



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Timing, military training and supplies for Ukraine are now more important than the F-16



The speed with which Ukraine's allies decided to send state-of-the-art tanks will not be repeated in the case of modern fighter jets.

The ninth meeting of the Ramstein group to support Ukraine has been held in Brussels. It showed that there was still no agreement among the allies to meet Kyiv's strong request to send fighter jets.

This topic was suspended by US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, who said, after the Brussels meeting, that he did not have any announcement to make on the supply of aircrafts.

He possibly closed the topic only to the public, and not for talks between partners. "This is something that will take time, and it is best done behind closed doors", said Dutch Defence Minister Kajsa Ollongren.

Great expectations of Ukraine

The 54-member block of allies, led by the US, who have been meeting since last April to coordinate the sending of military aid to Ukraine, assessed that at present, the focus is more on the timing of developments on the front than on the delivery of fighter jets.

There are several more important issues currently, and they boil down to the best possible coordination in the use of already delivered weapons, the supply of ammunition and the assessment of what type of weapons Ukraine would need more for the current phase of defence.

Ukrainian officials had high expectations from the Brussels Ramstein 9 meeting. After success in persuading the allies to supply modern tanks, they raised their ambitions to a higher level, and strongly demanded the supply of fighter jets.

The most important "No" in this regard came from US President Joe Biden on January 30, which meant the cooling of Ukrainian hopes that they could get American F-16 fighter jets, from the US or from another military.

However, this matter is not completely off the table, because some other leaders, such as French President Emmanuel Macron and the Dutch government have left the door open: "Nothing is excluded in principle", said Macron.

Western planes can wait

The latest meeting of the Ramstein group showed that the discussion about sending fighter jets to Ukraine has not been as useful as the agreements on better use of already existing defence resources.

Sending fighter jets is problematic primarily due to the rather long time frame until they could be used. It would take months to train Ukrainian pilots, and the jets would have to be accompanied by very extensive "secondary" logistics.

On the other hand, assessments of the situation at the front say that the Western planes could wait, and that the priority in terms of urgency should be different because time plays an increasingly important role.

The US does not see Russia stockpiling its aircraft in preparation for a potential larger air strike, Austin said.

Considering the increasingly frequent predictions that the Russian army will soon undertake an offensive in eastern Ukraine, the main priority has been preparations of the Ukrainian army for defence, and perhaps for its attack on Russian positions.

It is important for the allies and for Ukraine to implement the training of Ukrainian soldiers in the use of advanced armoured weapons and anti-aircraft systems as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Russia relies on massive troops

For example, troops being trained by the US to lead a tank battalion of several hundred

soldiers could be engaged in combat in 30 to 90 days, said Matthew Schmidt, associate professor of national security and political science at New Haven University.

A similar dynamic applies to members of the Ukrainian military who have been being trained to use modern Western tanks in the UK and Poland for example, so their rapid operational deployment is vital.

As far as weapons are concerned, even Kyiv estimates that what they need the most is what they can use to match the Russian invasion troops. According to Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to President Volodymyr Zelensky, it should be a response to Russia's use of large numbers of troops.

“The second component is armoured vehicles, which Russia brought as many as it could find to us. The third component is artillery, which Russia also pulled in from everywhere”, said Podolyak.

It is clear that in the case of the expected spring offensive, Russia would use the maximum of its resources, but not change the methodology of the war, which has relied on massive troop numbers, artillery and the movement of armoured units.

Those resources are at the peak of their use. “We now estimate 97 percent of the Russian army, the whole Russian Army, is in Ukraine”, UK defence secretary Ben Wallace told the BBC on Wednesday.

The response of Ukraine and its partners is therefore primarily focused on time as a key factor for effective confrontation at the front in the coming months, and on even more effective integration of the various defence components.

If this effort is effective, perhaps the discussion of sending modern jets will no longer be necessary.