Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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The arrival of the F-16 in Ukraine—the moment of truth for great expectations

In the last few days of July, unclear footage circulated on social media, which supporters of Ukraine claimed showed one of the first F-16 fighter jets in action over Ukraine.

There was no confirmation that it was an authentic video. So, this is more about the impatience of supporters of the Ukrainian resistance to see the Ukrainian air force finally using American aircraft against Russian forces.

According to reports from Wednesday citing US and Ukrainian officials, the first F-16s have arrived in Ukraine, so it is only a matter of time before they go into combat. However, few know how much or how soon their presence on the front lines will change the power balance.

The Russian invasion troops' activities confirm that the start of the F-16s flying under the Ukrainian flag is rapidly approaching. They have stepped up their attacks on Ukrainian airports—at least three in July—two in central Ukraine and one in the Odessa region on the Black Sea coast.

Their attacks target the airfield's infrastructure to disable, or at least hinder, F-16 aircraft operations. American fighter jets require long, smooth, and undamaged runways without any scattered material. Once the F-16 deployment begins, airports across Ukraine will continue to be among the most important targets for Russian air strikes.

On the other hand, recent Ukrainian actions look like preparations for the deployment of F-16s in combat. According to the Ukrainian commander-in-chief, General Oleksandr Syrskyi, his forces have intensively targeted Russian air defence systems in the occupied Donetsk region, destroying 20 S-300 systems and 15 radars.

The first actions in a matter of weeks

All the previous announcements suggest that the first Ukrainian Air Force F-16 flights should be expected in August.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced earlier this month that American aircraft donated by European NATO partners will fly over Ukraine "this summer."

“Those jets will be flying in the skies of Ukraine this summer, to make sure that Ukraine can continue to effectively defend itself against the Russian aggression,” said a US diplomat at the NATO public forum as part of the Alliance's summit in Washington.

While the first Ukrainian pilot deployments on F-16 aircraft are likely just a few weeks away, they will not resolve the two main issues for a while: whether they arrived on time, and whether there will be enough of them for the shift Ukraine anticipates.

> “We need 128, this is the fleet, all these numbers our partners have” - Volodymyr Zelensky

Of the total of 80 aircraft provided to Ukraine by four NATO members—Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Norway—the Ukrainians expect a total of 20 by the end of the year. Delivery of the remaining aircraft may take several years.

Despite all the gratitude to the Western allies for the delivery of modern aircraft, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is impatient and even dissatisfied with the number of F-16s he can expect.

“We need 128, this is the fleet, all these numbers our partners have,” said Zelensky during his stay in Washington at the NATO summit.

Kyiv's impatience

But because of his perseverance and that of his administration, F-16s are now gradually making their way into Ukraine. When he started his persuasion campaign 18 months

ago, this goal appeared unachievable, mostly because of resistance from the United States.

The Ukrainians are now even explicitly stating that they will only use the F-16s for defensive operations and defence against Russian air strikes, but not for attacks on targets in Russia, which used to be one of the main conditions for NATO partners to agree to the delivery of the aircraft.

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The speed at which pilots arrive from training will largely determine the dynamics of using the F-16, and thus far, it appears to be significantly less than anticipated. The first Ukrainian pilot completed F-16 training two months ago at Morris Air National Guard Base in Tucson, Arizona, and the others will finish training at that base in late August.

Ukrainian pilots are also training on the F-16 at European NATO member bases. However, reports say that only six of them have completed training so far. Even if they engage as much as possible, this will only allow for ten actions per day, far less than Ukrainian needs and expectations.

Golden bullet

The imminent involvement of F-16s in combat operations will have a strong symbolic and psychological impact on both sides of the front. Both Russian and Ukrainian troops see the start of American aircraft operations as one of the most important events in the course of the war so far—the former as a threat, the latter as an encouragement and incentive to fight.

The nearly two-year wait for the deployment of F-16s on the Ukrainian front coincided with Russian hopes that the project would fail. These hopes were accompanied by messages from the leadership to encourage the troops, who were undoubtedly concerned about the arrival of modern American aircraft.

It's not going to be the golden bullet that all of a sudden they have F-16s and now they're going to go out and gain air superiority - Gen. James Hecker

"These aircraft will be destroyed, like other types of weapons supplied by NATO countries to Ukraine," said the head of Russian diplomacy, Sergei Lavrov, in May, and this rhetoric has not changed to this day.

Everyone involved is eagerly awaiting the start of F-16 combat operations, which will undoubtedly bring new developments to the deadlocked front, even if few dare to speak of a turning point.

General James Hecker, commander of the US Air Force in Europe, undoubtedly sees the arrival of the F-16s in Ukraine as an important step in the fight against the Russian armed forces, but at the same time warns against exaggerated expectations.

"It's not going to be the golden bullet that all of a sudden they have F-16s and now they're going to go out and gain air superiority," said General Hecker.