

REPORT

Far From the Front Lines, Javelin Missiles Go Unused in Ukraine

Military support to the Eastern European country is at the center of a scandal that threatens to engulf the Trump administration.

BY [AMY MACKINNON](#), [LARA SELIGMAN](#) | OCTOBER 3, 2019, 3:57 PM



A Ukrainian serviceman rides atop an armored personnel carrier with Javelin anti-tank missiles during a military parade in Kyiv to celebrate the country's Independence Day on Aug. 24, 2018. [GENYA SAVILOV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES](#)

During a press conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky last week, U.S. President Donald Trump took a shot at his predecessor, claiming that Barack Obama had supplied “pillows and sheets” to Ukraine while his own administration had delivered “anti-tank busters” to help Kyiv in its fight against Russia and its proxies in eastern Ukraine.

Trump was referring to FGM-148 Javelin anti-tank missiles, which played a central role in the infamous July 25 phone call between Trump and Zelensky that is at the heart of the current impeachment inquiry. After Zelensky suggested he wanted to buy more Javelins, Trump asked him for a “favor” and then later urged him to investigate Hunter Biden, the son of Trump’s Democratic challenger Joe Biden, and his business dealings in the Eastern European country.

But while there is evidence that the Javelin sale has been a powerful gesture of support for Kyiv, the missiles’ military application has been far more limited. Under the conditions of the foreign military sale, the Trump administration stipulates that the Javelins must be stored in western Ukraine—hundreds of miles from the battlefield.

“I see these more as symbolic weapons than anything else,” said Samuel Charap, a senior political scientist at Rand Corp. Experts say the conditions of the sale render them useless in the event of a sustained low-level assault—the kind of attack Ukraine is most likely to face from Russia.

Trump’s claim about supplying far more critical military aid to Ukraine than Obama is **hyperbolic at best** in other ways. The Obama administration did draw criticism for its refusal to approve lethal assistance to Ukraine, including the Javelin missile sale Trump cited. But it did commit to Kyiv **more than \$600 million** in security assistance and equipment, including armored Humvee vehicles, unmanned aerial vehicles, countermortar radars, night vision equipment, and medical supplies.

Experts and military officials agree that the Trump administration’s decision to provide the Javelin, a shoulder-mounted precision missile system that can take out tanks and other armored vehicles, to Ukraine has been a significant contribution to the country’s security. And amid allegations that Trump might have held up military aid to Ukraine, news reports on Tuesday indicated that the U.S. State Department approved the sale of a further \$39 million worth of Javelins. The move would add another 150 missiles to the 210 the United States sent last year—the first sale of its kind to Kyiv.

Gen. Tod Wolters, the head of U.S. European Command, said Thursday at the Pentagon that Ukrainian soldiers welcomed the arrival of the first tranche of missiles, as well as U.S. and NATO training on how to use them.

“You see a little bit of a bounce in the step of a Ukrainian soldier when he or she has had the opportunity to embrace this system that allows them to better defend their turf,” Wolters said, noting that U.S. and NATO military teams traveled to Ukraine this summer to teach the armed forces there how to better use the new weapon.

While the Obama administration slapped sanctions on Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine and had provided Kyiv with substantial financial aid, the administration stopped short of providing lethal weapons to Ukraine—including the Javelins—due to fears that they could fall into Russia’s hands or prompt Moscow to escalate. Officials also worried that the untrained Ukrainian military would not be able to use sophisticated equipment such as the Javelins, said Jim Townsend, a former Defense Department official.

As the Ukrainian military gains experience, that is less of a concern, Wolters said.

U.S. and NATO training efforts over the last few years “allow us to have comfort that with an additional Javelin comes enough soldiers with the ability to embrace that capability, absorb it, and productively use it,” Wolters said, noting that his military advice would be to provide additional Javelins to Ukraine.

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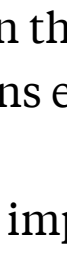
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But as part of the agreement of the sale, the Javelins are not deployed on the battlefield but stored hundreds of miles away in western Ukraine—far from the front lines of the Donbass, which could radically diminish their deterrent effect, said Mike Carpenter, who served as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia and Eurasia under Obama.

“If the Russians know that the Javelins are not there, the deterrent effect is negated,” said Carpenter, though he noted that the missiles could be transferred to the battlefield in the event of an attack. Michael Kofman, a weapons expert with CNA, described the Javelins as an “insurance policy”—but one with little impact in the balance of power on the conflict.

The decision in 2017 to go ahead with the sale under Trump is often held up as evidence that, despite the president’s puzzling affinity for Russia, his administration has pursued a hawkish Russia policy.

Shortly after the first batch of Javelins arrived in Ukraine in 2018, they were tested by the Ukrainian military in what then-President Petro Poroshenko **described** as a “dream come true.” The Ukrainian military has been trained on how to use the Javelins, but with no tank battles in eastern Ukraine since 2015, they haven’t yet had the chance to use them for real.

“It became this sort of embodiment of U.S. support for Ukraine,” said Charap, who previously served as a senior advisor to the State Department’s undersecretary for arms control. “It’s much more headline-grabbing than helping them with their logistics, which by the way is a real problem.”

“While generals and politicians in Kyiv played up the Javelins, in my own experience, soldiers in the field talked more about getting insufficient quantities of the nonlethal aid that they really needed—secure communications, armored vehicles, counterbattery radars,” said Olga Oliker, the director for Europe and Central Asia at the International Crisis Group.

Clarification, Oct. 4, 2019: This article has been updated to clarify the amount of money in security assistance and equipment the Obama administration provided to Ukraine.

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