

Austin Challenges Contact Group to Keep Supporting Ukraine

Jan. 9, 2025 | By C. Todd Lopez, DOD News

At the conclusion of the 25th meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, the last such meeting for Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, the outgoing secretary challenged group members to maintain the level of support to Ukraine they have built over the past three years.

Today, at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, Austin concluded the last meeting of the group he spearheaded the development of in April 2022. As part of his departure, he asked the nearly 50 members nations who participate in providing support to Ukraine in its fight against Russia, to keep up that support and not falter in their commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty.



"In my final hours at Ramstein as secretary of defense, I mourn for every Ukrainian man, woman and child killed in Putin's murderous war, and I salute the Ukrainian troops who are fighting so bravely for their country and for their freedom," Austin said. "And this coalition has had their backs for nearly three hard years of war, and we must not stop now. So, I'm leaving this contact group, not with a farewell, but with a challenge: The coalition to support Ukraine must not flinch. It must not falter, and it must not fail. Ukraine survival is on the line, but so is all of our security."

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, many nations stepped up to provide support, by delivering weapons and munitions. But Austin said he knew at the time that in order for Ukraine to succeed in preserving its sovereignty, that support must be coordinated.

"I opened our hastily arranged first meeting by urging some 40 countries to build a common understanding of the situation in Ukraine," he said. "Today, this ... group provides more than a common understanding, it provides a common cause. And today, some 50 countries of conscience are coordinating closely with Ukraine to send vital, consistent and cutting-edge security assistance. And that has helped turn Ukraine's struggle into one of the great military success stories of our time."



With the support of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, Austin said, Ukraine has been getting the weapons and supplies it needs to defend itself from continued Russian aggression. At the same time, he said, America and partner nations who are providing support to Ukraine have made sure to maintain their own readiness as well.

The secretary highlighted the stark difference between how Ukraine equipped itself at the start of the Russian invasion, with how it is equipped now.

"Ukraine has started to fly fourth generation fighter jets," he said. "It now fields advanced Western air defense capabilities, and it produces and operates state of the art unmanned systems. All of this positions Ukraine to defeat Russian aggression today and to deter Russian aggression tomorrow. And so our work has changed the course of history."

Altogether, Austin said, the UDCG members have contributed more than \$126 billion in security assistance to Ukraine. That includes tanks, air defense systems, combat vehicles, munitions, F-16 aircraft and training for pilots.

In providing that equipment, Austin said, the United States and other UDCG member nations have also increased support to their own defense industrial bases.

"The Ukraine crisis exposed some shortcomings in our defense industrial base," he said. "We've still got a lot more work to do. But we have galvanized our own defense industry, investing nearly \$70 billion at home to produce capabilities for Ukraine and replenish our own stocks."



At his last meeting of the group he created, Austin said the group has accomplished a lot. But Russia still remains in Ukraine, and the work is not yet concluded.

"We have come so far over the past ... 25 meetings of this contact group and the structure of this coalition is built to succeed, built to adapt, and built to last," he said.

When the contact group stood up, Austin said, he said the group's creation reflected a galvanized world, and that Russia's war was both reckless and lawless. The secretary said he still believes those things.

"I will always be proud that the Ukraine Defense Contact Group has held high the torch of security and freedom, and so I will keep saying it: free people must refuse to replace an open order of rules and rights with a violent world of force and fear."

