

INKSTICK

Afghanistan and the Danger of Small Arms Transfers

What happens when US military training and weapons backfire.

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In recent weeks, former members of Afghanistan's US-trained and armed intelligence service and elite military units have joined the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan, including an Afghan national army officer that commanded the military's weapons and ammunition depot in southeastern Afghanistan. Moreover, the Taliban have used US-made assault rifles to interrupt and stop protests in Kabul. While US weapons have supported anti-democracy and anti-US organizations in fighting war and committing human rights violations all over the world, these two examples in Afghanistan illustrate how US weapons sales and military training can — and often do — backfire.

The collapse of the Afghan government has delivered roughly \$24 billion worth of American equipment — including almost 600,000 small arms and artillery pieces, 75,898 vehicles, and 208 aircraft — to the Taliban, with no guarantee that they won't find their way to other unsavory groups operating in the country like ISK. To put this problem in perspective, since 2001 the value of weapons sent to Afghanistan is greater than the 2020 military expenditures of all but 12 countries in the world: US, China, India, Russia, UK, Saudi Arabia, Germany, France, Japan, South Korea, Italy, and Australia.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban are already selling these weapons. They are often more valuable to sell than to buy for two reasons. The most obvious is the economic benefit since they can sell the weapons for more than what they had bought (or more likely stolen and/or inherited) them for. The other reason is strategic: They can control who can buy the weapons, including selling the weapons to arms bazaars where anyone from local arms dealers, to Afghan and Pakistani businessmen, to potential fighters in al-Qaida and Islamic State (ISIS).

WHERE ARE THEY GETTING US WEAPONS FROM?

The Taliban overran government and local military bases following the US withdrawal, with thousands of weapons being stolen. Now they are also urging the old Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) members to train their own members to use US weapons — weapons that helped

them seize control of the Kabul airport. As of June 30, the ANSF had 211 US-supplied aircrafts, but the Biden administration now acknowledges that a “fair amount” of these have ended up in the hands of the Taliban.

Thanks to previous successes on the battlefield, the Taliban have already been using US small arms and night vision devices for some time. In 2020, a US military investigation into the Taliban’s killing of two Americans asserted that there was a “distinct possibility” that the Taliban had used US-made ammunition and guns to kill the soldiers. Recently, the Taliban brigade sent to fight ISK used US weapons, vehicles, and uniforms in combat. This revelation isn’t entirely surprising though. Since 2017, IS-K has been waging a war against the Taliban for control of the country. While the US is uncertain about working with the Taliban to fight ISK, many of the group’s fighters with access to US weapons have been hunted by the Taliban. The result is a fresh battle between the Taliban and ISK, where US weapons are a common tool.

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Making matters worse, Afghanistan is far from the only recipient of American weapons where trouble is brewing. Thanks to American security assistance programs, Colombia, Somalia, Mexico, and the Philippines all received over \$50 million in security assistance during 2020 alone, on top of billions more since Sept. 11, 2001. Again, this isn’t surprising; US military assistance to Central American states during the Cold War did little to weaken Washington’s adversaries, and instead created a global, illicit market for small arms. In other words, the US’ long-standing practice of sending weapons to corrupt and unstable governments continues — and has deadly and unintended consequences as currently being experienced in Afghanistan. The scale of the problem in Afghanistan is may well be staggering, but it will not be the last place where American weapons wind up in the hands of groups dedicated to harming US interests.

The use of US technology to fuel conflicts and thwart US goals is happening across the world. There are nearly two million unregistered weapons in the Philippines, many of which are American. The Philippines are also where Abu Sayyaf, an affiliate of ISIS, has a history of getting its hands on US weapons. Similarly, the terrorist organization al Shabaab often raids Somali military bases to steal US arms. In Mexico, criminal organizations get access to many US weapons via second-hand sales as well as poor background checks from American gun providers. This results in US guns being more likely to be used to kill someone in Mexico than in America.

STOPPING THE WEAPONS FLOW

Whether in Afghanistan, where ISK and the Taliban now have US weapons, or elsewhere across the globe, the US can and should take steps to reduce these dangers. Some of the tools to do so already exist, but they lack the teeth to make them effective. The Leahy Law attempts to prohibit weapons sales to human rights abusers, but its focus and scope have done nothing to prevent weapons sales to the very countries where weapons diffusion has been such a problem.

The first step to reducing these problems is to increase the effectiveness of end-use monitoring. End-use monitoring is important so that the US can track the misuse of US weapons and determine why problems occurred. The House version of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), a bill currently before Congress, contains a variety of amendments that would help achieve this. One amendment strengthens end-use monitoring by adding human rights and good governance reporting and regulation requirements to Title 10, subsection 127e, which controls special operations support for counterterrorism purposes. Another amendment would create a reporting requirement on human rights abuses for recipients of weapons from the top-five weapons manufacturing countries. In both instances, these amendments will add assessing human rights abuses and overall risk to the weapons sales process.

A second necessary step is to stiffen the criteria for approving arms sales to prevent sales to countries with poor human rights records or in which weapons diffusion presents too great a risk. Rep. Ilhan Omar's (D-MN) Stop Arming Human Rights Abusers Act (SAHRAA) seeks to prevent American weapons from being used to commit human rights violations by foreign governments and nonstate actors by strengthening the risk evaluation component of weapons transfer decisions. The SAHRAA puts human rights at the center of US foreign policy, and is a good start for trying to curb the spread of US weapons worldwide.

The situation in Afghanistan provides the starkest, though far from the only lesson to US policymakers about the dangers of arms sales and security assistance. The fallout from so many weapons ending up in the hands of the Taliban and other violent groups will be felt for decades. Unlike so many global security issues, this is one the US can easily take steps to mitigate in the future.

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