Since Ukrainian independence in 1991 security cooperation with 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 and the crisis in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and at the request of the Ukrainian Government, 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.

Recent events, which have seen the build-up of Russian military forces in Crimea and on the eastern Ukrainian border, have once again thrown a spotlight on the nature of Western support to the country.

- Crisis averted in Ukraine?, House of Commons Library, April 2021

1. UK military assistance – Operation Orbital

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, to include 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

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1 In September 2014 the MOD gave an overview of the military assistance that has been provided to Ukraine in the previous six years (PO 209093, Ukraine, 13 October 2014)
2 In July 2014 the Council of the European Union lifted the restrictive measures on export licences 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
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 through NATO, specifically the NATO-Ukraine Commission (see below), 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 however (see below), the UK Government ruled out providing lethal arms to Ukraine. Other European leaders, including 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.\(^11\)

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4. HC Deb 25 February 2015, c321
5. HC Deb 25 February 2015, c321 and 325
7. HC Deb 25 February 2015, c321 and 325
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
1.1 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
- Counteracting improvised explosive devices
- Training for defensive operations in an urban environment
- Operational planning
- Engineering.
- Counteracting 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 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.

Operation Orbital has also been underpinned by several new defence 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 Zelensky, the two countries signed a further Memorandum of Intent on defence cooperation that will seek to develop Ukraine’s naval capabilities.13

In September 2020 the MOD confirmed that British military personnel have trained over 20,000 Ukrainian armed forces personnel since the start of Operation Orbital.14 Secretary of Defence, Ben Wallace called it “a demonstration of the UK’s unwavering commitment to Ukraine’s independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty”.15 Between 2015 and the end of December 2017 the Government had also gifted £2.2 million of non-lethal military equipment to Ukraine.16

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.17

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**Box 1: Further reading**

- Ministry of Defence, Operation Orbital Explained, December 2020

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12 Ministry of Defence press releases: 24 June 2015, 12 August 2015, 21 September 2018
13 Ministry of Defence press release, 8 October 2020
14 Ministry of Defence, Operation Orbital explained, December 2020
15 Ibid
16 PQ116422, Ukraine: military aid, 8 December 2017
17 For further details see: UK programme assistance to Ukraine in 2020-2021 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
1.2 Multinational Maritime Training Initiative

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.\(^\text{18}\)

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.

More allies or countries are expected to join the initiative as it progresses.

Royal Navy vessels deployed to the region in autumn 2020 to conduct joint training exercises with the Ukrainian Navy.

In May 2021 the UK’s Carrier Strike Group is due to deploy on its first operational mission to the Indo-Pacific. It has been widely reported in the media that two Royal Navy warships deploying as part of that group, a Type 45 destroyer and a Type 23 frigate, will stop off in the Black Sea en route, in a show of solidarity with Ukraine and regional NATO allies.\(^\text{19}\)

2. United States 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 to the end of 2019, the US Congressional Research Service estimates that the US provided Ukraine with more than $1.6 billion in military assistance. In addition to bilateral foreign military financing, that money funded the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, a special security assistance fund worth $1.1 billion “to support Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and to help Ukraine defend against further aggression”.\(^\text{20}\) In 2019/20 a further $115 million was set aside in bilateral military financing.

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.
- the provision of military equipment.

In 2014 the Obama administration provided significant non-lethal military equipment to Ukraine.\(^\text{21}\) That was supplemented over the course of 2015 with a package of military

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\(^{18}\) Ministry of Defence press release, 18 August 2020

\(^{19}\) “UK warships to sail for Black Sea in May as Ukraine-Russia tensions rise”, Reuters, 20 April 2021

\(^{20}\) US Congressional Research Service, R45008, Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia and US Policy, April 2020

\(^{21}\) Protective gear, secure communications, medical support and counter-mortar radar capabilities.
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”.  

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.

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, 23 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”.

In response to recent events the US Congress has recently proposed a bill to increase military assistance to Ukraine and deliver up to $300 million of military assistance to Ukraine every year until 2026.

### 3. NATO

Ukraine joined NATO’s North Atlantic Cooperation Council 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”.

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

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

24 US Department of Defense press release, 1 March 2021

25 *NATO Ukraine Commission*
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 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 recent events the NATO Secretary General stated on 13 April 2021:

NATO stands with Ukraine.

Allies continue to provide significant practical support so that Ukraine can better provide for its own security.

Ukraine’s new status as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner demonstrates how both sides benefit from our long-standing partnership.

We are helping to strengthen capabilities, including with training for the Ukrainian armed forces.

And Allies also participate in joint exercises.

We have stepped up our cooperation in the Black Sea region with more exercises and port visits.

And we support Ukraine’s wide-ranging reform agenda, which will make Ukraine more resilient.

And help advance Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

On 14 June 2021 NATO’s next Heads of State and Government summit will take place in Brussels. Ukraine, and Russia’s recent actions in the region, are expected to feature in summit discussions.

**Box 2: Further reading**

- NATO Fact sheet, [NATO’s Support to Ukraine](#), November 2018

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26 [NATO press conference](#), 13 April 2021
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