

As the war grinds on, Zelenskyy visits UK, pleads for combat aircraft



Prime Minister Rishi Sunak welcoming Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on his arrival today at Stansted Airport.

Today, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited the UK in his only trip outside Ukraine other than his visit to the U.S. in December and, in a powerful speech to the British Parliament, called for more military assistance – in particular, combat aircraft – in anticipation of Russia’s soon-to-be-launched spring offensive in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Tomorrow, Zelenskyy will visit Brussels, where he will address the European Parliament and meet with the European Council, the heads of state or government of the 27 member states of the EU, and no doubt express both his gratitude for the EU’s support for Ukraine and its need for more assistance, including military assistance.

In his speech to the British Parliament, Zelenskyy expressed his country’s gratitude for the UK’s early support after Russian President Vladimir Putin began Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine last February. In it, he said, “Great Britain, you extended your helping hand when the world had not yet come to understand how to react.” But he also emphasized Ukraine’s urgent need right now for combat aircraft if it is to stop Russia’s anticipated offensive: “I appeal to you and the world. Combat aircraft for Ukraine. Wings for freedom.” Sunak didn’t say the UK will provide such aircraft. But he did announce that the UK will bolster training for Ukrainian soldiers and marines and expand it to fighter jet pilots. The training, his office said, “will ensure Ukraine can defend its skies well into the future. The training will ensure pilots are able to fly sophisticated NATO-standard fighter jets in the future. As part of that long-term capability investment, the UK will work with Ukraine and international allies to coordinate collective support to meet Ukraine’s defensive needs.” Sunak said, “I am proud that today we will expand... training from soldiers to marines and fighter jet pilots, ensuring Ukraine is militarily able to defend its interests well into the future.” The British Foreign Office also announced the UK will impose additional sanctions on Russia.

Ukraine has been saying for some time that it needs combat aircraft such as the American F-16 that could intercept Russian cruise missiles and attack drones and provide support for Ukrainian forces on the ground. A spokesperson for the Ukrainian air force said late last year that roughly 50 experienced Ukrainian pilots with English-language skills have been selected for training on such aircraft. But unfortunately for Ukraine, thus far neither the UK nor the U.S. nor any other western country has approved the transfer of F-16s or other combat aircraft to Ukraine, no doubt out of fear that doing so might further escalate the risk of conflict between Russia and the West. But as an adviser to Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov said, the British decision to begin training Ukrainian fighter jet pilots “sends a strong signal...to Ukraine’s other allies that the time has come to break through one of the last remaining hurdles – providing Ukraine with modern fighter jets.”

The problem, of course, is that time is running out for Ukraine. The British training for fighter pilots typically requires about six months, and by the time the U.S. and other states agree to provide Ukraine with combat aircraft (if they do) and Ukrainian pilots have been trained to fly them, Russia’s spring offensive will not only be well underway but may have already achieved Russia’s objectives, which are to continue to hold, as it does now, virtually all of Luhansk region in the northern portion of the Donbas; take the western portion of the Donetsk region now held by Ukraine that includes the large cities of Kramatorsk and Sloviansk; and retain the wide “land corridor” it now holds through Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions between the Donbas and Crimea. For Russia, the objective now is to launch the offensive, take the rest of Donetsk region and hold the other territories it now holds in eastern Ukraine, and then – before the western tanks arrive and Ukrainian crews have been trained to operate them, and before, in the event the U.S., the UK, and others agree to send Ukraine combat aircraft, Ukrainian pilots have been trained to operate them – unilaterally declare that it has won the war and call for a truce and for peace talks – a call that at least some, and perhaps many, in the West would reluctantly support.

Tomorrow, Zelenskyy will address the European Parliament and meet with the leaders of the 27 EU member states at the meeting of the European Council. He will no doubt repeat the same call he issued today in London: “Combat aircraft for Ukraine. Wings for freedom.” Hopefully, the leaders of the EU will have the intestinal fortitude to provide Ukraine at this perilous moment with the support it needs.

David R. Cameron
February 8, 2023