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The Ukraine Example: Circumstances Matter for Effective Security Assistance

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US security assistance in the form of military supplies, weapons, and vehicles has contributed to Ukraine's surprisingly strong military performance against Russia's invasion since February 2022. However, this does not mean that vast sums of US security aid can shift the military balance in any campaign. US security assistance to Ukraine between 1992 and 2014 was too small, and Ukraine's military too decrepit, for security assistance to help Ukraine protect itself from limited invasions by Russia in 2014. Since then, Ukraine increased military spending and improved manpower, training, procurement, and readiness in ways that positioned it to effectively incorporate and use the military systems and assistance it has received in the current conflict. Moreover, Russia has underperformed compared to most expectations in its 2022 invasion for reasons unrelated to US assistance or Ukrainian reforms. For these two reasons, US aid to Ukraine following the 2022 invasion has been able to boost Ukraine's effectiveness on the battlefield. However, this experience demonstrates that while there are cirumstances in which the US security sector assistance can be used to meaningful effect, such outcomes are only likely when the recipient of that assistance already has a robust set of existing capabilities.

US Security Assistance to Ukraine

Though military equipment and training have been the most prominent components of US security assistance to Ukraine since 2014—and especially since February 2022—nuclear nonproliferation funds dominated such

assistance in the years prior. Military equipment and education funds were small by comparison and, in any case, would not have been able to substantially improve Ukraine's military. As the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea made clear, Ukraine's pre-2014 military was a skeleton organization of only several thousand combat-ready troops with outdated equipment and insufficient organization to use that equipment effectively. After Russia's 2014 invasion, Washington increased security aid and focused more on training and equipping Ukraine's military (with weapons only arriving in 2018). This assistance was of limited use, however, until the Ukrainian military made significant improvements in funding, training, manpower, readiness, and domestic production of military equipment. Thus, some concerns about US security assistance after 2014 were based on the Ukrainian military's inability to absorb weapons responsibly and use them effectively against Russian-backed separatists.[1] Moreover, although advanced US anti-armor missiles would have been useful in small quantities, even limited lethal aid was politically incompatible at the time with the Obama administration's focus on securing Russian cooperation on the Iran nuclear deal. [2]

Reuters

[1] Michael Kofman, "Weapons Are Not the Answer to Ukraine's Military Woes," *Wilson Center*, October 1, 2014.
[2] From conversations with an ex-US national security professional who worked on the Ukraine security assistance portfolio after the 2014 invasion.

By the time of Russia's all-out invasion in February 2022, Ukraine's military had improved in each of its problem areas, enabling it to absorb vast quantities of weapons and vehicles from the United States and put these tools to use on the battlefield.[3] So, it was not only the case that US assistance after Russia's 2022 invasion dwarfed the aid provided previously, but also that the Ukrainian military was far more capable of using it effectively. US assistance would have been less effective if Ukraine's military was too small to stop Russian advances or undertrained on modern weaponry. Ukraine's own efforts since 2014 therefore deserve much of the credit for the efficacy of equipment, weapons, and ammunition sent by Washington.

What's in security assistance to Ukraine?

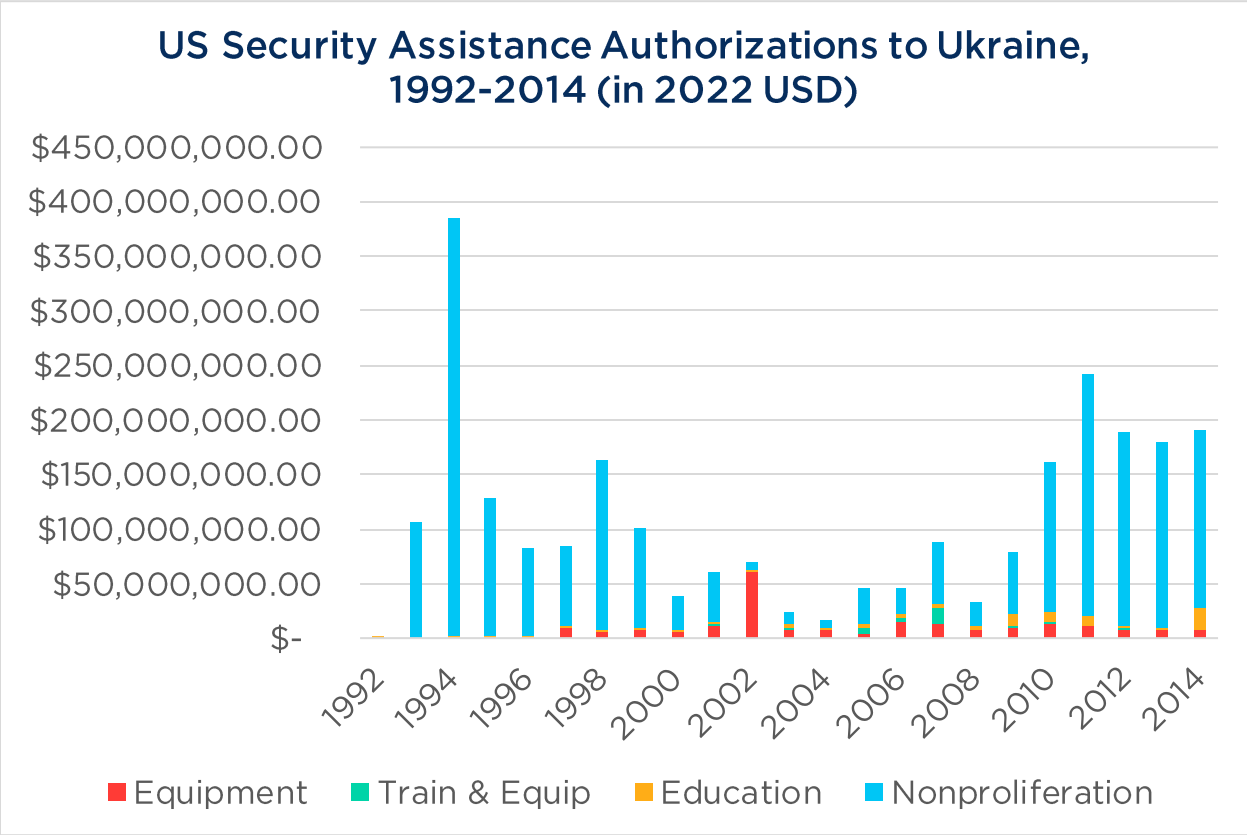
US security assistance to Ukraine over time has included many types of aid. Though not an exhaustive tally, the following four categories contain the security assistance programs most important for Ukraine's security:

- Equipment – Red
  Includes funds for Foreign Military Financing, which provides grants for buying weapons and defense-related equipment from the US government, which in turn buys them from US defense firms. Also includes funds from the Excess Defense Articles and Presidential Drawdown Authority accounts, which allow US-owned weapons and defense equipment to be transferred to recipient countries.
- Train & Equip – Green
  Includes funds aimed particularly at enhancing Ukraine's internal security and operational capacity, including Department of Defense (DOD)-funded Section 1206/2282 and 332/333 funds; Operations and Maintenance funds from DOD and military services; Coalition Support Funds for Ukrainian forces assisting US war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan; and DOD counter-narcotics funding. Also includes the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, a special DOD fund created after the 2014 Russian invasion.
- Education – Yellow
  Includes funds from the International Military Education and Training program, which trains and educates recipient countries on English, military affairs, US civil-military relations, and defense equipment. Also includes funds for the State Department's International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement program.
- Nonproliferation – Blue
  Funds including DOD's and State Department's Cooperative Threat Reduction programs and similar nuclear nonproliferation and fissile material control programs run by the Department of Energy

Figures from DOD programs can be unreliable, so any DOD figures are best estimates. Unlike the State Department or the US Agency for International Development, DOD does not break down regional security assistance funding by country in its justification books, nor does it decide on how to apportion funding at the start of fiscal years.

The charts below show yearly security assistance to Ukraine by funding category since 1992, Ukraine's first year of independence following the Soviet Union's dissolution. Some categories of aid were excluded because they could not be accessed in public reports.[4]

As the first chart illustrates, US security aid to Ukraine was dominated by nonproliferation funds from 1992 until the 2014 Russian invasion.[5] Even though pre-2014 US security aid to Ukraine was quantitatively large, nearly all of it was for nonmilitary ends. This aid was mainly for the safe dismantlement and transfer of nuclear weapons left in Ukraine after the Soviet Union's collapse—a top US policy concern at the time. Meanwhile, Ukraine economically contracted and shrank its military, which the post-Cold War environment permitted.

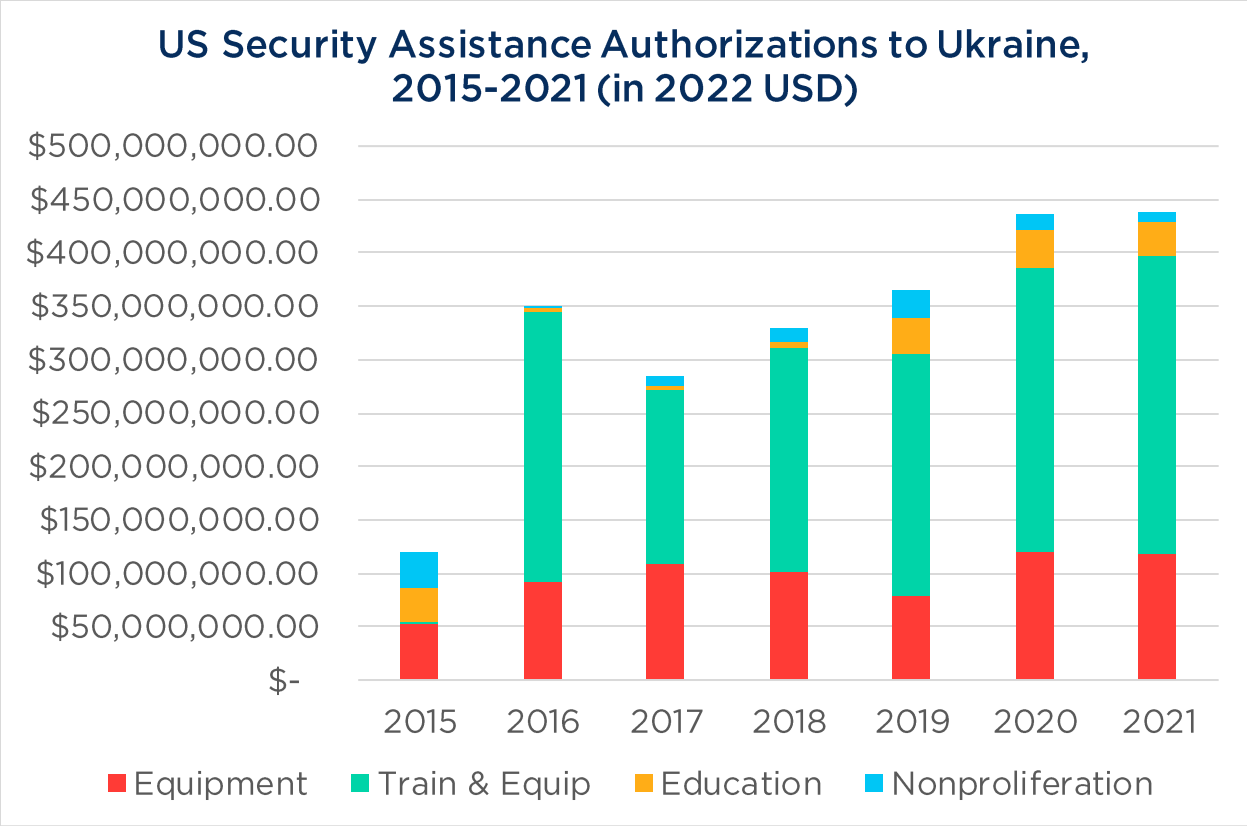


[4] Funds from two key programs in Ukraine security assistance since 2015 – the Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF) and US European Command's Joint Multinational Training Group Ukraine (JMTG-U) – were not counted in these categories. This is because the GSCF does not include year-specific totals for Ukraine, is not included in recent foreign assistance summaries for Ukraine, and is small (comprising only $232 million over ten years, spread across 14 countries). JMTG-U is funded by the Foreign Military Financing and Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative programs.
[5] Figures taken variously from "FY 2023 Congressional Budget Justification – Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs," *USAID*, March 28, 2022; "U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants (Greenbook) 2019," *USAID*, May 19, 2021; and Christina L. Arabia, Andrew S. Bowen, and Cory Welt, "U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine," *Congressional Research Service*, April 29, 2022. Aid from 2022 is extremely large and skews the rest of the data, so it is not displayed. Assembled datasets from author are available upon request.

US grants and loans for the purchase of defense equipment and articles, as measured by the total Foreign Military Financing funds authorized for Ukraine, were just over $151 million from 1991 to 2014—less than a third of Ukraine's funds for eliminating strategic arms under the Cooperative Threat Reduction program over that same period of time (around $514 million).[6] Although the US president and Congress had expressed interest in enlarging NATO to include former Soviet republics and Ukraine expressed interest in joining, Ukrainian domestic political struggles in the 2000s and the NATO-skeptic stance of President Viktor Yanukovych after 2010 made NATO membership infeasible in the near term.[7] Even pro-Western governments in Ukraine found full military reform infeasible given the lack of funding from parliament.[8]

The next chart shows how the 2014 Russian invasion drove a change in the distribution of US security assistance to Ukraine, with "train & equip" funds becoming the largest category. The total value of assistance also increased substantially, nearly doubling from 2010 to 2017 and eventually growing to about one-tenth of Ukraine's defense budget. Still, total aid to Ukraine in 2017 was still only around one-fifth of what the United States provided to Egypt and one-tenth of that to Israel—the two largest recipients of US security assistance.[9] Even as late as 2021, most aid was not lethal, like the Javelin and Stinger missiles now being sent, partly for fear of spoiling negotiations with Russia.[10] The prudence of aiding Ukraine was still debated in Washington. Security assistance was insufficient for reversing Kyiv's battlefield losses, likely by design.[11]

[6] Mary Beth D. Nikitin and Amy F. Woolf, "The Evolution of Cooperative Threat Reduction: Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, November 23, 2015, p. 21; "Security Assistance Database: Ukraine," *Center for International Policy*, accessed April 25, 2022.
[7] Joshua R. Shifrinson, "NATO enlargement and US foreign policy: the origins, durability, and impact of an idea," *International Politics* Vol. 57, No. 3 (2020), p. 345; Cory Welt, "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, October 5, 2021, pp. 14-15, 26.
[8] Michael Kofman, review of *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, eds. Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (2016), p. 103.
[9] Susan B. Epstein, Marian L. Lawson, and Cory R. Gill, "Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: FY2018 Budget and Appropriations," *Congressional Research Service*, April 13, 2018, p. 19.
[10] "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine," *US Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs*, May 6, 2022.
[11] From conversations with an ex-US national security professional who worked on the Ukraine security assistance portfolio after the 2014 invasion. Also see Miranda Priebe, Bryan Rooney, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Jeffrey Martini, and Stephanie Pezard, *Implementing Restraint: Changes in U.S. Regional Security Policies to Operationalize a Realist Grand Strategy of Restraint* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2021), pp. 45-47.



Crucially, in the aftermath of Russia's 2014 invasions, US weaponry would have been far less effective than in 2022 and unlikely to dislodge Russian forces. Since 1991, Ukraine's military had downsized and not focused on large conventional forces, leaving it ill-equipped to resist Russian invaders—it was "an army literally in ruins," in the words of its chief of the general staff.[12] Only around 6,000 Ukrainian troops were combat-ready when Russia invaded Crimea. Military spending was about 1 percent of GDP leading up to 2014 and raising state spending was difficult after the 2012 recession. And, by fall 2014, Russian-backed separatists in the east had dug in, giving them the defender's advantage.[13] Though Washington sent 360 Javelins in 2018 and 2019, this was not due to a shift in US strategy but instead a delayed expression of solidarity.[14] Even with more US aid, Ukraine was not able to restore its pre-2014 borders.

[12] Adrian Bonenberger, "Ukraine's Military Pulled Itself Out of the Ruins of 2014," *Foreign Policy*, May 9, 2022; Valeriy Akimenko, "Ukraine's Toughest Fight: The Challenge of Military Reform," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 22, 2018.
[13] Kofman, review of *Brothers Armed*, 103; "Russia and Eurasia," chapter 5 in *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015), pp. 170-173; Michael Kofman, "Why sending weapons to Ukraine would be a terrible idea for the US," *Quartz*, October 24, 2014.
[14] Mariya Omelicheva, "Washington's Security Assistance to Kyiv: Improving Long-Term Returns on Military Investments in Ukraine," *PONARS Eurasia*, September 27, 2019; Jennifer Steinhauer and David M. Herszenhorn, "Defying Obama, Many in Congress Press to Arm Ukraine," *New York Times*, June 11, 2015.

Other Contributors to Ukrainian Military Success

After the Crimean invasion, most of the change in Ukraine's military came from within Ukraine.[15] The military improved in three ways. First, it increased manpower by reinstating conscription—by 2021, the armed forces stood at 209,000 active-duty and 900,000 in reserve. Moreover, it enhanced its firepower with improved training (which complemented growing combat experience) and by acquiring new, more advanced equipment. Long-range precision artillery and missiles, anti-tank weaponry, and air-defense systems were specifically prioritized.[16] Lastly, Ukraine's military reorganized its command, control, and communications structure and created a joint operational staff, part of reforms aimed at NATO interoperability.[17] Annual defense spending also increased after the 2014 invasion of Crimea to over 2 percent (and often over 3 percent) of GDP, as the table below illustrates. Ukraine's GDP grew substantially each year after 2014 (except for in 2020), meaning absolute defense budget growth has been consistently high.

Ukraine's Defense Budget as a Proportion of GDP, 2013-2021[18]

Year	2013 (pre-invasion)	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Defense Budget as a % of GDP	1.33%	2.66%	4.34%	2.48%	2.63%	2.59%	2.54%	3.05%	3.20%

Russia's February 2022 invasion of all of Ukraine—with the apparent goal of taking Kyiv—has demonstrated the effect of these reforms. Ukraine's military surpassed many expert predictions by defending the capital and repelling

[15] The counterargument is that much of Ukraine's military progress may be attributed to the US- and European-run Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine at the Yavoriv base (which hosted Ukrainian forces from April 2015 to February 2022). But, as the commander of that training command, Brig. Gen. Joseph Hilbert, stated last month, only around 23,000 Ukrainian troops were trained under that command until January 2022 – a substantial number, but still only around 11 percent of Ukraine's active-duty forces ("Defense Officials Hold Media Brief on the Training of Ukrainian Military," *US Department of Defense*, May 4, 2022, https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3020390/defense-officials-hold-media-brief-on-the-training-of-ukrainian-military/).

[16] "Russia and Eurasia," chapter 5 in *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016), p. 177; "Russia and Eurasia," chapter 5 in *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021), pp. 176-178, 209; Jana Winter and Zach Dorfman, "Exclusive: Key U.S. military report revealed Ukrainian defense weaknesses, weapons needs," *Yahoo News*, March 25, 2022.

[17] Col. Volodymyr Postrybailo, "The Conflict in Ukraine: Its Implications on Armed Forces Development," in *Project 1721*, ed. Douglas Mastriano (Carlisle, Penn.: US Army War College, 2017), pp. 23-27; "Russia and Eurasia," chapter 5 in *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017), p. 227.

[18] Figures for 2013 to 2020 from "Chapter 5: Russia and Eurasia," *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014-2021), various pages. Figure for 2021 from "World military expenditure passes $2 trillion for first time," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, April 25, 2022, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/world-military-expenditure-passes-2-trillion-first-time.

Russia's advance in northern Ukraine. The invasion spurred a dramatic shift in US security assistance as well, making politically acceptable (and desirable) the transfer of mass quantities of weapons, equipment, and supplies to Ukraine that were previously off-limits or at least highly debatable. From March 2021 to February 2022, US assistance totaled around $650 million; since then, approximately $23.7 billion in security assistance has been authorized (though not all of it has been spent yet).[19] Ukraine has made use of this assistance in three ways: sustaining its operations in what has been a war of attrition, blunting Russian armored advances, and using US-provided artillery to counter Russian artillery in the latest phase of the war.[20] Ukrainian forces' combat experience since 2014 and improved training has likely enhanced their ability to use new equipment effectively. They have also made use of basic supplies and ammunition. Though these items have not featured as prominently as high-end weapons systems, they help narrow Russia's advantages in quantity. Ukrainian forces were also already trained on indigenous anti-tank missiles, smoothing the intake of US versions.

Reuters

[19] This counts both the value of the stockpiled equipment drawn down and sent to Ukraine and the funds allocated to replace this equipment. If the latter is not counted, then total authorized security assistance since February 2022 is closer to $14.6 billion. See Bianca Pallaro and Alicia Parlapiano, "Four Ways to Understand the $54 Billion in U.S. Spending on Ukraine," *New York Times*, May 20, 2022.
[20] Andrew E. Kramer and Maria Varenikova, "Powerful American Artillery Enters the Fight in Ukraine," *New York Times*, May 23, 2022.

Moreover, Russian shortcomings in the war have amplified Ukraine's military efficacy. Analysts have concluded that Russia's forces have been overstretched logistically, reflecting unrealistic war plans and deep organizational rot. Russian units are also understaffed in infantry due to Russia's manpower shortage, which has not been rectified by mass conscription due to political considerations. This has left Russian armor especially vulnerable to Ukrainian anti-tank teams in cities and other dense terrain.[21] These vulnerabilities have grown less meaningful as the war has become more attritional in Ukraine's east, playing more to Russia's advantages and eating away at Ukrainian manpower. These shifts may change the efficacy of US security assistance as well.

Conclusion

The extraordinary efficacy of US security assistance to Ukraine since Russia's 2022 invasion has depended heavily on a set of factors specific to this conflict. Without Ukraine's own military reforms after 2014 and Russia's poor initial performance in the war, US assistance would have had limited ability to help Ukraine maintain the fight. Data from 1992 to the present reveals that, although US aid to Ukraine pivoted away from nonproliferation and increased substantially after the 2014 invasion of Crimea, it was not large enough—and Ukraine's military was not strong enough—for it to tip the scales toward Kyiv. However, by 2022, Ukraine's military improvements allowed it to absorb massive amounts of US supplies and weaponry effectively. Russia's poor military choices have compounded this success, showing the potential military value of wartime US security aid.

But there are strict parameters for this success. The dramatic uptick in US funding in 2022 shows that assistance likely must be substantial (even by US standards) to be meaningful—especially in conflicts on the scale of the Russia-Ukraine war. Moreover, the recipient military must be mostly self-sufficient to use assistance effectively. In the war's first few months, Ukraine has shown that US security assistance, in great quantities and in the hands of motivated, experienced partners, can contribute substantially to wartime aims.

[21] Andrew S. Bowen, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects," *Congressional Research Service*, April 27, 2022, pp. 5-11; Michael Kofman and Rob Lee, "Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military's Ill-Fated Force Design," *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2022.

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