

Albanese needs to stop dithering over Ukraine aid

Retired Australian fighter jets and helicopters could be making a difference in Ukraine. Instead, they are left to languish here.

[Andrew Tillett](#), *Australian Financial Review*, *Foreign affairs, defence correspondent* Jan 18, 2024

Australia has two perfectly good aircraft types that with a little bit of work and effort could have been provided to the Ukrainians and made a difference on the battlefield.

Instead, the dead hand of Defence bureaucracy and timidity of the Albanese government means F/A-18 fighter jets are [left to rust](#), while [Taipan helicopters](#) will be hacked to pieces for spare parts and the remainder of the airframes buried.

It feels like Canberra regards assistance to Ukraine almost as an intellectual exercise – a new package every few months, no urgency in delivery, tick a few boxes and move on. For Kyiv, it is an existential matter.

The world stands at a crossover point: Ukraine is desperate for more weapons to continue to repel Russia just as Western interest in helping it is waning.

Ongoing US help remains shaky, with presidential prerogative held hostage by the whims of a Congress which takes its cue from pro-Putinistas platformed by conservative media. Heaven knows what will happen if/when Donald Trump moves back into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

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Similarly, billions in European aid are in limbo thanks to the bloc's most pro-Moscow leader, Hungary's Viktor Orban.

Australia, of course, cannot fill that void, but it can send an important signal by offering up some big-ticket items. Imagine the boost to morale Ukrainian soldiers would get when they hear the first Taipan chopper swoop in to evacuate their injured comrades?



The retired F/A-18s are sitting in a hangar at the Williamtown RAAF base north of Newcastle.

Imagine how galvanised Ukrainians would be when the first F/A-18 fired a missile that destroyed a Russian base beyond the trenches, or helped keep the skies clear of drones at night?

Sure, there would be challenges. Ukrainians would need to be trained to operate and maintain equipment. Stockpiles of parts would need to be assembled. But these are not insurmountable. Times of war require desperation.

The Australian Financial Review revealed in June there were discussions about [sending some of the RAAF's retired F/A-18 Hornets to Ukraine](#). If a deal had been done at the time, training and refurbishment would be well under way now.

The European-designed, Brisbane-assembled Taipan helicopters have long been unloved and beset by problems. Retiring them early when Australia can easily obtain US-made Blackhawks was understandable, albeit expensive (and some would say indulgent).

The fate of the Taipan in Australian hands was sealed after the fatal crash in the Whitsundays in July.

Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy insists, "We have no idea whether these aircraft are safe to fly" while myriad crash investigations are conducted.

But that didn't seem to stop the government making inquiries if other countries wanted to buy them, only to be knocked back.

Hence, the decision to break up the helicopters, which Conroy says maximises value for the taxpayer.

But as the ABC's Sally Sara exquisitely put it to Conroy on Thursday, it seems the government's view is the choppers are safe enough to flog off but not safe enough to give to Ukraine.

How serious is the safety issue? While New Zealand grounded its fleet for two days after the accident, it resumed flying and no other operators have stopped flying their helicopters. And the chief of the Taipan's manufacturer said in September that [engineers had not found any signs of malfunction](#).

In any event, from Conroy's responses, it appears too late to salvage any of the Taipans. Which makes it unfortunate that Ukraine is still waiting a month for an official answer to its request.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Canberra is more intent on dithering rather than showing some initiative to deliver.