

The Clamour for Tanks Shows that the Tank Has Not Lost Its Effectiveness

If the tanks succeed, then victory follows,” is what Heinz Guderian the famous German General who also led the Panzers across the Dniipier River at Kopys during World War II had once stated. However, since the beginning of the Ukraine War, most analysts have been talking about the ‘demise’ of the tank, and questioning their centrality in light of the proclaimed success of the drones, Javelins, NLAWs and other anti-tank weapons. In fact, while condemning the brutality of the war in Ukraine, Pope Francis in an interview with the Italian newspaper Corriere Della Sera said Russians are discovering that their “tanks are useless”. Ironically, we now see a clamour by Ukraine to obtain the latest tanks, with the aim that victory will follow.

The onset of the winter has now provided the NATO a narrow window to arm Ukraine to repel an anticipated Russian springtime offensive. They are therefore moving fast to give them sophisticated weapons, they had earlier refused for fear of provoking Russia.

The sense of urgency over sending more powerful weapons reflects the grim standoff on the battlefield in Eastern Ukraine, where the Russians are trying to seize the city of Bakhmut and the surrounding area, but they have only made incremental gains. Though they have been successful in Soledar a salt mine town inhabited by 10,000 people.

Over the last few weeks, one barrier after another has fallen, starting with an agreement by the United States in late December to send the Patriot Air Defence System. That was followed by a German commitment to provide a Patriot Missile Battery, and then, France, Germany and the United States each promised to armoured fighting vehicles mainly the Bradley’s to the front line for the first time. [i]

Now the spotlight is on the induction of modern Western tanks with its protection and rapid offensive capabilities to the growing list of powerful weapons being sent Ukraine’s way. Until now, Ukraine has relied primarily on the Soviet-era T-72 tanks with a 125mm smooth bore gun. These also included T-72 tanks given by NATO countries that were members of the Warsaw Pact. In fact Poland has given them 260 T-72 tanks with various upgrades. This figure was confirmed by the Polish President Andrzej Duda during the discussion panel “Defending Europe” within the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos.

Under the so-called “Ringtausch,” a swap scheme Eastern NATO partners supplied the Ukrainian Army with Soviet-era tanks like the T-72 in exchange for the Leopard 2 from Germany, the exchange rate was not one for one. However, most of Ukraine’s tank fleet has been destroyed and has suffered wear and tear due to the prolonged conflict, and they are running low on ammunition, which is incompatible with Western amunitions.

The impasse over tanks now seems to be ending with the UK announcing that it would be sending 14 Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine. Making it the first country to send Western-made battle tanks to Kyiv, while countries like Poland, Finland and the Baltic states have also openly endorsed re-exporting Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine from their own stocks, but they require Germany’s permission to do so. Probably this decision was aimed at pushing both the US and Germany to provide tanks which they have in far greater number and in much better shape than the Challengers held by the UK.

President Zelenskyy thanked the UK for its support, saying the decision would “not only strengthen us on the battlefield, but also send the right signal to other partners.” “Somebody always has to set an example,” is what he told the Polish state-run broadcaster TVP Info. [ii]

Russia reacted with fury, saying that all the units that the UK plans to send “will burn” and ‘do nothing to alter the outcome of its nearly year long war’. Vladimir Solovyev a presenter on the Rossiya 1 State television channel said the UK had “de facto entered the war” with its move to supply the units. “I consider Britain is now a legitimate target for us,” he said.[iii]

While Ukraine has been requesting sophisticated tanks since the start of the war, the push to satisfy those pleas gained speed as the British and Polish governments publicly urged a change in the Western alliance’s stance. While the British have agreed to send a small number of tanks, the Polish government said it would happily send some of its Leopard tanks, though would need Germany’s permission.

The increased pressure was aimed at persuading Germany’s Chancellor Olaf Scholz to authorize the export to Ukraine of German-made Leopard 2 tanks held by other NATO allies or provide the tanks. Tanks are among the most coveted weapon platform, and if inducted in significant numbers, they would substantially increase Ukraine’s offensive capabilities.

However, it was felt that Chancellor Scholz and his party wanted “to keep a relationship with Russia and with Putin for the future, and thinks that if he gives Ukraine the best Germany has, Russia will perceive this as breaking a special relationship, But pressure from allies is becoming too strong.”[iv]

Germany had been tight-lipped about tanks despite increasing pressure, and criticism. However, German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall (which makes the main gun for the Leopard 2) tried to manage mounting expectations of a decision on tanks, with the chief executive of the firm telling a German newspaper that Leopard 2s from Germany’s industrial reserves would not be ready for any kind of delivery before 2024.

In Ukraine, officials say Armoured Fighting Vehicles will play a key role in battles for control of the fiercely contested towns and cities in the Eastern provinces. Ukraine’s, General Valery Zaluzhny, said ‘it needs some 300 Western tanks and about 600 Western Armoured Fighting Vehicles to make a difference’.[v] There is no doubt that the tank gives a sense of invincibility on the battlefield.

The fact is that tanks are logistically intensive. Moreover, the logistics for each type of tank varies not only as per the type of ammunition fired but also the fuel. Logistic sustenance thus plays a critical role in their employment. Then there is also the issue of maintenance and repairs both of which requires a huge inventory. There is not only a high cost involved in maintaining them but even a higher degree of skillsets required to man and operate a tank to optimise its effectiveness.

For example while the T-72 and T-90 have a 125mm smooth bore gun, the Challenger 2 has a 120 mm rifled gun and the Leopard 2 has a 120 mm smooth bore gun manufactured by Rheinmetall. ” The US operates the M1 A2 which also has a 120 mm smooth bore gun. The quantities of which far outstrip the Challenger and Leopards tanks but they consume the most fuel and are driven by gas turbine engines.

A handful of Challenger 2s, taken from the UK’s existing fleet of 227, would not in itself make much difference on the battlefield. But it would be the first time any Western country has

agreed to send its own heavy armour to Ukraine. However, the Challengers have maintenance issues, and the UK would be hard-pressed to replenish its stocks.

Altering the balance of forces in Eastern Ukraine is needed to break the stalemate in the war, and modern Western battle tanks and other combat vehicles could tip the balance. Without tanks, a powerful component of ground warfare, it is unlikely that Ukraine will be able to win back significant amounts of territory.

Ms Laura K Cooper, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence, had said at a briefing that “we absolutely agree that Ukraine does need tanks.” “This is the right time for Ukraine to take advantage of its capabilities, to change the dynamic on the battlefield,” she said.

Plans to send German-made Leopard tanks and UK Challengers to the front lines in the Donbas have been greeted by Ukrainian forces, who have been taking heavy casualties in recent weeks, around Bakhmut.

“There were very heavy losses. It’s very pitiful. It’s hard,” said an officer in charge of repairing tanks for the 24th Mechanised Brigade. He said the current deadlock would not be broken unless foreign tanks arrived in significant numbers. “We’ll be stuck here. We need these Western tanks to stop Russia’s aggression. With infantry, covered by tanks, we’ll win for sure,” he said. [vi]

Battle tanks designed by NATO countries such as those Challenger 2 and Leopard 2 would provide Ukrainian forces with better protection, and more accurate firepower.

However, they would not provide an instantaneous boost in terms of combat capability because the Ukrainian forces would need to be trained to use any tanks supplied by the West, a process that is likely to take several weeks, if not longer. Conversion is a long drawn out process focused at individual level, graduating to crew integration, sub unit training and thereafter integrated and joint training. There is also the issue of maintenance and repairs both of which have their own complexities.

The issue of Leopard 2 tanks was on top of the discussions when officials from Ukraine and allied countries met at a “Ukraine Defense Contact Group” meeting on 20 January in Ramstein, Germany, to coordinate efforts to provide further military aid to Ukraine. But the German Defence Minister, Boris Pistorius, said that, “we still cannot say when a decision will be taken, and what the decision will be, when it comes to the Leopard tank”.

On 21 January Ukraine denounced the “global indecision” of its allies in providing heavy-duty modern tanks, saying “today’s indecision is killing more of our people.” “Every day of delay is the death of Ukrainians. Think faster,” tweeted presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak.

However, based on the pressure, both the US and Germany have now agreed to send 14 M1A2 Abrams and Leopard 2 tanks respectively to Ukraine. This move signifies a major step as for the first time the West will now be equipping Ukrainian forces with major offensive capabilities. However, a discerning observer will realise that these numbers are only symbolic and will not make major difference in the outcome. The challenges of varied composition of equipment and that too in insufficient numbers is complex.

The problem of training the crews to man this equipment their logistic sustenance and integration are all extremely complicated. For example, the communication between the

Western and Eastern equipment will itself be a problem and then is the issue of different types of fuel and ammunition.

While there have been narratives regarding the future of war based on the emergence of high technology weapon systems and futuristic visions of battles contested in cyberspace and by other non-kinetic means, it is unlikely that an outcome of a conflict can be controlled without the use of force. Violence continues to remain the dominant force. The fact remains that to be able to constantly create criticalities for the enemy in all phases of operations, you need the tank and it has not lost its effectiveness. There is no doubt that in war, violence still dominates.

There is no denying the fact that the premature obituary of the tanks due to the manner in which the Russians used them in the initial phases of the operation. Having occupied centre-stage of land warfare since its induction over a 100 years ago, the demand for tanks has proven that its era is still not over.

Endnotes

[i] Dan Sabbagh and Philip Oltermann, US and Germany agree to send infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine, The Guardian, 05 January 27, 2023

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/05/germany-tanks-ukraine-russia-war>

[ii] Other countries may follow Poland's example on tanks, says Ukraine's Zelenskiy, The Reuters, 13 January 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/other-countries-may-follow-polands-example-tanks-says-ukraines-zelenskiy-2023-01-12/>

[iii] Will the West deliver the tanks Ukraine is asking for? The Al Jazeera, 16 January 27, 2023 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/16/will-the-west-deliver-the-tanks-ukraine-is-asking-for>

[iv] Lara Jakes and Steven Erlanger, Western Tanks Appear Headed to Ukraine, Breaking Another Taboo, The New York Times, 12 January 2023,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/world/europe/ukraine-western-tanks.html>

[v] Ibid

[vi] Andrew Harding, Ukraine war: Bakhmut defenders plea for Western tanks, The BBC, 17 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64294653>

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