

# Thanks but no tanks: Is Australia stingy with weapons for Ukraine?

*Critics say the Albanese government can do better than provide Vietnam-era troop carriers for Ukraine.*

[Andrew Tillett](#), *Foreign affairs, Australian Financial Review* Jun 30, 2023

In December 2021, Australian bureaucrats began preparing for war.

A month earlier, the US and Ukrainian governments had reported an unusual build-up of Russian troops on Ukraine's borders. While Kremlin mouthpiece Dmitry Peskov insisted "Russia has never hatched, is not hatching and will never hatch any plans to attack anyone", no one was buying his denials.



Australian M113 armoured personnel carriers being prepared for transport to Ukraine.

In Canberra, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade convened an interdepartmental committee on Ukraine, bringing together officials from Defence, Home Affairs, the Federal Police, and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources for regular updates on the developing crisis. A week before Russia re-invaded Ukraine on February 24, the committee was upgraded to a full-blown emergency taskforce and its membership widened, with daily briefings.

The proactive approach served the Morrison government well, as requests for aid from Kyiv to then defence minister Peter Dutton began to flow days before Vladimir Putin launched his "special military operation".

Within a week, the government had approved a \$4.2 million donation to buy non-lethal military equipment and medical supplies, and a \$70 million package including missiles and ammunition, amid fears Volodymyr Zelensky would be toppled within days.

## What Australia has provided Ukraine...



### M113 ARMoured PERSONNEL CARRIER

- Entered Australian service: 1964
- Number donated: 56
- Crew: two with up to 10 infantry
- Top speed: 66km/h
- Range: 550km
- Weapons: machine gun

All-terrain troop carrier dates back to Vietnam War and earmarked for retirement from 2025.



### BUSHMASTER PROTECTED MOBILITY VEHICLE

- Entered service: 2005
- Number donated: 90
- Crew: one, with up to nine infantry
- Top speed: >100 km/h
- Range: 800km
- Weapons: machine gun

Ukraine used to good effect with troops rapidly exploiting breakthroughs in Russian lines.

### M777 TOWED HOWITZER

- Entered service: 2010
- Number donated: six
- Rate of fire: two to five rounds per minute
- Range: 30km

Lightweight artillery gun that fires 155mm shells to protect troops during advances or retreats.



SOURCE: FINANCIAL REVIEW

But almost 18 months later, the Albanese government is fending off claims of stinginess when it comes to providing military aid.

From February to May last year, the Morrison government provided \$283.3 million in aid, including 40 Bushmaster and 14 M113 troop carriers. Since Anthony Albanese came to power, Australia has provided \$326.7 million in aid, including another 50 Bushmasters and 42 M113s.

The headline figure may seem impressive, and Defence Minister Richard Marles claimed this week Australia was the second most generous non-NATO supporter of Ukraine after [unveiling a fresh \\$100 million package](#).

The Kiel Institute for the World Economy, which has been tracking commitments, showed that, as of February, Australia had actually offered the same amount of military aid (400 million euros) as France, a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The figures will be updated next week.

But as Ukraine embarks on its long-awaited counter-offensive, some shortcomings have emerged.

The last lot of Bushmasters were promised in October and Albanese and Marles rebuffed Ukrainian pleas for Hawkei armoured four-wheel-drives and M1 Abrams tanks. The army argues braking issues with the Hawkeis prevent their deployment and also claims it would be difficult to support the bespoke Bendigo-built vehicle on the battlefield.



Bushmaster troop carriers have made an important contribution to Ukraine’s war effort. **Getty**

And while the US has made some of its M1 Abrams available to Ukraine’s “tank coalition”, sources say the army is unwilling to part with its tanks despite the fact they are slated for replacement with an updated model from next year.

Instead, Australia’s offer of M113 armoured personnel carriers is attracting scorn because of the age of the vehicles. Albanese and Marles doubled the number gifted to Ukraine to 56 this week.

### ... and what Ukraine wants

#### Hawkei protected mobility vehicle

- Entered service: 2021
- Crew: up to five
- Top speed: 130km/h
- Range: 600km
- Weapons: can be fitted with machine gun, grenade launcher or surface-to-air missile



The army has blamed braking issues for its refusal to provide the Bendigo-made vehicles

#### M1 Abrams tank

- Entered service: 2007
- Crew: four
- Top speed: >60km/h
- Range: >400km
- Weapons: 120mm small bore cannon, three machine guns



The US is providing M1 tanks, Australia has refused despite replacement next year.

SOURCE: FINANCIAL REVIEW

The M113 entered service during the Vietnam War. While they have been upgraded over the years, Strategic Analysis Australia director Michael Shoebridge, a former Defence official, accused the Albanese government of giving Ukraine vehicles otherwise “destined for the boneyard”.

But former army major-general Mick Ryan says the M113s still have some utility, pointing out that hundreds have been delivered to Ukraine from other countries, including 300 from the US alone.

“They’re not first-rate 21st century fighting vehicles but as we say in the army, a second-class ride is better than a first-class walk,” Ryan says. “[Riding in them] is like being in a washing machine at times but this is a military operation, not a five-star safari. It’s about getting the soldier as quickly and as safely as you can into the fight.”

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Ryan shares concerns, though, that the Albanese government is lowballing Ukraine on aid, saying there is a “gap between rhetoric and action”.

“We’re finding every excuse to do the minimum required,” he says. “This doesn’t seem to be a government that is fundamentally serious about national security besides visiting the South Pacific a lot.”

Ryan is particularly scathing over the stonewalling on Hawkeis, especially in light of Defence claims in 2020 that the braking issue had been resolved.

“To be honest the Ukrainians have demonstrated enormous innovation in using vehicles in ways they were not designed for. If we can’t sort out the brakes then give them to the Ukrainians to do it,” Ryan says.



Anthony Albanese and Richard Marles, pictured on Monday with Penny Wong, are defending the level of military support for Ukraine. **Alex Ellinghausen**

The opposition has tapped into the criticism, saying that the military aid Australia is now offering is too little, too late in a break with bipartisanship.

“I’m disgusted with this appallingly miserable package to support Ukraine and then spruiking a budget [surplus] off the back of those increased commodity prices because of that war,” deputy Liberal leader Sussan Ley told Sky News this week.

One of the difficulties confronting Defence is that the government has not given it a fresh infusion of funds. Marles confirmed that the \$100 million cost of this week's package had effectively come out of Defence's existing budget and resources.

This is on top of the failure to lift defence spending over the forward estimates to meet the recommendations of the Defence Strategic Review, despite the alleged need for urgency for an arms build-up.

It's the classic story: Defence being asked to stretch its dollars further. The M113 encapsulates the dilemma. The ageing M113s were due to be pensioned off from 2025 but their replacement, the infantry fighting vehicle, was gutted in the DSR, with the number to be built slashed to 129 from 450.

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While the government has signed a contract to build new Bushmasters in Bendigo to replace the ones gifted to Ukraine, sources say army chiefs are reluctant to give up vehicles without certainty they will be replaced.

Marles rejected criticism the Albanese government was not doing enough.

"Ukraine is certainly very grateful for the announcement that we made [on Monday], and it comes off the back of three previous announcements since we came to power, and announcements prior to that made by the former government," he said.

"In total, Australia's now committed \$610 million worth of military assistance in support of Ukraine. Most of that has happened since Labor came to power," he said. "And we've been roughly doing an announcement every four months or so, and we expect that that will continue for as long as that's required."



A RAAF No.1 Squadron F/A-18 Super Hornet.

One decision that will soon be across Marles' desk is whether the RAAF's retired F/A-18 Classic Hornet fighter jets should be made available to Ukraine.

An American private aerospace company, RAVN, owns the rights to dispose of the planes, with talks under way between Australia, the US and Ukraine over selling them to Kyiv. An assessment report by

RAVN this week found the 14 best examples of the planes had the [equivalent of two years' flying time on their airframes](#).

While Russia's military planning in part has been sweating on war fatigue in the West, the Australian people overwhelmingly remain willing to come to Ukraine's aid. The Lowy Institute's annual poll, released last week, found 76 per cent of people support providing military assistance to Ukraine, down slightly from 83 per cent.

How long that lasts will depend on a variety of factors: how much territory Ukraine can recapture in its counteroffensive amid suggestions progress has been slow; whether Putin continues to teeter after the shortlived mutiny by warlord Yevgeny Prigozhin; and the need to address more pressing security challenges – namely China – closer to home.

A souring economy may also see Australians turn more insular, putting pressure on the government to focus more on domestic matters.

An auditor-general's report, released on Thursday, largely gave the Defence Department a tick for how it had delivered military aid to Ukraine. But it pointed out Defence had relied on "business as usual" processes because of the need for a rapid response.

The question the Albanese government needs to answer is whether "business as usual" is good enough.