Far From the Front Lines, Javelins Go Unused in Ukraine

BY AMY MACKINNON

The Trump administration’s decision to provide the Ukrainian military with Javelin anti-tank missiles has become a flashpoint for the impeachment inquiry. But it may also be a missed opportunity to help Ukraine.

“Javelin is a very capable weapon,” said Richard Kaelin, a professor at Georgetown University’s Center for Peace and Security Studies. “If it had been deployed on the battlefield, it would have been a force multiplier. But it isn’t.”

Javelins are not deployed on the battlefield but rather stored in basements, said Maj. Gen. Tod Wolters, the head of U.S. European Command. “It’s a very capable weapon, but the key is having the soldiers trained to use it,” he said.

The move by the Trump administration would add another 150 Javelins to those already in the hands of the Ukrainian military, including a recent shipment of 100 missiles that were made available to Ukraine in the aftermath of the infamous July 25 phone call between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Experts and military officials agree that the Obama administration was more aggressive in supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine, including tanks and Javelins. In contrast, the Trump administration has been more focused on providing nonlethal aid, such as medical supplies and training.

“ Obama provided two ships with lethal weapons, while Trump has provided none,” said Samuel Charap, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and author of "Ukraine’s War: The Struggle for the Soul of a Nation." "Trump’s claim about supplying far more critical military aid to Ukraine than Obama is a serious hyperbolic misstatement."

The decision to send the Javelins to Ukraine was made by the Obama administration, and the Trump administration has limited the missile’s use to training purposes. This decision has been criticized by some as a missed opportunity to help Ukraine.

“Throughout the administration, there has been a consistent policy of not deploying Javelins to the front lines, even though the Obama administration made plans to provide them,” said Mike Carpenter, who served as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia and Eurasia under Obama.

The move by the Trump administration is intended to serve as a gesture of support for Ukraine, but it may not be as effective as other forms of aid. "It’s much more headline-grabbing than helping Ukraine," said Charap, who previously served as a senior advisor to Obama.

Ukraine has welcomed the Javelins, but the military has not yet been trained on how to use them. "There’s a lot of optimism that the Javelins will go a long way toward giving Ukraine the ability to defend itself," said Jim Townsend, a former Defense Department official.

The move is also seen as a sign of growing tensions between the U.S. and Russia. The Trump administration has imposed sanctions on Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine and its involvement in the Donbas conflict in eastern Ukraine.

"This is less of a concern, Wolters said. "But is it less of a concern, Wolters said, noting that additional Javelin comes enough soldiers with the chance to use them for real."