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David Axe Ukraine has its back to the wall. Time for Australia to step in

American-made tanks gathering dust Down Under could rearm the battered 47th Brigade



David Axe
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Australia has old tanks it doesn't use any more. Ukraine wants them.

So what's stopping Canberra from shipping those 59 surplus M-1 Abrams to Kyiv?

Politics, of course. But if the Australians can muster the will to donate their M-1s and the Americans can find it in them to approve the deal, it's obvious what

the Ukrainians would do with them. They would reinforce the survivors of the 31 ex-US M-1s the Americans donated to Ukraine last year.

The fast-growing Australian army acquired its M-1A1s in 2004 to replace old German-made tanks. Twenty years later in July, it retired the M-1A1s – having never deployed them for combat – and began replacing them with newer American-made M-1A2s.

The old M-1A1s are in storage. Ukrainian officials have been inquiring about them since at least February. And according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the government in Canberra is increasingly open to donating them.

“The government is considering its request and working with the US to make the transfer happen,” the newspaper reported last week.

A lot could go wrong. Senior Australian officials could veto the transfer over fears of escalating tensions between Australia and Russia. The United States holds the export license for the tanks and could reject a proposed transfer on the same grounds. Far less likely, Ukrainian officials could inspect the decades-old tanks and politely decline the donation.

Political factors in Canberra and Washington DC are the likeliest obstacles, although there could be some minor logistical issues. While both the Australian tanks and Ukraine’s current M-1s are the same basic model – the 67-ton, four-person M-1A1 Situational Awareness export version with tungsten and steel armour, digital fire controls and a 120mm smoothbore main gun – the Australian and ex-American tanks do have slightly different equipment fits the Ukrainians might choose to resolve. The Ukrainian army has also developed boutique add-on armour kits for its M-1s and would probably want to install them on any additional Abrams it gets.

If everything works out for the Ukrainians and they get those 59 tanks, they almost certainly will assign many of them to the Ukrainian army’s 47th Mechanized Brigade. The 47th Brigade is the army’s main operator of American-made armoured vehicles – and the *sole* operator of Ukraine’s M-1s.

The 47th Brigade is a powerful unit. And it’s *because* it’s a powerful unit that the Ukrainian general staff kept it in combat nonstop for 15 months – a long time for any formation. When Ukrainian troops launched their ambitious but ultimately disappointing counteroffensive in southern Ukraine in June 2023,

the 47th was at the vanguard – and suffered heavy losses as it got bogged down in dense minefields.

The brigade fought in the south for four months and, by October, was badly in need of rest. But Russian forces went on the attack in the east that month, so commanders in Kyiv ordered the 47th to redeploy eastward and blunt the attack.

The brigade fought a desperate rearguard action for another 10 months. By the time the general staff was finally ready to let the 47th Mechanized take a break, the unit had lost scores of its roughly 100 M-2 Bradley infantry combat vehicles and around half of its 31 M-1 tanks.

The Americans obligingly sent another 200 M-2s to make good the 47th Brigade's losses and potentially also equip another unit. But for reasons no one in the US government has adequately explained, they *didn't* send more M-1s – despite the Pentagon having literally thousands of the old tanks in storage.

With 59 ex-Australian Abrams, the Ukrainian army could restore the 47th Brigade back to its original strength of 31 tanks and still have enough tanks – 30 or so – to equip a second brigade ... or to make good future losses.

That's the argument in favor of Australian tanks for Ukraine. The argument against is less concrete. It's purely political, and given that the US has already sent tanks and Australia has already sent missiles, artillery and other weapons, it's hard to see how sending some more tanks will make Russia any angrier than it already is.

That's not to say there's no argument against sending the Abrams. But such an argument will not carry much weight with Ukrainian soldiers who need to defend their homes and families – but who are running out of tanks.

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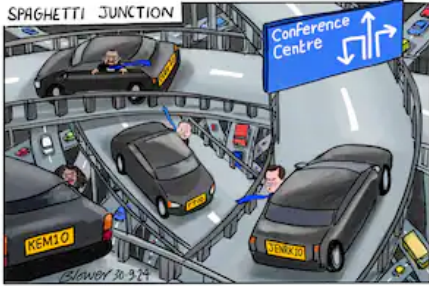


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