

# RUSSIA BATTLES ITS OWN WEAPONS SYSTEMS IN UKRAINE

**THALIF DEEN**

Perhaps one of the biggest ironies of the current military conflict is that Ukraine may be using mostly Soviet-era weapons against the Russians, including combat helicopters, T-64 battle tanks and AT-6 anti-tank missiles acquired from the former USSR.

But that military scenario is expected to change significantly with increased security assistance and fresh arms supplies both from Europe, and most importantly, from the US, amounting to over a staggering US\$ 1.0 billion dollars.

According to the figures released by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Ukrainian military is equipped mostly with older Russian and Soviet-era weapons systems.

Since 2010, however, it has imported limited quantities of weapons from several European countries, as well as Canada, the US, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

With a population of about 44 million people, Ukraine "has a broad defence industry capable of building Soviet-era land systems and maintaining and upgrading Soviet-era combat aircraft, as well as missile and air defence systems," according to a 2021 report from the CIA.

## Military assistance to Ukraine

In a statement February 26, US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said he has authorized the Department of Defence to provide US\$ 60 million in immediate military assistance to Ukraine. In December, as the Russian threat materialized, Blinken also authorized a further drawdown worth US\$ 200 million.

"Today, as Ukraine fights with courage and pride against Russia's brutal and unprovoked assault, I have authorized, pursuant to a delegation by President Joe Biden, an unprecedented third Presidential Drawdown of up to US\$ 350 million for immediate support for Ukraine's defence."

This brings the total US security assistance to Ukraine over the past year to more than US\$ 1 billion. This package will include further lethal defensive assistance to help Ukraine address the armoured, airborne, and other threats it is now facing. A transfer of US\$ 400 million was also made during President Donald Trump's tenure.

"It is another clear signal that the United States stands with the people of Ukraine as they defend their sovereign, courageous, and proud nation," said Blinken.

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission (EC), the European Union's (EU) executive branch, said February 27: "For the first time ever, the EU will finance the purchase and delivery of weapons and other equipment to a country in Europe that is under attack."

## New sanctions against Russia

She spoke ahead of a meeting of EU Foreign Ministers who imposed a rash of new sanctions aimed at Russia. She also announced the total closure of EU airspace to Russian civilian and military aircraft.



Russian military tanks in Ukraine.



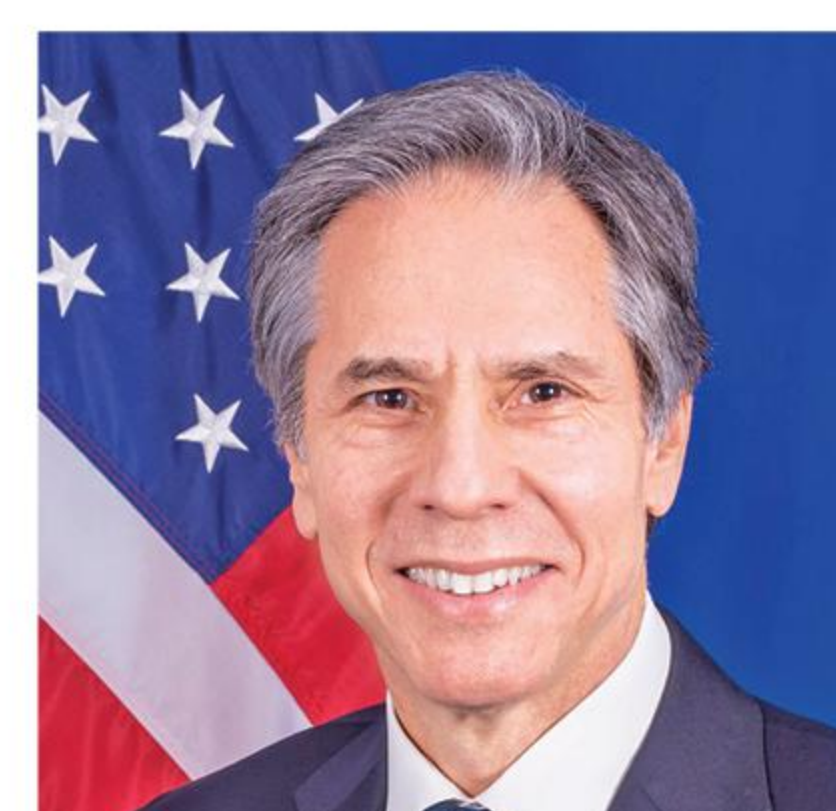
US President **Joe Biden**



EC Chief **Ursula von der Leyen**



Ukrainian President **Volodymyr Zelensky**



US Secretary of State **Anthony Blinken**

Meanwhile, according to a CNN report aired on March 2, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is warning that his country—which has a much smaller military than Russia—needs more help to prevent the crisis from spreading across Europe. Key cities in Ukraine were attacked from several sides yesterday, with Russia launching rockets that struck

buildings in the centre of the capital Kyiv.

Siemon Wezeman, Senior Researcher, Arms Transfers Programme at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), told *IDN* the general picture of foreign arms supplies to Ukraine is that they have been low, in particular considering that the conflict is going on since 2014.



A building in Ukraine's second largest city Kharkiv which was hit by a missile strike.

According to the SIPRI data base, supplies of major arms had been limited by the end of 2020 to smaller numbers of rather simple armoured vehicles and artillery pieces, many of them second-hand, a few hundred sophisticated but small missiles, a handful of radar, several patrol craft (also second-hand) and a couple of transport helicopters.

The arms suppliers include the US, Canada, Poland, Czech Republic, the United Kingdom and France during the period 2014-2020. Wezeman said some of the weapons have been provided as aid and others as sales.

"The most recent and probably most significant transfer has been for armed drones (with their armament of light guided weapons) from Turkey."

Supplies of other weapons and equipment have also been limited. Aside from the low numbers and often low level of technology of the major arms supplied, significantly, no really heavy, long-range major arms (for example, combat aircraft, heavy armoured vehicles, long-range missiles and air-defence sys-

tems, large radar systems or warships) have been supplied by any country.

While Ukraine has plans for new equipment in these categories and has been in talks with several potential suppliers, only a few actual orders have been placed, he said, pointing out that the most significant orders are for two frigates from Turkey in 2020 and armed drones also from Turkey in 2018.

The low level of imports can be explained by various factors, including the fairly limited financial resources of Ukraine to buy equipment <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

Wezeman said Ukraine's spending is not much higher than, for example, Belgium or Switzerland but also that spending accounts for—measured as a share of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—a much higher part of the economy than for almost any other European State.

There is also the existence of a large inventory of equipment inherited from the Soviet Union (much of which was still available by 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea from

Ukraine and 2020), the large Ukrainian arms industry which is capable of maintaining or modernizing much of the existing equipment, or producing some new equipment, and the limited willingness of foreign States to provide equipment as aid (especially lethal or heavier and more advanced weapons that might provoke Russia unnecessarily). It must be recalled that Ukraine handed back all the nuclear weapons that were stationed on Ukrainian soil from the Soviet Union days back to Russia when it gained Independence. This has now become a matter for regret for some Ukrainians, for invasions of nuclear-armed countries are very rare.

According to the CIA, Russia's military and paramilitary services are equipped with domestically-produced weapons systems, although since 2010 Russia has imported limited amounts of military hardware from several countries, including Czech Republic, France, Israel, Italy, Turkey, and Ukraine itself.

Besides its status as one of the world's major nuclear powers, Russia has a defence industry capable of designing, developing, and producing a full range of advanced air, land, missile, and naval systems.

With a population of about 144 million people, Russia is the world's second largest exporter of military hardware, as of 2021, according to the US CIA.

A breakdown of Russia's military follows: approximately 850,000 total active-duty troops (375,000 Ground Troops, including about 40,000 Airborne Troops; 150,000 Navy; 160,000 Aerospace Forces; 70,000 Strategic Rocket Forces; 90,000 other uniformed personnel (approximately 20,000 Special Operations Forces, plus command and control, cyber, support, logistics, security, etc.) and an estimated 200,000-250,000 Federal National Guard Troops (2021).

As of late 2021, Russia was known to have deployed a considerable number of private military contractors to the Central African Republic (100-2,000), Libya (1,000-2,000), and Mali (more than 400).

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(IDN-InDepthNews)