

## Germany approves Leopards for Ukraine and U.S. agrees to send M1 Abrams



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in the Bundestag today discussing the decision on Leopards.

Last February, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” to protect the people in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine who, he said, “have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime.” But as it unfolded, rather than being focused on the Donbas, the “special military operation” was a multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine from Belarus in the north, Crimea in the south, and Russian territory adjacent to northeastern Ukraine. The “operation” began with an attack on Kyiv from the north; Russia was unable to take Kyiv but did take much of Kharkiv region in the northeast, all of Luhansk region and about half of Donetsk region in the Donbas, and most of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in the southeast, thereby establishing a land corridor to Crimea. Russia subsequently annexed the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions.

Ukraine took back the Kharkiv region and a portion of Kherson region several months ago, but since then the “contact line” between the forces in eastern Ukraine has changed very little and, with winter settling in, both sides are preparing for a resumption of the ground war this spring. Russia is currently embarking on a second round of conscription – larger than the first in late September and October that drafted 300,000 – that will bring another 500,000 into the military. And Ukraine, which expects a massive Russian offensive beginning in February and March while the ground is still frozen and tanks and other large vehicles can move easily, is preparing for what is likely to come primarily by pressing its supporters for more equipment – in particular, armored vehicles, personnel carriers, and, above all, tanks. Ukraine estimates it will need several hundred tanks to withstand the anticipated Russian offensive.

Some of Ukraine’s supporters in the West – most notably, the UK, Poland and Finland – have already pledged assistance in the form of tanks. The UK has agreed to provide Ukraine with 14 Challenger 2 tanks and Poland and Finland have agreed to provide it with some of their German-made Leopard 2 tanks, which were specifically designed to fight Russia’s T-90 main battle tank.

But German law requires an export license for any transfer of tanks it produced to another country and, until today, Germany had not approved the transfer of the Polish and Finnish Leopard 2s to Ukraine. Germany presumably feared its approval might be regarded by Russia as a de facto intervention in the war and might expose it to Russian retribution. Perhaps for that reason, Germany reportedly said it wouldn't approve the transfer of Leopards unless the U.S. agreed to provide Ukraine with its M1 Abrams main battle tank.

Last Friday, the top defense officials of the U.S.-led Ukraine Defense Contact Group met in Ramstein, Germany to discuss what Ukraine needs for the Russian offensive that lies ahead. But while several countries, including the U.S., announced various types of military assistance, Germany didn't say it would grant the export license that's required for Poland and Finland to send their Leopards to Ukraine. After the meeting, Boris Pistorius, the new German Defense Minister, said, "Today, we still cannot say when a decision will be taken and what the decision will be when it comes to the Leopard tank" The Poles were furious. In October, Polish President Andrzej Duda had said, "Poland will stand with Ukraine, no ifs or buts," and on Jan. 11, in a meeting in Lviv with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, he had offered Ukraine 14 of Poland's Leopards. After the Ramstein meeting, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said, "If the Germans are not part of this coalition, then we, with others, will still send tanks to Ukraine. Ukraine and Europe will win this war – with or without Germany."

On Sunday, Annalena Baerbock, the German Foreign Minister and former co-leader of the Greens, the supporters of which are, according to polls, strongly in favor of sending Leopards to Ukraine, took the matter into her own hands, telling the French news channel LCI that, "For the moment the question [approval of the transfer of Leopards] has not been asked, but if we were asked, we would not stand in the way." Yesterday, Poland officially sought permission to supply Ukraine with 14 Leopard 2s. Today, after a Cabinet meeting, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced in the Bundestag that Germany will approve export licenses for countries that wish to send Leopards to Ukraine and that Germany itself will send a company of 14 Leopards and begin training Ukrainian crews: "It is right that we act closely with our international partners to support Ukraine – financially, with humanitarian aid, but also with weapons deliveries. Now we can say that, in Europe, it is us and Britain who have made the most weapons available for Ukraine... Germany will always be at the forefront when it comes to supporting Ukraine." But he also added an important cautionary note: "With everything that we do, we must always make very clear that we will do what is necessary and possible to support Ukraine, but at the same time to prevent an escalation of the war to a war between Russia and NATO."

This afternoon President Biden announced that the U.S. will provide Ukraine with 31 M1 Abrams tanks. Speaking of the U.S. and its European allies, he said, "Putin expected Europe and the U.S. to weaken our resolve. He expected our support for Ukraine to crumble with time. He was wrong... We are united. America is united and so is the world. And as we approach the one-year mark – as we do – of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we remain as united and determined as ever in our conviction and our cause. These tanks are further evidence of our enduring and unflagging commitment to Ukraine...."

David R. Cameron  
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