

## The logic of defence assistance to Ukraine: a strategic assessment

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# SWP Comment

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## The Logic of Defence Assistance to Ukraine

A Strategic Assessment

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The recent debate about providing military assistance to Ukraine has relevance for the efforts to overcome the current impasse in the Minsk Process and the Normandy Format in particular, and thus the search for a resolution to the conflict regarding the Donbas. But it also concerns larger questions of Germany's role in Europe, and in security policy more generally. It touches on Germany's ability to adapt to situations in which other countries are willing to envisage military solutions to existing conflicts. In this sense, it fits into discussions about a more geopolitical EU. And it offers Berlin a way to reinforce its commitment to European security and stability by more actively resisting the redrawing of international borders.

The question of providing military assistance to actors in crisis zones has consistently been a difficult one for German politicians and policymakers. However, with rising expectations both inside and outside the country for Germany to play a more robust role in the international arena, this and related questions are likely to arise more insistently with regard to future conflicts. Thus, the recent debate on sending military assistance to Ukraine should be seen not only as a sign of the Bundestag election campaign heating up, but also as an indication that this topic is going to remain on the political agenda. The case of Ukraine points to a set of issues related to Germany's foreign policy role more broadly conceived, and to Berlin's potential contribution to European security.

### Germany's Approach to Ukraine's Security

War between Russia and its proxies in the Donbas on the one hand, and Ukraine on the other, has been ongoing since 2014. During that time, Germany has made a variety of contributions to Ukraine's security. The most visible one is its participation in the Normandy Format, in which Germany and France attempt to manage and promote solutions to the ongoing conflict in the Donbas. Berlin has also provided important input in the Trilateral Contact Group, which is another component of the "Minsk Process" that is responsible for agreeing upon concrete measures of conflict regulation and management. Furthermore, Germany has offered medical treatment to some of those seriously wounded in the war and has contributed personnel



to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in the Donbas, and in Ukraine more broadly. It has also made financial and other types of assistance available to improve the situation in those parts of the Donbas still under Ukrainian control.

However, it has been German policy not to provide defence assistance to Ukraine for a variety of reasons. Beyond a strong pacifist streak in German politics and society, these reasons have focused on the potential negative consequences for the development of the conflict. In particular, there has been concern that injecting more weapons and other military equipment into an ongoing conflict situation would cause the conflict to escalate. German policy has primarily emphasised de-escalation as well as efforts to identify a political solution. The approach has been premised on increasing the number and effectiveness of the political, economic, and humanitarian mechanisms brought to bear on the situation, while leaving the military component largely unaddressed. This has essentially coincided with the EU approach, although individual member states, in particular Lithuania, have provided some military assistance to Ukraine bilaterally. Outside the EU, the US has been the most substantial provider of such assistance, although the UK and Canada have also been active in this respect. If Germany were to join these countries in assisting Ukraine in the realm of defence, it would make sense to coordinate with them, as well as with Kyiv, on the types of assistance that could be most useful. But this issue is secondary to the question of whether or not to offer such assistance in the first place.

## The Role of Defence Assistance

Insights from the field of strategic analysis reveal that military assistance can in fact be utilised for de-escalation purposes. In particular, crisis bargaining and deterrence-related studies suggest that visible capabilities for denial-based deterrence are the most reliable option for discouraging delib-

erate armed escalations. Given Ukraine's conflict conditions, this means that the most likely outcomes of increased military assistance to Ukraine would be a reduction in the level of armed violence and a heightened probability of peaceful negotiations.

In Russia's foreign policy toolkit, war represents a valid alternative to other types of policy. In other words, the Russian military is viewed as just another national resource that can be used to acquire desired goods. As do numerous states, Russia switches between its persuasive (trade and diplomacy) and its coercive (military) tools, depending on which is more cost-effective in a given case.

In 2014 Russia switched to the military tool in the case of Ukraine, in the attempt to ensure the compliance of Ukraine with Russia's designs for the region. This happened because Russian leaders believed that the military instrument would be more efficient than diplomatic talks. Russia's military build-up in March and April of this year indicates that this is still the way they view the conflict. However, if this tool achieves less than expected, while the military resources invested degrade more quickly, the Russian leadership could be induced to reconsider and switch back to peaceful talks. One way to make the Russian military tool less effective and less attractive would be by strengthening Ukraine's military. This approach appears feasible since previous Russian foreign and security behaviour indicates that Russia is not currently contemplating a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

By acquiring additional defence assistance, a militarily stronger Ukraine can impose more significant costs on Russia while on the defensive, but it cannot win against Russia in an offensive operation. Its military capabilities are not adequate for this – Ukraine could hardly deploy more than 60,000–80,000 troops in the Donbas, at the risk of significantly weakening its defences in other areas, including on the border with Belarus. Russia, on the other hand, can afford to amass at its borders with Ukraine a force about twice as large.

It revealed this in April 2021, when it deployed more than 100,000 troops in the proximity of Ukraine's borders, in addition to the fighting force already deployed in the Donbas. This estimation also considers Russia's constraints, which are related to the structure of its armed forces, and the necessity to cover its very extensive borders.

Ukraine thus has no chance to succeed in — and therefore no incentive for — a military offensive against Russia. Ukraine is capable of defeating Russian proxies in the Donbas alone, as it proved in August 2014. However, it will presumably refrain from attacking, since the Ukrainian army is aware that Russia could always intervene — as it did in 2014, when it sent its military across the border and defeated advancing Ukrainian troops. Both the 2008 Russian-Georgian War and Ukraine's own experience with Russia in the Donbas sent a strong signal to Ukrainian policymakers that Russia will respond militarily to an attempted offensive against its proxies.

On the other hand, a militarily stronger Ukraine can affect the attractiveness of an armed escalation in the Donbas for Russia. With modern Western equipment, logistics, and training, it can significantly alter the cost calculations and incentives of the Russian military. Evidence shows that even a technologically and numerically inferior fighting force can pose a challenge if it skilfully uses the modern system of force employment. Combining this system with Western military equipment, Ukrainian forces can inflict higher levels of damage on troops attacking them, more quickly degrading their deployed military capabilities. This should encourage longer ceasefires, at least. For instance, one of the longest ceasefires in Eastern Ukraine, agreed in summer 2020, came shortly after the US permitted Ukraine to use the Javelin anti-tank missiles it had provided, under the condition that they were to be used only in response to attacks in the Donbas.

A second-tier effect of defence assistance is that a better-equipped Ukraine would also considerably reduce its own losses from Russian attacks, diminishing their utility.

For instance, the combat first-aid kits and other medical supplies that Ukraine requested but failed to receive from Germany in 2014 could have significantly reduced the almost 40 per cent death rate among wounded soldiers, preserving higher defensive capabilities on the Ukrainian side. Similarly, improved individual protection equipment for soldiers, such as body armour vests and Kevlar helmets, would also save the lives of many Ukrainian combatants, contributing to a higher cost-benefit ratio of Russian military operations. Furthermore, secure radio capabilities, better reconnaissance equipment, and night-vision devices that Ukraine previously requested could further improve the ability of the Ukrainian military to reduce its personnel losses.

Some of the highest Ukrainian casualties have come as a result of artillery and sniper fire. Improving the counter-fire capabilities of the Ukrainian military by delivering surveillance and target acquisition equipment would change this drastically. This and other types of defence assistance have the dual effect of reducing Ukrainian losses and increasing costs for the Russian military by forcing them to expend more munitions and lose more hardware. The continuous replenishment of Russian supplies of munitions and military hardware over the last seven years has not been cheap. And if Russia starts to lose that hardware more frequently, while its strikes inflict less damage on Ukrainian troops, then the military escalation becomes more costly and delivers fewer benefits.

## A Better Chance for Diplomacy

Increasing the defence capabilities of Ukraine would not only reduce its losses, but also improve its resolve and signal that resolve more powerfully to Russia. This could play a strong role in deterring further escalation and move the conflict from the violent stage to diplomatic talks by affecting both Russia's perception of Ukraine's determination to continue fighting and its

expectations about the conflict's duration and gains. Defence assistance to Ukraine challenges Russia's expectations of Ukraine's propensity to capitulate and accept Russia's conditions regarding the Donbas. As Russian leaders become aware of Ukraine's increased resolve and its more resilient defence posture, they will adjust their expectations and have less confidence in Ukraine's potential capitulation. This could have a critical impact on the crisis bargaining process, in the sense of positively affecting Russia's willingness to negotiate in earnest.

Thus, by providing defence assistance to Kyiv, Germany – in conjunction with other states already active in this regard – would temper Russia's decision to escalate by influencing Russia's expectations about Ukraine's resolve to resist. If Moscow perceives Ukraine to be weak and irresolute, then it has an incentive to keep pressure high by mounting continuous attacks and skirmishes against Ukrainian troops for a constant attrition effect. In the perception of Russian defence planners – based on the influence operations they have been running against Ukraine – this approach generates continuous news about casualties, heightens war fatigue amongst the population, and puts political pressure on the leadership. Since Russia perceives Ukraine as weak, it orchestrates continuous ceasefire violations and instrumentalises their impact, aiming to erode the Ukrainian population's desire to resist.

More active German involvement would not just significantly benefit the peace process and make armed escalations costlier. It could also further affect Russia's expectations regarding the ability of Ukraine to secure the support of critical players inside the EU. Berlin would thereby acquire a more solid position to negotiate with Moscow. Currently, Russia strongly influences the negotiations and their agenda, exploiting its Donbas proxies to absorb the costs of its noncompliance with the Minsk agreements, thus making its violations easy to sustain.

By assuming a substantive role – along with other Western states – in consolidat-

ing Ukraine's defence and resolve against military attacks in the Donbas, Germany would be able to strengthen its bargaining leverage on Russia due its ability to directly impact Russia's interests and activities in its priority geographic area. By providing defence assistance to Ukraine, Germany would progressively create for itself a wider space for a trade-off with Russia. It could achieve this by conceding to adjust this assistance in the future, although maintaining it at a level sufficient to ensure Ukraine's effective deterrence ability, thus promoting a bargaining process on the Donbas that discourages armed escalations. This ability to impact facts on the ground would force Russia to seek to engage Germany, not only in the economic sphere, but in the security domain as well.

If Germany wants to play a prominent pacifying role in Eastern Ukraine, it needs to reshape Russia's perception that it can easily coerce Ukraine into submission through a gradual military attrition of Ukraine's defence capabilities and its resolve. Otherwise, the conflict is likely to linger for decades, leading to thousands of additional casualties and a higher risk of military escalation, since Ukraine is unwilling to become a satellite state of Russia. In parallel with this strategy, Germany could contribute to the peace process by negotiating with Russia and providing an "honourable way out" of the Donbas war, making such a retreat more palatable for Moscow. A peaceful solution to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War in the Donbas that does not involve significantly raising the costs of Russian military activity seems unlikely. Altering Russia's cost calculations is, however, a gradual process, requiring a continuity of approach with regard to international support for the Ukrainian armed forces.

## Insights for German Foreign Policy

A willingness to provide military assistance to Ukraine would thus address multiple issues simultaneously. It would serve as a

proactive response to the current stalemate in the Minsk Process, in which Russia has demonstrated inflexibility despite various Ukrainian proposals on how to move forward. This would be an important signal to Moscow and Berlin's allies that Germany is willing to continue to take a certain share of ongoing European responsibility for managing the conflict in the Donbas – in a situation where Ukraine and other actors are increasingly placing greater hopes on the US administration. Increased US involvement would leave Germany and other European actors with less ability to influence the process in Ukraine. Germany's assistance would also signal to Moscow that Berlin is unwilling to contemplate trading long-term European security for short-term economic benefits. Currently, some Russian officials tend to believe that the opposite is true, namely that Germany and other EU countries are unlikely to persist in jeopardising common economic interests for an extended period. This perception emboldens Russia's security policy abroad. Finally, Germany would be demonstrating strategic solidarity with EU and NATO member states that have been providing defence assistance to Ukraine.

Such assistance would not violate Germany's obligations under international agreements. There are no restrictions on military assistance to Ukraine according to the Arms Trade Treaty, which Germany is a party to. More specifically, there is no UN Security Council prohibition of arms exports to Ukraine, and there is no evidence that the arms exported to Ukraine are to be used to violate international law. In fact, in line with Article 51 of the UN Charter, Ukraine has the right to use arms for self-defence, and there is abundant evidence that Russia used its regular military forces directly and as local proxies to attack Ukraine.

More generally, military assistance would be evidence of a more strategic approach to European security, demonstrating

German willingness to expand the arsenal of instruments it employs in the current challenging international environment. It would represent an effective reaction to a situation in which other actors (in this case Moscow) are pursuing a military solution. It would also make a political solution to the conflict more probable by increasing the likelihood that Moscow will be willing to engage in serious and genuine negotiations. Finally, it would constitute a clear response to Russia's military build-up in and near Ukraine in March and April, which has only partially been reversed. This build-up plainly indicated Moscow's intention to continue relying on military instruments to intimidate weaker actors and coerce them to accept its will. This approach by Russia has already led to borders in Europe being de facto redrawn. Reducing the incentives for – and the potential impact of – Russia's military instruments by offering defence assistance to Ukraine would not only raise the chances for a sustainable de-escalation. It would also provide a further tangible sign that Germany refuses to accept the redrawing of borders in Europe and the subordination of smaller states with fewer resources to larger and militarily more powerful ones.

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