



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Bloc of autocracies effectively assists Russia - can Western democracies find an answer?



NATO and Ukrainian officials will meet next week at Kyiv's urgent request over the latest wave of Russian missile and artillery **attacks** at the start of 2024.

Ukraine will ask the Alliance to increase arms deliveries, which would strengthen its air defence, faced with the latest surge of missile attacks on the interior of the country.

Officials from Kyiv will have interlocutors at the level of ambassadors of NATO members, within the format **established** at the NATO summit in Lithuania last July. The formation of the NATO-Ukraine Council was then one of Kyiv's consolation prizes for rejecting its request for Alliance membership.

The forthcoming NATO-Ukraine meeting on Wednesday will have a comforting tone rather than an effective one, given Kyiv's dramatic demands for further arms deliveries.

NATO ambassadors will then listen to the demands of Ukrainian officials and convey them to their governments, and certainly reiterate (on behalf of their governments) their determination to maintain the pace of military support for Ukrainian defence.

However, the capitals will respond to Ukrainian requests with a combination of political calculations, indecision, and even diminished interest.

Hesitation and lack of enthusiasm

The West has long had a problem confirming its rhetorical commitment to unity in support of Ukraine with **practical steps**, primarily in sending money and weapons.

The weak performance of last year's Ukrainian counter-offensive in the areas occupied by the Russian army was only one of the "cooling" factors of the previously strong and unquestionable support.

The duration of an unchanged balance of

power on a thousand-kilometre front line has dampened Western enthusiasm, as did the resulting estimates that there was no prospect of a rapid end to the conflict.

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On the other hand, New Year's mass rocket and artillery attacks by Russian forces on Ukrainian cities showed that the supply channels from friendly countries, primarily North Korea and Iran, have started to work.

National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby stated last Thursday that North Korean weapons were also employed in the most recent Russian missile strikes.

"This is a significant and concerning escalation of the DPRK's support for Russia", said Mr Kirby, emphasising that launchers and ammunition from North Korea were used, with a range of up to 900 kilometres.

This is the first time that the use of North Korean weapons by the Russian military has been verified, following a series of reports that the shipment took place last autumn.

The official also said that Russia wants to acquire short-range missiles from Iran. The US officials estimated in a **statement** to the Wall Street Journal that this acquisition is possible by spring.

Supply channels

The latest wave of Russian missile attacks on Ukraine in late December and early January has verified the functioning of arms supply channels from friendly, renegade countries.

All previous warnings from the West, in connection with numerous reports that during the past year, talks and arms shipments from

the east to Russia were under way, remained unsuccessful.

Russia has had the opportunity to test and practise the use of North Korean missile systems in the past few days, and their use will only increase in the coming weeks and months.

The supply of cheap and efficient Iranian drones has so far been evident, despite Tehran's claims that they are old Russian stocks from before the invasion of Ukraine.



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There is no obstacle to expanding the arsenal that Russia has been acquiring from Iran. Last September, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visited the headquarters of the Iranian Air Force in Tehran, particularly interested in procuring missile systems.

Last December, a Russian military delegation observed a demonstration of ballistic missile use at an Iranian military base.

The start of the year brought an almost definite confirmation that the coalition of autocracies that militarily supports Russia in its invasion of Ukraine will be more effective than the opposing bloc of Western allies of Ukraine.

While there has been a decline in Western military support to Ukraine, and support channels were being questioned, followed by decreasing political attention, it has been

getting more powerful and effective on the opposite side.

Pre-election calculations with aid to Ukraine

The impasse in approving further US aid to Ukraine, caused by opposition from Republicans in the US Congress, indicates that it will be an increasingly difficult obstacle to overcome as the presidential campaign heats up.

The decline in enthusiasm in Europe regarding further support for Ukraine is partly a consequence of the American deadlock and partly of its own internal turmoil, at the root of which are also political calculations.

This year, as many as 13 NATO members will hold elections at various levels, from presidential to parliamentary and municipal, including presidential in the US, parliamentary in the UK and significant municipal in Germany. In addition, elections for the EU Parliament will be held next June in all 27 member states.

Political caution in all those elections will make the current governments calculate their support for Ukraine, either because of opposition from competitors or financial expenses for non-domestic needs, which all politicians avoid in election years.

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The parties in the opposing bloc of autocracies have elections this year - Russia will hold presidential, and Iran and North Korea parliamentary elections. However, this is no obstacle to their lucrative business with weapons.

These regimes do not have the "burden" of the

democratic public, free elections and fair political games on their backs, making their deals more efficient and faster.

The partnership in this triangle will strengthen even more during the year, considering the increased roles of Iran in the Middle Eastern crisis, that is, North Korea in the tensions between China and the US-led Western allies in the Pacific.

Russia's missile attacks on Ukraine this week and last week were a demonstration that the alliance of autocracies is up and running. Military cooperation will gain more strength and expansion this year, not weaken. Can Western democracies provide an adequate response?