

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 14, 2023

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Austin,

A year after Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, we've seen the courage and skill Ukrainians have shown on the battlefield defending their homeland. At the same time, Russia has shown itself to be far weaker than it professed and is facing setbacks as a result of international sanctions as well as its own poor operational planning and performance. An important part of this dynamic has been the success that the United States has had leading our allies in support of Ukraine, working quickly to get them the military and humanitarian assistance they need.

We are now at a critical juncture in the conflict. And it's imperative that the United States continue to carefully assess what capabilities we can provide to ensure Ukraine is able to defeat the Russians on the battlefield.

After speaking with U.S., Ukrainian, and foreign leaders working to support Ukraine at the Munich Security Conference last month, we believe the U.S. needs to take a hard look at providing F-16 aircraft to Ukraine. This would be a significant capability that could prove to be a game changer on the battlefield. We are encouraged to see two Ukrainian pilots visit Morris Air National Guard Base in Tucson for skills assessment, including in an F-16 simulator, this week. This is a critical step in gauging the readiness of Ukrainian pilots to receive Western 4th generation fighters, but there are a number of other important factors that must be evaluated and considered.

As the Pentagon continues analysis on the possibility of providing F-16s to Ukraine, we want to raise the following factors, and request your response, no later than March 17, 2023.

On priority:

1. Pentagon officials have indicated that top requests of the U.S. and its allies have not included fighter aircraft. What priority ranking have these aircraft been given?

On operational impact:

2. EUCOM's analysis on the impact of providing fighter aircraft has changed over the course of the conflict. Did the recent U.S. tabletop exercises in Wiesbaden Germany assess or consider the impact new combat air power could have on the current conflict? Please explain the command's current analysis.
3. What new capability would the F-16 provide to Ukraine's Air Force? Can they support different or additional ordnance from currently available aircraft? Are there scenarios in the current conflict that could benefit from capabilities of the F-16, which are superior to that of their Soviet era aircraft such as the suppression of enemy air defenses?
4. If so, do Ukrainian pilots have experience in conducting this type of mission? And are there alternative means of providing this capability? What limitations would they have?
5. How quickly do you assess it would be possible to train Ukrainian Air Force pilots on the F-16 for uses relevant to the current conflict? What would longer-term training look like?
6. Considering long-term goals for Russian deterrence, does the Department believe F-16s would be an important component of a modernized Ukrainian Air Force?

On sourcing the aircraft:

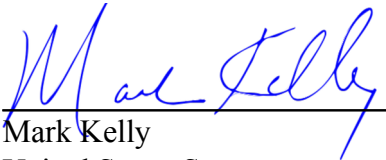
7. What aircraft would be available to transfer if a decision is made to provide F-16s – either new production or from current U.S. or allied inventory?
8. Has the Department assessed the possibility of restoring retired F-16s?
9. Has the Department evaluated the possibility of facilitating transfers from allied countries' inventories?

On training and maintenance:

10. Would Ukraine be able to address maintenance and sustainment needs connected with the aircraft if training were provided? What U.S. or allied support would be necessary?
11. Has the Department identified a potential training location for foreign pilots in the event of a decision to transfer fighter aircraft?

We thank you for your prompt consideration of this inquiry. Putin has made a critical misjudgment, but at the same time, he shows no sign of acknowledging this and withdrawing from Ukraine. If anything, we expect additional Russian offensives this spring. In order to restore peace and security in Europe, the United States must continue working with our allies to continuously assess how we can best support Ukraine's efforts and ensure Putin loses this war.

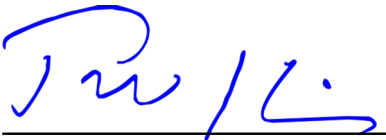
Sincerely,



Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Ted Budd
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Tommy Tuberville
United States Senator



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator

cc: General Christopher Cavoli, Commander, U.S. European Command, and Supreme Allied Commander Europe