officials remain optimistic, citing Russia's continuing lack of air superiority and the inflow of western weapons into Ukraine. In addition, the slower pace of Russian missile attacks on national infrastructure has helped maintain Ukrainian air defence stocks.

"We don't see any danger that Ukraine will lose air superiority," said one. "Ukraine has enough [air defence] to defend itself . . . [although] everyone is low, we've had a year of conflict, and nobody has inexhaustible supplies."

But if missile shortfalls and weak air defences resulted in big gains for Russia on the battlefield, that is likely to lead to renewed demands for western powers to supply modern fighter jets or impose a no-fly zone, Barrons said. These are two steps that Nato powers have so far rejected.

"There is a very hard choice here: either the west significantly and rapidly ramps up its defence industrial output . . . or the west elects not to do this and runs the risk of Ukraine simply not having the means to fight effectively and therefore be defeated and abandoned," he added.

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