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F16s are here to stay - Ukraine's technological and political leap towards the circle of Western partners



The US has removed the last administrative obstacle to training Ukrainian pilots on F16 aircraft and their subsequent delivery, thus opening a new, even strategic chapter in Ukraine's partnership with the West. The US government's approval to begin training Ukrainian pilots on F16s and the announced delivery when pilots are ready is the end of a long story in which political and strategic interests have been intertwined more than in any war episode thus far. Denmark and the Netherlands will lead the 11-member F16 coalition, and its job will be to quickly but also effectively educate many Ukrainian pilots to operate fourth-generation aircraft. Both governments are pleased with the new role, which they welcomed once Washington gave the green light, not just in terms of training but also regarding the subsequent delivery of the aircraft to Kyiv. "The government has said several times that a donation is a natural next step after training," said Jakob Ellemann-Jensen, Danish Defence Minister. Preparations for this step have been ongoing for a long time. The first Ukrainian pilots will start training by the end of the month, and according to the training concept, they will spend six months training together with ground crews.

Are planes really late?

Regarding the F16, Ukraine and its Western partners have gone through a difficult path from "No" to "Yes", as in the case of the delivery of modern Western tanks. Months were needed for both shifts (slightly longer in the case of American fighter jets), but a decision that few could have imagined just half a year ago is on the table. Even though Ukrainian lobbying exerted substantial pressure on Western allies to deploy new aircraft, this was not the only or even the principal factor in the decision. American fighter jets will not arrive in time to join the current Ukrainian offensive on the outskirts of the occupied territories in the east of the country, which is why the Ukrainian Air Force publicly complained just three days ago. Russia was particularly hostile because of the seemingly long decision to include the F16 in the Ukrainian defence, saying that the

American plane caused a big split in the West.

A new geopolitical fact

The F16s and the Ukrainians who will fly and maintain them are now entering the scene. The barrier has been broken. This is a crucial fact and will influence military and political preparations and everyone participating in the Ukrainian crisis as of last Friday. As of today, Ukraine will not receive ordinary weapons, as Operation F16 was regarded. This is not a case of providing combat equipment that should be used and then forgotten. The F16 represents one of the most complex combat systems delivered to Kyiv, where aircraft is only one, but the most important, part. A new technological generation is provided (suddenly) with the maintenance procedures, the training of the professionals who will operate it, a variety of materials, replacement parts, and software, even though, under normal circumstances, this takes years. Ukraine has been tasked with adapting to a completely new and unique combat doctrine and culture it has had no contact until now, just like its opponent on the battlefield. "The F-16 was designed to help the U.S. Air Force beat the Russian Air Force," stated a recent analysis by Brynn Tannehill for RAND, where the ambiguity of the use of this aircraft is emphasised, particularly on a battlefield such as Ukraine.

Compensation for NATO membership?

In addition to the technological leap that awaits the Ukrainian army in the coming months, Kyiv also must adapt to the defence standards that apply to the closest circle of allies gathered in NATO and several other countries outside the Alliance. The long-lasting aircraft has been produced in around 4,500 units since the mid-1970s and is currently used by 25 armies, with between 2,500 and 3,000 aircraft in use. Ukraine joins this club of the privileged who share not only one type of aircraft, not even the most modern

in its class, but the highest level of warfare that goes with this aircraft. That is why giving the final green light to the decision to send F16s to Ukraine, which US President Joe Biden announced at the G7 summit in Hiroshima last May, is of great political importance for Ukraine and its Western partners. In the simplest terms, the delivery of modern aircraft and the involvement of the Ukrainian Air Force in their use is compensation to Kyiv because its demands for admission to NATO have not yet been fulfilled. This decision is, in fact, the fulfilment of NATO's promise from the summit in Lithuania to continue supporting Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression, but no less significant, providing security guarantees for the period after the end of the aggression. The F16, with its complexity and exclusivity reserved for a narrow circle of the most significant partners, provides Kyiv with the assurance that it will have an instrument to deter Russia from future attempts to repeat aggression. American planes, through European partners, arrive in Ukraine to stay there. The plans for several months of training of pilots and technicians have been calculated so that the use of F16 is optimal, their combat effect at maximum, and participation in Ukrainian armed forces long-term, even after the onset of peace.