

Australia has mothballed a \$550m tank fleet. Ukraine would like a word



By [Matthew Knott](#), Sydney Morning Herald, September 20, 2024

Ukrainian soldiers could be given retired Australian battle tanks in their fight against invading Russian forces, as the Albanese government works with the Biden administration on a plan to send them to the battlefield.

This masthead can reveal that, after previously appearing to rule out providing tanks to Ukraine, the government is considering its request and working with the US to make the transfer happen.

One of the nation's longest serving army chiefs joined calls for Australia to provide its old tanks to Ukraine, saying he was baffled why the decision to send them hadn't been made already.



An Australian Army M1A1 Abrams tank during an exercise at Puckapunyal in Victoria in 2018. *Credit: Australian Defence Force*

The July retirement of the 59 American-made M1A1 Abrams tanks, which were never used in combat and are being replaced by newer models from this month, has focused attention on whether they will be put into storage, disposed of or given to Ukraine.

This masthead [revealed](#) this week that the Ukrainian-Australian community was angry that decommissioned Australian military equipment, including long-range patrol vehicles and inflatable boats, was being auctioned online to motoring enthusiasts instead of being sent to Ukraine.

Bought for \$550 million in 2004, the heavily armoured tanks weigh 63 tonnes each and are equipped with cannons and machine guns.

Ukraine has made formal requests for Australia to join the US, United Kingdom, Poland and Germany by donating tanks to help defend its nation. Earlier this year the government buried its fleet of MRH-90 Taipan helicopters rather than provide them to Ukraine as requested.

Peter Leahy, who served as army chief from 2003 to 2008 and oversaw the introduction of the M1A1 tanks, said: "I'm bemused why the tanks aren't on offer to Ukraine.

"Although we are retiring them, they are a very competent tank, they should be well-maintained, there are spare parts available and the Ukrainians are very keen to get them."

Leahy, the director of the University of Canberra's National Security Institute, said: "We should put them on a ship and get them over there... I certainly wouldn't want to see the bloody things destroyed or buried."

After insisting in February that sending tanks to Ukraine was "not on the agenda", Defence Minister Richard Marles has softened his rhetoric, raising Ukrainian advocates' hopes.

"There are a range of capabilities that we are talking about with the government of Ukraine," Marles said last month.

Government sources, who were not authorised to speak publicly, said Marles was exploring how the tank shipment could occur under the US defence export rules that apply because the vehicles are American-made.

Vasyl Myroshnychenko, Ukraine's ambassador to Australia, said that tanks "are an essential part of our land defence, and our soldiers both need and want them".

"If Australia makes them available to Ukraine either directly, or indirectly through the US, we will gladly accept them and put them to good use," he said.

Stressing that Ukraine was grateful for the \$1.1 billion in military assistance Australia has provided since the war began, he said: "All Ukraine is asking for is the opportunity to use military equipment Australia no longer needs."

Opposition foreign affairs spokesman Simon Birmingham said: "Labor's decision to bury rather than gift the retiring Taipan helicopters baffled many and must not be repeated with the Abrams tanks."

Former senior Defence Department official Michael Shoebridge said: "These tanks are still in good shape. The Ukrainians are fighting a war for national survival so we should get them there as soon as we can."