Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 19.11.2024 www.osw.waw.pl

Ukraine gets ‘green light’ to attack Russian territory with Western-made missiles

Andrzej Wilk

On 17 November, Western media outlets including *The New York Times* and *Le Figaro* reported that Ukraine had received approval to use US-made ATACMS ballistic missiles and British/French-made Storm Shadow/SCALP cruise missiles against targets on Russian territory. The next morning, these outlets published more nuanced reports, quoting US, UK, and French officials who largely refrained from commenting on this issue and stressed that such an authorisation remained under consideration. Some media organisations reported that the approval related to rocket and missile strikes in Russia’s Kursk Oblast. US outlets emphasised that the goal was to deter North Korea from joining the conflict on Russia’s side, after some sources indicated that North Korean troops had been deployed to this part of Russia. On 19 November, Brian A. Nichols, an advisor to the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, confirmed that President Joe Biden had approved Ukraine’s use of US-made missiles against Russia but provided no further details.

This has led to widespread confusion, with little attention given to the fact that ATACMS ballistic missiles have already been used to strike Russian territory, even in the absence of official approval. This confusion has been further compounded by the frequent misuse of terms such as ‘long-range missiles’ and ‘deep strikes’, which refer to capabilities that Ukraine has never received from the West. If the ‘green light’ for Ukraine to strike Russian territory applies solely to the missile types that have already been supplied, this will only marginally enhance Ukrainian defensive capabilities.

Commentary

- **The media landscape is characterised by confusion surrounding reports from US outlets. Washington’s approval for Ukraine to use ATACMS appears to confirm an existing practice; however, it could also indicate a qualitative and quantitative expansion.** Last spring, Ukraine received US permission to strike targets in Russia’s border regions using US-supplied weapons, a decision that came amid a surge in destructive attacks on Kharkiv. Ultimately, the US government stated that this approval did not extend to ATACMS; however, some sources claim that they have been used at least once to strike targets in the Belgorod Oblast. Despite the lack of formal authorisation from Washington, these missiles were reportedly fired last August to destroy bridges over the Seim River in the Kursk Oblast, in an attack aimed at severing part of the Russian grouping of forces from its logistical support; this was confirmed by video footage. Officially, Ukraine used ATACMS for the first time on 19 November to

strike an ammunition depot in the Bryansk Oblast.

- **The terms 'long-range missiles' and 'deep strikes', widely used in media reports, are inconsistent with standard military terminology.** Ukraine has never received Western-made long-range missiles capable of conducting deep strikes into Russian territory. The missiles supplied by the West to date have a maximum range of 300 km (ATACMS Block 1A), which is the minimum threshold for short-range ballistic missiles (300–1,000 km). British/French-made Storm Shadow/SCALP cruise missiles supplied to Ukraine have a range of approximately 250 km, while the basic version of the ATACMS (Block 1), delivered to Ukraine in the largest quantities (up to several hundred units), has a range of 165 km. Ukraine would gain the ability to conduct effective deep strikes into Russian territory if Western countries supplied it with a greater number of missiles with a range of at least 1,000 km. The US-made JASSM-ER cruise missile is relatively accessible and could be adapted to Ukraine's needs within a reasonably short timeframe. The Ukrainian armed forces already possess compatible launch platforms for these missiles – the F-16 fighter jets. Ukraine has periodically conducted strikes on Russia's deeper rear positions using drones with ranges exceeding 1,000 km. These are Ukrainian-designed drones built from components sourced from the West. However, owing to their limited effectiveness, they primarily serve a psychological purpose.
- **Ukraine's limited ability to strike targets on Russian territory stems not only from the range of the weapons it has received but also from their limited numbers, making it impossible to conduct large-scale attacks similar to those carried out by Russian forces.** Ukraine has conducted only a few attacks per month using ATACMS ballistic missiles and Storm Shadow/SCALP cruise missiles, primarily targeting the immediate rear of Russian forces in the occupied territories; with only some achieving tangible results. In contrast, Russia has conducted similar strikes almost daily, benefitting from a much larger stockpile of ballistic and cruise missiles and a far broader range of missile types tailored for various missions. Expanding Ukraine's capacity to strike Russian regions bordering Ukraine using ATACMS missiles, rather than relying primarily on drones, would, however, complicate Russian logistics and air force operations in those areas.
- **The effectiveness of Ukraine's use of Western-made missiles to strike targets on Russian territory is closely tied to Western support in the broader field of targeting.** Most of the successes achieved by Ukraine's armed forces with the use of Western-made ballistic and cruise missiles would not have been possible without the capabilities of the US and UK. These countries have provided Ukraine with reconnaissance and attack guidance; some sources suggest they have even assisted Ukraine in planning attacks, particularly the UK. This is reflected in the sharply reduced effectiveness of Ukrainian strikes on Crimea after Ukraine's access to US reconnaissance was reportedly limited following Russia's alleged downing of a US Global Hawk reconnaissance drone near Crimea's coast last June. Since then, Ukraine has conducted several strikes on the relatively vulnerable Kerch Strait Bridge, including using ATACMS, but all these attacks have failed.
- **The latest media reports have not yet prompted the UK, France, and Germany to change their positions on authorising strikes deep into Russia with the use of British, French,**

and German missiles. In all likelihood, Storm Shadow/SCALP missiles have so far not been used beyond Ukraine's internationally recognised territory. British media have previously suggested that Washington has been blocking such use of these weapons. Britain is now exercising caution in public statements after both the previous and current UK governments experienced reputational setbacks over this issue. Then-Foreign Secretary David Cameron hinted at British approval for such strikes last May, followed by similar remarks from the country's new Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, last July. However, both statements were later denied. Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron has described the US decision as entirely appropriate, but Paris has so far also adhered to the 'red lines' outlined by Washington. Germany's federal government remains opposed to providing Ukraine with long-range Taurus cruise missiles, which are currently in the Bundeswehr's arsenal. Both Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Defence Minister Boris Pistorius have refrained from commenting on the most recent US media reports.

- **In response to the US reports, Russia initially reiterated its threats against the US and other Western countries, but provided no specifics. This likely reflected its expectation that any decisions on this matter would not be fully implemented and that the incoming Trump administration would reverse them. However, later, it adopted a much harsher tone in a bid to deter the US and its Western allies from increasing their support for Ukraine, threatening to potentially use its non-strategic nuclear weapons.** On 19 November, Russia released a revised version of the document entitled 'The Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence'. The Kremlin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, stated that Moscow would perceive Ukraine's use of Western-supplied missiles armed with conventional warheads against Russian territory as an act of aggression that meets the conditions for Russia's potential nuclear retaliation.

Table. Types of ballistic and cruise missiles supplied to Ukraine by Western countries

Missile type	Range	Warhead	Guidance	Launch platform	Purpose
Storm Shadow/ SCALP	250–550 km	450 kg,- multi-stage (shaped charge follow by unitary)	Inertial + GPS + thermal	Aircraft: primarily Su-24	Precision strikes against fortified high-value targets, such as command posts and aircraft shelters
ATACMS Block I (M39)	165 km	Cluster – 950 bomblets	Inertial	M270 MLRS and HIMARS launchers	Strikes on lightly armoured targets, including command posts and ammunition/fuel depots, across a wide area immediately behind the front line
ATACMS Block IA (M39A1)	300 km	Cluster – 300 bomblets	Inertial + GPS	M270 MLRS and HIMARS launchers	Strikes on lightly armoured targets, including command posts and ammunition/fuel depots, across a wide area behind the front line
ATACMS M48 or M57*	270 or 300 km	214 kg, unitary	Inertial + GPS	M270 MLRS and HIMARS launchers	Precision strikes on command posts and similar objectives behind the front line

* It is not known which version was delivered.

Compilation: Jacek Tarociński.