

Opinion **The FT View**

Nato's weapons stockpiles need urgent replenishment

Russia's attack on Ukraine shows western militaries are ill-equipped for war

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Ukrainian soldiers prepare a US-supplied howitzer in Kherson. Last summer, Ukraine's forces were firing 7,000 shells a day — about a fortnight's worth of maximum US production © Libkos/AP

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Russia's war against Ukraine has been a sobering wake-up call for western militaries. Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, they are discovering they are ill-prepared for a full-intensity conflict like that in Ukraine or the one that China may unleash against Taiwan. Russia's onslaught has turned into an attritional struggle with ghastly echoes of the first world war, albeit with more modern arms. The US and its European allies have commendably poured in weapons and ammunition to help Ukraine defend itself. Western-supplied portable anti-tank weapons, precision-guided missiles and Nato-standard artillery have proved critical to blunting Russia's invading forces.

However, Kyiv's insatiable demands are emptying stores at an alarming rate and outstripping capacity to replenish them. With the post-cold war peace dividend and then the shift to more nimble expeditionary warfare, governments have allowed inventories to dwindle despite a Nato benchmark, set in 2014, to stockpile a month's ammunition for high-intensity combat. Some, like Germany, have supplies for a few days at most.

Years of lean, stop-start procurement have curtailed the defence industry's capacity to ramp up production in an emergency. As FT [analysis](#) has shown, sophisticated weapons systems such as Javelin anti-tank missiles or Himars guided rockets can take at least a year to manufacture and involve complex production chains with multiple suppliers, each of them a potential bottleneck.

The situation is particularly acute for artillery munitions. At the height of the slugfest across the front lines last summer, Ukraine's army was firing an estimated 7,000 shells a day, a fortnight's worth of maximum US production. Ukraine has only a few friendly central European suppliers for its 152mm Soviet standard shells. The continuing shift to Nato standard artillery and 155mm shells will only increase the burden on western suppliers. Russia is also thought to be suffering shell supply problems, but it has a vast defence industry that it can put on a war footing.

The [war in Ukraine](#) is a war of resources — as would be any conflict with China. Nato governments have been slow to respond. It should have been obvious, for example, that once Russian forces had been pushed back from Kyiv in March last year, Ukraine would need advanced air defences to protect its cities and its troops.

The US has at least begun signing contracts and writing cheques. It has pledged to expand artillery production by five times within two years. The risk of fighting a war over Taiwan while also defending Europe against Russian aggression means it will need to do more to beef up production capacity and resilience. It should be more strategic about identifying long-term armaments needs, replenishment capabilities and potential bottlenecks, and where necessary agree multiyear contracts.

European powers are further behind. [Catching up will be costly](#). Germany says that building a 30-day ammunition stockpile alone could cost €20bn. Outside aeronautics and missiles, Europe's defence industry is fragmented and low-volume. It is all the more important that European governments join together for procurement. A German-led initiative on air defence involving 15 European countries is a good step forward.

Governments will balk at feather-bedding already profitable defence companies whose performance often leaves much to be desired. But defence industrial capacity is a vital component of security underpinning the international order and global trading system. Maintaining it is also a way of deterring aggression. It is a message to Moscow — and to Beijing — that Ukraine's allies are in it for the long haul.

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