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First tanks, fighters next?

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| Snapshot



While tanks are being introduced, Kyiv is clamouring for fighter aircraft. The Ukrainian request to be reinforced in the air is fully understandable. Although they have been able to keep the Russian air force at bay for a full year, the Russian missile campaign is still ongoing and Russia seems to prepare its airpower to support its Spring offensive. But fighters are not tanks. Aircraft are even more complex than armoured vehicles and demand a large logistic tail and pilots and ground personnel with dedicated training. To put all of this in place will take far more time than reequipping part of the Ukrainian army with modern Western armour. Besides these practical considerations, Western fighter aircraft could have an escalatory effect as they theoretically would give Kyiv the ability to strike deep in Russian held territory or even Russia proper. But there is a third reason why we should carefully ponder the question when and whether fighters are needed or whether other alternatives might be more useful on the short term: the balance of forces in the air differs fundamentally from the balance of forces on the ground.

On land, the war hangs in the balance as both sides try to take the initiative and force their will on their opponent. In this domain the Ukrainian army is giving as good as it gets. The main tools of this high intensity land battle are the combined arms forces of both sides: the brigade and division sized formations of tanks, mechanized infantry and artillery that dominate operational manoeuvre warfare. Ukraine has shown at Kharkiv its ability in effectively deploying such heavy formations, but the lack of further grand counteroffensives this autumn and winter indicates that Kyiv desperately needs reinforcements, both in numbers and in quality. This is where the Leopard II and other Western MBTs come into play. These modern MBTs will give the Ukrainian combined arms formations the fighting power they need to beat of the inevitable Russian Spring offensive and allow them to go on the counterattack to recover lost Ukrainian ground. Ideally, this might even set up the conditions for realistic peace talks.

In the air, the Ukrainian position is far more tenuous. At the start of the war the Ukrainian Air Force was far inferior to the Russian Air Force (VKS): with about 120 combat aircraft Ukraine had to face circa 350 Russian combat aircraft in theatre, backed up by reserves deeper in Russian territory. Today, after the losses of one year of war, the force ratio is even more lopsided. To make matters worse, this Russian force is not only supported by impressive missile and bomber forces, but also enjoys clear technological advantages. The Russian aircraft are far more modern and – crucially – are equipped with long range active radar guided missiles that give them a decisive edge in air-to-air combat. That Russia has been incapable of gaining air superiority is due to the masterfully handled Ukrainian Ground Based Air Defences (GBAD). Surviving the Russian onslaught, the Ukrainian GBAD managed to inflict such losses on the Russian attackers that the VKS had to suspend its offensive operations. This created a precarious equilibrium of mutual air denial in which the Russians cannot conduct an air campaign against Ukrainian targets and have to fall back on their missile forces, while the Ukrainians are still far too weak to challenge Russian strength in the air. For Ukraine this is essentially a victory, as it stops the far stronger VKS from using its impressive striking power.

Introducing Western fighter aircraft in this air battle would not allow the Ukrainian air force to transform mutual air denial into air superiority. Not only would the Ukrainian air force have to defeat or at least achieve parity with the full might of Russia's fighter force. But Ukraine would also face the same challenge that is stopping the VKS from taking full advantage of its quantitative superiority and superior equipment: deadly air defences. Ukrainian air power has to deal with the very capable Russian GBAD build around long-range systems such as the deadly S-400. This is an enormous double challenge and considering the balance of

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forces, this is a battle Ukraine is unlikely to win by itself, even with massive reinforcements. To realistically gain air superiority, the NATO air forces that have been designed to defeat the Russian air defences would be required. If we think it is necessary that Ukraine can strike deep into Russian held territory, long range missile artillery like the GLSDB and ATACMS make far more sense.

Rather than reinforce unrealistic dreams of air superiority, it is far more important that the West supports the vital defensive Ukrainian capability to maintain mutual air denial. This means first and foremost GBAD systems: Surface to Air Missiles (SAM) and close-in defences to keep the VKS-storm at a distance. For if Ukraine loses this battle, Russia will be able to unleash the full might of its airpower on Ukraine's cities and army – and in that case the Ukrainian operational reserve with its Western MBTs will have a far tougher battle on its hand. The crux is how many SAMs Ukraine has left in its arsenals, specifically, how many of their S-300 and Buk missiles remain after a year of high-intensity air warfare. This is where Western support can really make a difference fast – whether it is Patriot, Iris, NASAMS or whatever we can get to Ukraine without too dangerously depleting our own stocks and too gravely hamstringing our ability to rebuild our own forces.

Where Western fighters could and probably will come into play is in shoring up the Ukrainian air defences. If we cannot sufficiently reinforce the Ukrainian GBAD to hold the line this might in fact become unavoidable in the mid- and long-term. The West – secure in the capability of its own air forces to impose air supremacy - has not invested much in GBAD during the last decades and might have no alternative but providing fighter aircraft. This will be a massive undertaking, which not only will require trained Ukrainian pilots, ground personnel, logistics and sufficient fighters to make a difference, but also the Western weapons these fighters need for their survival. In practice, this would imply that if the Netherlands intend to give Ukraine F-16s it will also have to send modern long range active radar guided AIM-120 AMRAAM missiles along, so that the F-16s can fight Russian R-77 equipped aircraft. While this sounds self-evident, despatching the latest generation air-launched AMRAAMs might even be more of a political challenge than F-16s.

All in all, providing Ukraine with Western fighters is not something that we can do as quickly and relatively easily as introducing Western MBTs. If we consider it important for our security that Ukraine should not be defeated – and if possible, win - we should think seriously about whether and when Western fighters are needed or whether there are alternatives, and if we decide to send fighters, how and when they should be deployed. This is not an easy and cut case, as reinforcing the Ukrainian Ground Based Air Defences and providing Ukraine with long ranged firepower might be a quicker and more effective way than flying in Western fighter aircraft. A lot depends on how many SAMs Ukraine has left in its arsenals and how many GBAD systems we can send them. But considering the time needed for fighter reinforcements and the vital importance of Ukraine being able to defend itself against Russian air power, we should get our act together fast.

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