

Biden lifts ban on Ukraine using US weapons to strike deeper into Russia

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By Dan Sabbagh

Officials have suggested permission for wider use could be response to North Koreans joining war on Putin's side



Atacms weapons systems could be used to support Ukrainian forces in Kursk, Russia, according to officials. Photograph: Getty Images

Joe Biden has lifted the ban on Ukraine using long-range missiles to fire into Russian territory by permitting them to be used against Russian and North Korean forces in the Kursk region.

The US president will allow Ukraine to use US-made Atacms rockets, which have a range of 190 miles (300km) – a decision being justified by the presence of North Korean troops fighting alongside Russia against Ukraine.

Though there was no public comment from the White House, the story first

appeared in coordinated briefings to the New York Times, the Washington Post and the news agencies Reuters and Associated Press.

Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, appeared to confirm the news, though he said any proof about the change in policy would emerge on the battlefield, if and when the missiles are used.

"Today, there's a lot of talk in the media about us receiving permission for respective actions. But strikes are not carried out with words. Such things are not announced. Missiles will speak for themselves. They certainly will," Zelenskyy said.

Poland's foreign minister welcomed the news. "With the entry into the war of North Korea troops and the massive airstrike of Russian missiles, President Biden responded in a language that Putin understands," Radosław Sikorski wrote on X.

But Vladimir Dzhubarov, the first deputy head of the Russian upper house's international affairs committee, warned Moscow's response would be immediate.

"This is a very big step towards the start of world war three," the Tass state news agency quoted Dzhubarov as saying.

It is the first time Biden has given Kyiv permission to use long-range weapons inside Russia but their use will be limited to the Kursk region, where Ukraine launched an incursion into Russia in the summer.

Kyiv announced nationwide energy rationing from Monday after Moscow's biggest drone and missile attack in months on Ukraine's energy grid on Sunday.

US officials briefed that the weapons would be used against Russian and North Korean troops deployed against Ukrainian forces in Russia's Kursk region – and was intended to send a message to North Korea – though Biden may authorise their use elsewhere during his remaining two months in the White House.

The first strikes using US-supplied Atacms rockets could come within days. The decision is not thought to apply to UK-supplied Storm Shadow missiles, the use of which on Russian territory has previously been blocked by the US.

Kyiv has indicated it wants to use Storm Shadows against airbases used to launch attacks on Ukraine, instead of in Kursk. The White House and Downing Street declined to comment.

It is not clear if Donald Trump, who has previously criticised the scale of US military aid to Ukraine, will seek to reverse the decision. Biden previously allowed Ukraine to use shorter-range US-supplied Himars against Russian forces attacking Kharkiv from over the border, but had refused permission for deep strike weapons Russia.

Last month, North Korea sent an estimated 10,000 troops to Russia to participate in the Ukraine war, the first time Pyongyang has been prepared to use ground forces since the end of the Korean war in 1953.

They have since been positioned in Kursk and preparing to join with Russian troops in a counterattack against in joint force whose strength is estimated at 50,000.

Other reports, based on Ukrainian intelligence briefings, have suggested that North Korea could be willing to send as many as 100,000 troops if the alliance between the two countries strengthens, at a time when Kyiv is struggling to mobilise more people to join the war.

Earlier on Sunday, the Ukrainian president said about 120 missiles and 90 drones were fired into Ukraine that morning in a nationwide attack he described as the work of "Russian terrorists".

The attack was the largest missile and drone assault on Ukraine since August and the first big Russian assault since the US election, showing the Kremlin in little mood to compromise after Trump's victory.

Poland and Nato allies scrambled jets to safeguard its airspace in border areas early on Sunday, the country's operational military command said, returning to their bases about three hours later without incident. Moldova said Russian drones and missiles had violated its airspace.

Ukrenergo, Ukraine's principal energy supplier, said blackouts and consumption restrictions would be introduced "in all regions" as engineers tried to repair as much of the damage to power facilities as possible from the strikes in the early hours of Sunday.

Andrii Sybiha, Ukraine's foreign minister, described the strike as Moscow's

“true response” to leaders who had interacted with Vladimir Putin, an apparent swipe at the German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, who made a phone call to the Russian leader on Friday for the first time since December 2022.

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, said Sunday’s attack showed Putin “does not want peace and is not ready to negotiate”. He said the priority for France was to “equip, support and help Ukraine to resist”.

Donald Tusk, the Polish prime minister, echoed Sybiha’s remarks in his condemnation of the Russian barrage. “The attack last night, one of the biggest in this war, has proved that telephone diplomacy cannot replace real support from the whole west for Ukraine,” he said.

Keir Starmer, the British prime minister, said he had no plans to speak to Putin. Starmer was speaking as he flew to Brazil for a G20 summit, where he said Ukraine would be his top priority for discussions with other world leaders.

He highlighted the presence of North Korean soldiers as reinforcements, saying this showed the “desperation of Russia” and meant the conflict now had an additional element, involving security in the Indo-Pacific. “That’s why I think we need to double down on shoring up our support for Ukraine and that’s top of my agenda for the G20,” he said.

