

Research Briefing

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Military assistance to Ukraine 2014-2021

The UK, US and Russia are signatories to the [1994 Budapest Memorandum](#) with Ukraine, which provided security assurances against the “threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine”, including respect for its sovereignty and existing borders, in exchange for Ukraine’s unilateral nuclear disarmament and accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Since Ukrainian independence in 1991, security cooperation with the UK and other Western allies has been a key feature of bilateral and multilateral relations. With aspirations to join both the EU and NATO, initial military assistance to Ukraine was largely focused on defence reform, defence planning and capacity building.

In response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing crisis in Eastern Ukraine, and at the request of the Ukrainian Government, Western allies significantly stepped up their support. Reiterating their commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, military assistance to the Ukrainian armed forces has been a key part of their overall approach.

The build-up of Russian military forces in Crimea and on the eastern Ukrainian border over the course of 2021 once again threw a spotlight on the nature of Western support to the country. For the first time, several countries, including the UK, started supplying defensive lethal weaponry to Ukraine.

Russia said Western military assistance to Ukraine was a provocation and accused the West of supporting Ukraine in militarising eastern Ukraine and dismantling the 2014 and 2015 Minsk Agreements, which had been the basis for a political solution to the conflict there.

For information on military assistance to Ukraine since the February 2022 Russian invasion, see Library briefing: [Military assistance to Ukraine since the Russian invasion](#).

1 UK military assistance

1.1 Operation Orbital

In response to concerns of an imminent Russian invasion the [UK announced](#) in mid-February 2022 that all UK military training personnel would withdraw from Ukraine.

UK military assistance to Ukraine is longstanding.¹ In October 2014, and in response to the unfolding crisis, the Government announced that bilateral military assistance would be expanded at the request of the Ukrainian Government. That support included the provision of a package of non-lethal military equipment,² that is “defensive and designed to prevent further UAF [Ukrainian armed forces] fatalities and casualties”.³

In early 2015 Operation Orbital was launched. A non-lethal training and capacity building operation, it provides guidance and training to the Ukrainian armed forces through several advisory and short-term training teams. Initially comprising 75 non-combat military personnel, its initial focus was on medical, logistics, general infantry skills and intelligence capacity building.⁴

In March 2015, the MOD acknowledged the shortfalls in the capacity of the Ukrainian armed forces,⁵ and announced the gifting of a further package of non-lethal equipment, to increase Ukraine’s defensive capacity and tactical awareness on the ground.⁶ Then Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, said at the time, “Ukraine is our friend, it is in need and we should respond to requests, whether they are for equipment or additional training”.⁷

In a press release on 6 March 2015 the MOD set out the UK’s overall policy with respect to military assistance to Ukraine:

UK policy since the start of the crisis has been to provide non-lethal assistance to Ukrainian armed forces, in line with HMG’s assessment that there must be a political solution to this crisis. The MOD will continue to focus on support and assistance that will reduce fatalities and casualties amongst members of the Ukrainian armed forces, whilst building their capacity and resilience.⁸

While UK military assistance was bilateral in nature, the provision of equipment and training was undertaken in coordination with allies. Primarily

¹ In September 2014 the MOD gave an overview of the military assistance that has been provided to Ukraine in the previous six years ([PQ 209093](#), Ukraine, 13 October 2014)

² In July 2014 the [Council of the European Union](#) lifted the restrictive measures on export licenses to Ukraine that it had [previously imposed](#) in the February of that year in response to political violence in the country.

³ [HL Deb 20 Oct 2014, c69WS](#)

⁴ HC Deb 25 February 2015, c321

⁵ HC Deb 25 February 2015, c321 and 325

⁶ Ministry of Defence, [Press Release](#), 6 March 2015

⁷ HC Deb 25 February 2015, c321 and 325

⁸ Ministry of Defence, [Press Release](#), 6 March 2015

through NATO, specifically the NATO-Ukraine Commission, and through initiatives such as the US/Canada/UK/Ukraine Joint Commission for Defence Reform and Security Cooperation which was established in July 2014.⁹

In contrast to the United States (see below), the UK Government ruled out providing lethal arms to Ukraine at the time. Other European leaders, including then German Chancellor Angela Merkel and then French President Francois Hollande, also openly opposed arming Ukraine.¹⁰

The then Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond, acknowledged the difference of opinion among allies, and the right of the UK to review its position:

It is a national decision for each country in the NATO alliance to decide whether to supply lethal aid to Ukraine. The UK is not planning to do so, but we reserve the right to keep this position under review. Different members of the alliance take nuanced positions on this question, and are entitled to do so. However, we share a clear understanding that while there is no military solution to this conflict, we could not allow the Ukrainian armed forces to collapse.¹¹

Expansion of military training

Since 2015 Operation Orbital has been expanded, and extended, several times. It now comprises approximately 100 British military personnel.

The training package to the Ukrainian armed forces has been expanded to include:¹²

- Additional medical, infantry and survival skills training
- Countering improvised explosive devices
- Training for defensive operations in an urban environment
- Operational planning
- Engineering
- Countering attacks from snipers, armoured vehicles and mortars.

Operation Orbital has expanded its reach by embracing the concept of “train the trainer”, which will enable Ukrainian military personnel to pass on techniques initially taught through the UK programme. It has also increased the scope of the training package by expanding it to all of branches of Ukraine’s armed forces. In 2018 training teams consisting of Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel were deployed to deliver training to the Ukrainian Navy.

After several operational extensions, the MOD confirmed in November 2019 that Operation Orbital would be extended until March 2023.

Ministry of Defence, 4 November 2019

⁹ It was subsequently expanded to include Lithuania, Poland, Denmark, and Sweden.

¹⁰ ‘[Germany rules out arms to Ukraine](#)’, *EUobserver*, 2 February 2015

¹¹ HC Deb 10 February 2015, c619

¹² Ministry of Defence press releases: 24 June 2015, 12 August 2015, 21 September 2018

Underpinning defence agreements

Operation Orbital has also been underpinned by several new agreements in the last five years. In March 2016 the UK and Ukraine signed a 15-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on closer defence cooperation, including the sharing of information on potential threats, joint exercises, the training of Ukrainian armed forces personnel and cooperation in the field of military equipment. In October 2020, during a State visit to the UK by President of the Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the two countries signed a [Political, Free Trade and Strategic Partnership](#) that will, among other things, enhance defence cooperation.

Between 2015 and the end of December 2017 the Government had gifted £2.2 million of non-lethal military equipment to Ukraine.¹³

Operation Orbital is funded through the [Conflict Stability and Security Fund \(CSSF\)](#). The CSSF, and other funds such as the Good Governance Fund, also support the Government's non-military programmes in Ukraine.¹⁴

1.2

Naval Capabilities Enhancement Programme (NCEP)

In October 2020 the UK and Ukraine also signed a Memorandum of Intent that would focus on developing Ukraine's naval capabilities through a new Naval Capabilities Enhancement Programme (NCEP).¹⁵

In June 2021 [the UK, Ukraine and industry signed a Memorandum of Implementation](#) that will push the NCEP forward.

Contractual work is now underway on:

- Ukraine's purchase of two refurbished Royal Navy Sandown-class minehunters in a government-to-government sale
- The sale and integration of missiles on new and in-service Ukrainian Navy patrol and airborne platforms, including a training and engineering support package
- Assistance in building new naval bases in the Black Sea and Azov Sea
- The development and joint production of eight fast missile warships
- Participation in the Ukrainian project to deliver a modern frigate capability.

¹³ [PQ 116422 \[Ukraine: Military Aid\], 8 December 2017](#)

¹⁴ For further details see: [UK programme assistance to Ukraine in 2020-2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁵ [Ministry of Defence press release](#), 8 October 2020

Babcock International will be the primary partner assisting the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence in delivering these projects, with funding made available by UK Export Finance.

In November 2021 the UK and Ukraine [signed an Intergovernmental Framework Agreement](#) further progressing these joint projects with the release of £1.7 billion of financing.¹⁶

Announcing that agreement, the Ministry of Defence said:

Our governments have no desire to be adversarial, or seek in any way to strategically encircle or undermine the Russian Federation. We are concerned by Russia's military build-up and activity around the borders of Ukraine.¹⁷

Box 1: Further reading

- Ministry of Defence, [Operation Orbital Explained](#), December 2020
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [UK/Ukraine: Political, Free Trade and Strategic Partnership Agreement](#), CP312, November 2020
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [UK-Ukraine Joint Communique](#), 8 December 2021

1.3

Multinational Maritime Training Initiative

The UK has trained 22,000 Ukrainian military personnel as part of Operational Orbital and the Maritime Training Initiative.

[Downing Street press release](#), January 2022

In August 2020, the UK announced that it will lead a multinational Maritime Training Initiative for the Ukrainian Navy, intended to boost its capacity to act in the Black Sea.

Announcing the initiative, the MOD stated:

Ukraine lost much of its Navy capability during Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine has since continued to face a rising number of threats in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov. In response, Ukraine has been rebuilding its Navy to protect its economic interests and its right to freedom of navigation. The Maritime Training Initiative will boost that effort, enabling them to uphold the rules based international order and European security in the region on which the UK's own security depends.¹⁸

¹⁶ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [UK-Ukraine Strategic Dialogue: Joint Communique](#), 8 December 2021

¹⁷ [Ministry of Defence press release](#), 16 November 2021

¹⁸ Ministry of Defence press release, 18 August 2020

Training in navigation, operational planning, military diving, sea surveillance, firefighting and damage control will be delivered by the Royal Navy and naval personnel from Sweden, Canada and Denmark.

Royal Navy vessels have deployed to the Black Sea region on numerous occasions to conduct joint training exercises with the Ukrainian Navy, most recently in summer 2021 as part of exercise [Cossack Mace](#) and as part of NATO's annual [Sea Breeze](#) exercise.

In June 2021 HMS Defender, deployed as part of the [UK Carrier Strike Group's](#) operational mission to the Indo-Pacific, also stopped off in the Black Sea in a show of solidarity with Ukraine and regional NATO allies.¹⁹ The temporary deployment provoked a harsh response from Russia who accused the UK of entering Russia's territorial waters off the coast of Crimea, and violating the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The Russian Ministry of Defence suggested that warning shots had been fired at HMS Defender, although this was disputed by the Ministry of Defence which said the destroyer was "conducting innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters in accordance with international law".²⁰

2 US military assistance

Ukraine has been a leading recipient of US foreign and military aid since the early 1990s. In the first decade after independence, Ukraine received almost \$2.6 billion in aid. In the years leading up to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine was receiving an estimated \$105 million per annum, including foreign military financing.

From the onset of conflict in 2014, the US Congressional Research Service estimates that the US provided Ukraine with more than \$2.5 billion in security assistance across the board. In addition to bilateral foreign military financing, that money has funded the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, a special security assistance fund worth \$1.3 billion "to support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and to help Ukraine defend against further aggression". In fiscal year 2021, a further \$115 million had been set aside in bilateral foreign military financing.²¹

Since 2014 US military assistance has focused on:

- the training and mentoring of the Ukrainian armed forces, often in concert with allies through the Joint Commission on Defense Reform and Security Cooperation.

¹⁹ [Royal Navy press release](#), 10 June 2021

²⁰ [Ministry of Defence Press Office Twitter account](#), 23 June 2021

²¹ US Congressional Research Service, R45008, [Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia and US Policy](#), October 2021 (accessed on 15 December 2021)

- the provision of military equipment.

In 2014 the Obama administration provided significant non-lethal military equipment to Ukraine.²² That was supplemented over the course of 2015 with a package of military assistance worth \$75 million, including Humvees, surveillance drones, night vision devices and military ambulances. At the time, the Obama administration, with the support of Congress, indicated that it was considering providing Ukraine with lethal weapons if “diplomacy fails to end the crisis in the east”.²³

However, it wasn’t until the Trump administration that the decision was taken to provide Ukraine with major defensive lethal weaponry.

In 2018, and again in 2019, the US provided Ukraine with Javelin anti-tank missiles. Among other things, the US has also provided sniper rifles, rocket propelled grenade launchers and two retired US coastguard patrol boats to the Ukrainian Navy. The Trump Administration also continued to provide non-lethal aid to Ukraine, including night vision, medical, communication, command and control and military mobility equipment.

It was the withholding of Ukrainian security assistance and specifically the provision of lethal weaponry that was linked to the [first impeachment trial](#) of President Trump in 2019. That pause on assistance was lifted in September 2019.

In June 2020 Congress approved a \$250 million package to Ukraine intended to address shortfalls in Ukraine’s capacity, specifically in air and maritime surveillance, command and control, secure communications, cyber defence and strategic communications. In addition to that package, the US State Department also authorised the sale of a further 150 Javelin anti-tank missiles.

²² Protective gear, secure communications, medical support and counter-mortar radar capabilities.

²³ “US may supply arms to Ukraine”, BBC News Online, 9 February 2015

2.1

Assistance under the Biden administration

Over the last year, the US has provided \$650 million in defensive assistance to Ukraine.

[Jake Sullivan, US National Security Adviser](#), 11 February 2022

On 1 March 2021, the US Department of Defense announced a further \$125 million military assistance package for Ukraine, the first of its kind under the Biden administration. The package of equipment includes two additional Mark VI patrol boats to enhance Ukraine's capacity to patrol and defend its territorial waters,²⁴ additional counter artillery radars and tactical equipment, satellite imagery and analysis capability and equipment to support military medical treatment and combat evacuation procedures. In announcing the package, the DoD stated that "This action reaffirms the U.S. commitment to providing defensive lethal weapons to enable Ukraine to more effectively defend itself against Russian aggression".²⁵

A further \$150 million for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative was announced in June 2021, followed by an additional \$60 million package for lethal and non-lethal equipment, including Javelin anti-armour missiles, in September 2021.²⁶

In August 2021 the US and Ukraine also signed a [Strategic Defense Framework](#) to provide a foundation for strengthening defence cooperation. Among its priorities are defence industry reform, strengthening cooperation with respect to security in the Black Sea, cyber defence and intelligence sharing, and countering Russian aggression.²⁷

Response to Russian military build-up in 2021

In December 2021 the US indicated that, in response to Russian aggression, it could provide additional defensive capabilities to Ukraine, above and beyond what it is already providing.²⁸ A further \$200 million in military assistance was subsequently authorised by the US administration.²⁹

On 26 January 2022 the US State Department confirmed additional Javelin missiles, other anti-armour systems, ammunition and non-lethal equipment have been delivered to Ukraine, with further deliveries planned. Among further assistance will be five US Mi-17 helicopters. The US has also granted authorisation to US allies to provide Ukraine with US-origin military

²⁴ The DoD has committed a total of 8 patrol boats.

²⁵ US Department of Defense press release, 1 March 2021

²⁶ U.S. Department of Defense press release, August 31, 2021

²⁷ [White House press release](#), 1 September 2021

²⁸ White House, [Press briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan](#), 7 December 2021

²⁹ US Department of Defense, Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby holds a press briefing, 27 January 2022

equipment from their own inventories.³⁰ On 11 February, US National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, said:

We have made good on the commitment to get those deliveries into the hands of the Ukrainian armed forces. Those are defensive weapons intended to defend Ukraine against aggression. They are not meant for offensive purposes against any country.

The US has, however, ruled out the deployment of US ground forces to Ukraine.³¹

On 10 November 2021 the US and Ukraine adopted a [Charter on Strategic Partnership](#) which underlines the US' commitment to Kiev and the intention to enhance defence and security cooperation between the two countries in order to counter "Russia's aggression".³²

3

NATO

Ukraine joined NATO's [North Atlantic Cooperation Council](#) as a partner country in 1991 and the [Partnership for Peace](#) programme in 1994. The NATO-Ukraine Commission was also established in 1997 and is the forum through which consultation between NATO allies and Ukraine takes place on security issues of common concern.

The crisis in Ukraine has been discussed in the forum frequently since 2014 with commitments on all sides to "intensify cooperation and promote defence reforms through capacity building and capability development programmes".³³

Since 2016 NATO's practical support for Ukraine has been set out in its Comprehensive Assistance Package. Specifically, that support is focused on 16 capacity building programmes and several trust funds, a number of which were established after 2014. Those latter [trust funds](#) include:

- command, control, communications and computers (C4)
- logistics and transformation
- Cyber defence
- Medical rehabilitation
- Explosive ordnance disposal and countering-IEDs.

NATO has increased its presence in the Black Sea and stepped up maritime cooperation with both Ukraine and Georgia. NATO allies also participate in a

³⁰ US Department of State, [Press briefing](#), 27 January 2022

³¹ White House, [Remarks by President Biden before Marine One Departure](#), 8 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)

³² [US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership](#), Section II, 10 November 2021

³³ [NATO Ukraine Commission](#)

wide range of military exercises with Ukrainian armed forces personnel through the Military Committee with Ukraine Work Plan. Exercise Rapid Trident, for example, has been held annually since 2011. That particular exercise has been used more recently as a validation exercise for Ukrainian armed forces undergoing training with NATO allies.

In June 2020 Ukraine was offered [Enhanced Opportunity Partner](#) status with NATO. This status provides Ukraine with preferential access to NATO's exercises, training and exchange of information and situational awareness, in order to increase interoperability. In September 2020 Ukraine hosted [Exercise Joint Endeavour](#), with British, US and Canadian troops. This was the first exercise conducted under Ukraine's new enhanced status.

In response to the Russian military build-up on the borders of Ukraine the NATO Secretary General stated on 1 December 2021:

Georgia and Ukraine are long-standing and close NATO partners. Contributing to our missions and operations. And aspiring for membership.

Ministers made clear that we stand by our decisions. Our support for their sovereignty and territorial integrity remains unwavering. And we remain committed to enhance our support to both countries.

We are already strengthening their capabilities to defend themselves. Training and exercising together. Providing maritime support. And sharing information.

We also addressed the importance of moving ahead with reforms. To strengthen the rule of law and democracy. Fight corruption. And continue to transform their security and defense sectors. These reforms are key to make both Georgia and Ukraine stronger and more resilient.³⁴

On 14 January 2022, the NATO Secretary General also confirmed that Ukraine and NATO would conclude an agreement on enhanced cyber cooperation, following a cyberattack on Ukrainian government institutions.³⁵

In addition to the UK and the US (see above), several other NATO allies, including Canada³⁶ and [Denmark](#) have also been providing non-lethal military assistance to Ukraine on a bilateral basis.

Box 2: Further reading

- NATO, [Relations with Ukraine](#)

³⁴ NATO, [Closing press conference of the meeting of Foreign Ministers](#), 1 December 2021

³⁵ NATO, [Statement by the NATO Secretary General on cyber attacks against Ukraine](#), 14 January 2022

³⁶ Since 2015 Canada has had a training and capacity building mission in Ukraine (Operation Unifier). At the end of January 2022 the [Canadian government announced](#) that the operation would be extended until March 2025.

4

The EU

Ukraine is a [priority partner](#) for the EU. Support has been mainly focused on political reform and economic growth through the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.

Support for security reform has been limited to the [EU Advisory Mission Ukraine](#),³⁷ which is concerned with civilian security sector reform. Military reform has largely been the focus of NATO and bilateral cooperation with individual allies.

However, in December 2021 the EU announced a package of measures to help strengthen the capacity of the Ukrainian armed forces. Established under the EU's new European Peace Facility,³⁸ the package is worth €31 million over three years and will finance military medical units, including field hospitals, engineering, mobility and logistics units and support on cyber.³⁹

EU Foreign Ministers are also currently discussing the establishment of an EU military training assistance mission to Ukraine, which will focus on military education reform.⁴⁰

³⁷ EU Advisory Mission Ukraine is a civilian mission under the remit of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy

³⁸ The [European Peace Facility \(EPF\)](#) was established in March 2021 as an "off budget" instrument that allows the EU to finance operational actions under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that have military or defence implications. It replaces the previous Athena Mechanism through which the common costs of EU military operations were financed.

³⁹ Council on the European Union, [Press release](#), 2 December 2021

⁴⁰ EU External Action Service, [Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell](#), 24 January 2022

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