Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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After tanks and F16, ATACMS will arrive in Ukraine - has the "silver bullet" been assembled?

US President Joe Biden has finally confirmed the delivery of the ATACMS long-range ballistic missiles to Ukraine. However, they won't be a "silver bullet" in the hands of the Ukrainian defence against Russian aggression.

Neither were F16 fighter jets, whose supply to Ukraine was also approved following high tensions, nor modern combat tanks (Leopard and Challenger), whose delivery caused conflict between Ukraine and its allies.

However, all these modern weapons could constitute one "silver bullet" and lead to Ukrainian supremacy on the front, and the liberation of parts of the country occupied by Russia.

Ukrainians have been demanding ATACMS from the US for more than a year. These missiles have a range of up to 300 kilometres, which provides defence with the ability to attack Russian targets deep behind the front line.

At this moment, their delivery to Ukraine makes perfect sense. The counteroffensive launched by the Ukrainian army during the summer did not significantly move the front line, which is about 1,000 kilometres long.

Every Russian target will be in range

Ukraine must move the Russian defence line and strike significant targets buried deep within the Russian-controlled area. Nearly every Russian military target in the seized parts of Ukraine will be within striking distance of ATACMS.

ATACMS will target everything significant for the Russian operation: command centres, supply lines, traffic hubs, equipment and weapons warehouses, communication and air defence centres.

The Ukrainian bombing of the Russian Black Sea Fleet command post in Sevastopol last Saturday was one of the most successful attacks far behind the front lines.

But it was probably British or French "Storm Shadow" or "SCALP" missiles, used with significant risk because they must be fired from an aircraft, not from the ground.

Because ATACMS is fired from the ground using the HIMARS system, it eliminates this main concern for the Ukrainian army. The HIMARS system has been operating for some time, so the Ukrainians do not require additional training.

Timing helps the Ukrainian defence

The timing of President Biden's decision is critical to Ukraine's defence efforts. The delivery of ATACMS missiles will take "several months", according to US military experts.

This means they will be delivered at a time when bad weather and muddy terrain will limit Ukraine's ground counteroffensive, and allow barely any manoeuvring.

"There's still a reasonable amount of time, probably about 30 to 45 days worth of fighting weather left. Then the rains will come in; it will become very muddy, and it will be very difficult to manoeuvre", General Mark Milley, US joint chiefs chair, told the BBC.

The previous US reluctance regarding the delivery of ATACMS to Ukraine followed the assessment that this could provoke an escalation and a Russian response beyond Ukraine's borders.

Another restriction concerned the limitations on ATACMS use on targets inside Russia's territory, which Kyiv had promised from the start that it would not do. But, after President Biden's decision to deliver missiles to Kyiv, these reasons ceased to be valid.

Russia has been fighting at full capacity

Russia has not shown in any way that it is ready to de-escalate its aggressive operation against Ukraine. Abstention due to a possible harsher Russian response does not make sense because Moscow has been fighting in Ukraine using full force.

This was confirmed following Washington's decision to send ATACMS to Ukraine and after the announcement of the new Russian military budget for 2024 of as much as 6% of GDP, two-thirds higher than last year's, and as much as 3 times the 2021 budget as the final year before the attack on Ukraine.

It is also evident that the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, during his meeting with Joe Biden at the UN and his visit to Washington, gave convincing promises that he would not use ATACMS for attacks on Russia.

The range of this weapon allows actions in all the occupied areas in the east of the country, particularly the Crimean Peninsula, annexed by Russia in 2014.

The first key target after ATACMS's arrival is Crimea, with its massive military installations which provide the majority of support for Russian activities within Ukraine.

A 19 kilometre-long bridge that connects the peninsula with the interior of Russia as the principal logistical artery for supplying the occupying Russian army is also a significant target.

End of hesitation among the allies

The US approval of ATACMS deliveries to Ukraine is also a significant turning point regarding hesitation among Western allies over arms deliveries to Kyiv.

The decision of the US president will definitely have an impact on France, for example, to reconsider its intentions to stop the supply of SCALP missiles, which was discussed this week by Gen. Stéphane Mille, chief of staff of France's air and space force.

The green light from the US regarding ATACMS will ease the way for Ukraine to get the German Taurus cruise missiles, which have a range of 500 kilometres, and Berlin has been reluctant to send them to Kyiv.

With the delivery of ATACMS missiles, Ukraine's wish list for modern Western weapons is practically completed.

This will give Western leaders more scope to defend themselves, each one from their own internal critics, regarding sending military aid to Kyiv, either because of the high costs or the reduction of domestic defence reserves.