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WORLD

Western Tanks Heading to Ukraine Raise Stakes for Russia's Next Move

Moscow could increase defenses or attacks but is already struggling to gain ground



Western tanks could significantly help Ukraine in its fight to evict Moscow's forces.

PHOTO: RONI REKOMAA/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By *Daniel Michaels* [Follow](#)

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Months before modern Western tanks reach Ukraine, their anticipated delivery has the power to shift battlefield dynamics by forcing Russia to act faster than it had planned—or is ready—to do.

The U.S., Germany, Poland and other allies of Ukraine on Wednesday said they would send dozens of modern tanks, greatly expanding a British pledge of 14 from earlier in the month. The mobile, armored weapons are more advanced and lethal than any tanks Russian forces possess, military specialists say, and they will join a far larger number of modern armored vehicles and other weapons systems also recently pledged by Ukraine's Western supporters. Ukrainian leaders have for months asked for 300 Western tanks.

The U.S. is considering three options that would see the tanks delivered as soon as several months and as far out as two years, Pentagon officials said.

General Dynamics Corp., the defense company that produces the Abrams, could manufacture new tanks, which would see Kyiv receiving fresh off-the-assembly-line machines as far out as 18 to 24 months from now, an official said. General Dynamics Chief Executive Phebe Novakovic said Wednesday that the company has plenty of capacity to accommodate new orders.

The Pentagon could also refurbish tanks in the U.S. inventory, or find tanks from allies to whom the U.S. has already sold tanks. Those approaches would also mean Ukraine wouldn't see the tanks for many months, officials said. The U.S. has decided to send Kyiv the M1A2 variant, officials said.

Russian officials attacked the tank pledges. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that Moscow sees the pledges of tanks and other weapons as increasing the West's "direct involvement in the conflict" despite statements from countries linked to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization that they aren't parties to the war.

Moscow's ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Antonov, said Wednesday on the Telegram messaging app that "American tanks without any doubt will be destroyed" alongside other Western equipment in Ukraine.

While the Western tanks—the British Challenger 2, German-made Leopard 2 and U.S. Abrams—could significantly help Ukraine in its fight to evict Moscow's forces, Russian troops probably won't encounter them before spring. Ukrainian forces must first learn to operate the complex equipment and then train to use the vehicles in coordinated formations alongside armored infantry vehicles and foot soldiers.

Russian commanders, meanwhile, will be trying to divine how and where Ukraine might use its new weapons, and assess how best to react, say military strategists. Moscow will need to decide how to balance defensive and offensive measures, and whether to act first or wait for a Ukrainian offensive widely expected for spring.

"Obviously the Russians will be out to target the tanks," said retired U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Stephen Twitty, who predicted that if Ukraine can mobilize a sufficient number of the new weapons, Russian forces won't succeed in thwarting them.

Ukraine currently has hundreds of Soviet-designed tanks, including from its own armories, modernized units provided by ex-Warsaw Pact allies and ones seized from retreating Russian troops. Their numbers, which Kyiv doesn't reveal, remain smaller than Russian stocks of similar tanks.

Tanks are extraordinarily powerful weapons, mixing mobility, protection and lethality, but are best used in what military strategists call combined arms maneuvers, mixing a variety of land and air systems. Ukrainian troops will train in Western European countries to gain some proficiency in those tactics, but the extent of the necessary education means the tanks may only roll into battle in spring.

That gives Russia time to adapt. Preparations could range from strengthening physical defenses like barriers and trenches to bolstering Russia's own tank fleets and pre-emptively attacking Ukrainian positions.



Ukraine is expected to receive around 100 German-made Leopard 2 main battle tanks.

PHOTO: PATRIK STOLLARZ/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Russia's tanks are less sophisticated than the Western models, but Moscow has far more of them, potentially numbering in the thousands. Uralvagonzavod, Russia's largest tank manufacturer, is also ramping up production of new tanks under pressure from the Kremlin.

M1A1 Abrams Main Battle Tank

Max speed: 41.6 mph
Firing range: 2.49 miles

Crew number



“The correlation of forces in raw numbers favors Russia,” said Dara Massicot, a senior policy researcher

Weight: 57.2 tons
In service: 1986
Origin: U.S.



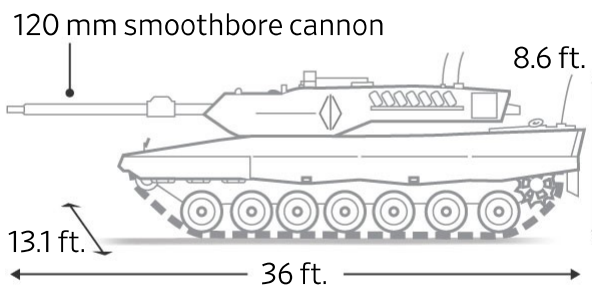
120 mm smoothbore cannon
 Turret 7.62 mm machine gun
 12.7 mm anti-aircraft machine gun



Leopard 2 Main Battle Tank*

Max speed: 43.5 mph
Firing range: 3.1 miles
Weight: 62 tons
In service: 1979
Origin: Germany

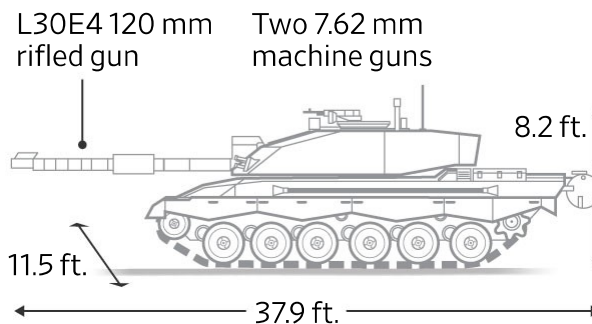
Crew number



Challenger 2 Main Battle Tank

Max speed: 34.8 mph
Firing range: Over 1.86 miles
Weight: 62.5 tons
In service: 1994
Origin: U.K.

Crew number



*A6 model shown Sources: Military Today; Krauss-Maffei Wegmann (Leopard)

at Rand Corp., a California-based global research organization.

Mikhail Barabanov, an analyst at the Moscow-based Center for Analysis and Strategic Technologies, said 31 Abrams tanks wouldn't significantly change the battlefield. "The point of limited deliveries of Western weapons isn't so much a decisive Ukrainian victory as much as increasing the attrition and wearing down of Russian forces," he said.

Still, he said the Western tanks have more modern weapons with superior firepower, putting the Russians at a disadvantage if battles occur over greater distances. Western tanks also have more-advanced targeting capabilities, including better night vision, potentially allowing them to spot Russian vehicles before being spotted.

"Generally in a tank-on-tank battle, the one that gets a shot off first wins," said Ed Arnold, a research fellow at the U.K.'s Royal United Services Institute.

Moscow lost a large portion of its active-duty tanks early in the war, and many tanks in storage are in poor condition. But large numbers remain usable and could be pulled from reserves, Ms. Massicot said. A bigger

ivaner veygmann (Leopard)
Jemal R. Brinson and Brian McGill/THE WALL
STREET JOURNAL

obstacle than the supply of tanks
may be manpower.

“Russia’s problem is not having enough trained tank crews because they lost so many in the opening days of the war,” Ms. Massicot said. Russia is now drilling a significant portion of its 300,000 recently mobilized troops, but it is unclear how many are being trained for tank operations as opposed to more basic infantry roles, she said.

If Russia deploys more tanks, it will have to decide how to do it. Moscow could hold them back to square off with Ukraine’s new reinforcements, or it could opt to act sooner, before the Leopards and Challengers are ready for action. Russian social-media channels over recent days have carried chatter advocating fast action, including targeting tank deliveries to Ukraine.

But Russia has already been trying to gain ground from Ukrainian forces, with limited success, so its ability to quickly achieve more remains uncertain.

“Russia has made only incremental gains at high cost,” and largely using infantry forces, said Mr. Arnold. A more sophisticated assault would demand more resources and training, he said.

“If the Russians gear up for offensive operations and fail, it will make defensive operations that much harder and they will be much more vulnerable to Ukrainian attack,” Mr. Arnold said.

Gen. Twitty said that Ukrainian forces so far have had an edge over Russian troops in their will to fight, despite being armed with only minimal equipment. “Now, with sophisticated equipment alongside will and tenacity, this could potentially change the balance” if Ukraine can mass its equipment, he said. “What you need is overwhelming combat firepower to make a difference on the battlefield.”

Russian forces may opt to improve their defensive positions, rather than attack. They could redouble efforts already under way along the front line to plant land mines, place obstacles and dig trenches that can impede modern tanks, said Ms. Massicot.

Another option for Moscow is to push on as previously planned. Russian tactics

have varied little during the war, even as Ukraine has employed varied and evolving approaches to fighting. Moscow's strategy has largely relied on massive artillery barrages and waves of infantry, even when the vast expenditure of lives and ammunition achieves little or nothing.

After Ukraine began hitting Russian targets last summer with precision weaponry, including from U.S.-donated Himars mobile rocket launchers, Moscow adapted by moving some supplies and bases out of firing range. But little else has changed in Russian tactics, say Western military officials.

"The war shows the Russians may not take the tank deliveries into account," said Johann Michel, a defense and military analyst at the International Institute of Strategic Studies, a think tank based in London. He said Russian commentary playing down the threat of Western tanks could increase that tendency to overlook changes in strategy.

"If they believe their own propaganda, they may not think the deliveries are a problem," he said. "Russian propaganda to some extent works against them."

Russian decisions regarding battlefield tactics may also unfold in response to factors other than tank deliveries that remain unknown to outsiders, he added.

"We have a tendency in the West to think that everything that happens is in response to what we do," Mr. Michel said. "We're not the only factor, and probably not the first."

—Evan Gershkovich, Thomas Grove, Gordon Lubold and Doug Cameron contributed to this article.

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Corrections & Amplifications

A photo caption with an earlier version of this article incorrectly identified a military vehicle as a tank. (Corrected on Jan. 26)

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