



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Tanks have broken the barrier to sending F-16s to Ukraine



It seemed impossible for top Western production tanks to be sent as support to Ukraine. "Breaking" the German blockade on the delivery of Leopard tanks opened a path for about one hundred modern Western tanks from Western arsenals to Ukraine.

This is about one third of the needs which would suffice to liberate the country, according to Ukrainian officials.

Sending modern tanks to Ukraine was a huge barrier for Ukraine's Western partners. It was a step beyond the usual transfers of Soviet-made tanks that are housed in the arsenals of Eastern European NATO members.

The barrier, consisting of a lot of psychology and even history, particularly in the case of Germany, has been broken. But a new one is being raised. Is the West ready to start sending modern fighter jets to Ukraine?

At the next meeting of the Group of 50 allies, led by the US in February at the Ramstein base in Germany, there is currently no item on the agenda about sending planes to Ukraine. But the pressure that has been building around this issue is very similar to the recent push to send a large quantity of state-of-the-art tanks to Ukraine.

"They didn't want to give us heavy artillery, then they did. They didn't want to give us Himars systems, then they did. They didn't want to give us tanks, now they're giving us tanks. Apart from nuclear weapons, there is nothing left that we will not get", Yuriy Sak, who advises Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov, told Reuters recently.

Countering the Russian offensive

Raising the bar comes at a time when a Russian offensive is expected on a front that has been well established for months, and where neither of the two sides are making any progress.

The first months of spring are when Russia is expected to launch an offensive for which it has been preparing and mobilising its resources for a long time.

And really, is there any objective barrier that, after a year of Russian aggression and Ukrainian defence, can define which weapons are allowed to be sent to Ukraine and which are not?

Western tanks have recently broken down the biggest barrier so far. The next one is close to breaking, and concerns the most modern fighter jets.

The Kremlin's propaganda has a lot of influence on raising these barriers. German public opinion has been divided about sending Leopard tanks to Ukraine for historical reasons, because the collective memory of the Second World War has been blocking any suggestion of sending weapons for use against the Russians.

Since this mental block has been removed, and the government in Berlin approved sending Leopard tanks, Moscow has been furiously talking about the Second World War, with variations on the same subject: Germany sent tanks against the Russians then, and then Russian tanks entered Berlin.

Support for Ukraine's request to obtain modern fourth-generation fighter jets has been on the rise in Western capitals. The Dutch government is currently leading a new phase of pressure to supply arms to Ukraine.

It announced that it is ready to consider the delivery of their F-16s to Ukraine with an "open mind", as the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Wopke Hoekstra said.

The Netherlands has 24 F-16s and has been preparing to retire them next year and replace them with more modern F-35s.

A change in the US attitude

Most eyes are on the US and its willingness to

open a new phase in the supply of weapons to Ukraine, given that the US is the largest producer of fighter jets.

Whilst a political decision from the US leadership is expected, F-16 manufacturer Lockheed Martin announced that there is “a lot of conversation about third party transfer of F-16s”, meaning countries that wish to buy and then re-export their US jets to Ukraine.

“Any countries that are prepared to provide Kyiv with F-16 fighter jets would face no shortage of supply”, Lockheed Martin’s chief operating officer, Frank St. John, told the FT.

In the early stages of the war in Ukraine, the US opposed sending high-tech weapons. US Ambassador to NATO, Julianne Smith, was explicit last June when she said that the United States did not intend to provide high-end jets to Ukraine despite Russia's advances in eastern Ukraine at the time.

A lot of time has passed since last June, and there has been a lot of evidence that supplying the Ukrainian military with modern Western weapons was an effective way to achieve defence goals.

After all, the US's position changed from last June's explicit “no” on the possibility of sending the F-16, to: “this is not a moment to slow down when it comes to supporting Ukraine in their defence”, as a senior US military official said at a recent briefing at the Ramstein base.

Last weeks for reaching an important decision

At the next meeting in February the issue of sending F-16s to Kyiv as military aid could at least be opened. Possibly even a final decision could be reached.

Logistical estimates say that training Ukrainian pilots to fly modern Western jets, such as the F-16, takes from a few weeks to a few months, depending on the pilot's ability.

With only that in mind, these are the last weeks for reaching a decision on sending fighter jets to Ukraine, given the quite realistic prospect of a Russian spring offensive.

The arrival of the F-16s to the Ukrainian battlefield would mean significant psychological support for the defenders, as well as fear on the opposite side. More importantly, it would give the Ukrainian side air superiority for the first time, which has not been the case since the start of the aggression almost a year ago.

It would be good if the consultations on a new wave of Western support for Ukraine were now at the level of military logistics, because there is neither time nor need for a political discussion.

Russia has already threatened the West enough times that it will “respond strongly” if it supplies weapons to Ukraine. Just as none of those empty threats came true, when Kyiv gets the most modern Western fighter jets, threats would be no more dangerous than before.