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Abstract

Following the announcement of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban quickly seized control of the country. The seemingly rushed and chaotic nature of the US' withdrawal also allowed the Taliban to seize large quantities of small arms and light weapons (SALW) left behind. This policy brief explores the purposes for which the Taliban use these newly acquired 'spoils of war', ranging from fighting rival group ISK-P and controlling territory to financing their activities and propaganda purposes. It finally provides recommendations on how to contain the flow of SALW in and out of Afghanistan, and draw lessons on how to better manage future withdrawal of international troops in other countries.

Keywords: SALW, terrorist groups, weapons, Taliban, ISK-P, Afghanistan, financing, arms control

Introduction

In the aftermath of the historic withdrawal of the United States (US) from Afghanistan, several videos of Taliban fighters posing with weapons and military equipment left behind by US and foreign forces emerged. After US President Biden announced the withdrawal date in April 2021, the Taliban swept through Afghanistan while many Afghan soldiers surrendered and handed in their weapons.¹ The speed at which the Afghan government fell took the international community by surprise, and raises many questions. Due to the seemingly rushed and chaotic nature of the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan,² the very group that the US ousted at the beginning of the conflict is not only back in power, but is now stronger than ever before, is better equipped militarily to fight its adversaries, and to repressively impose sharia law.³

In this policy brief, we will focus on the question of what weapons and military equipment were left behind by the US, and what has been seized from the Afghan army by the Taliban since the beginning of 2021. The focus is on small arms and light weapons (SALW)⁴ such as assault rifles, pistols and machine-guns, as well as handheld interagency identity detection equipment (HIDE), heavy weapons and military equipment such as missiles, aircrafts, helicopters and armoured vehicles.⁵ Security concerns in the region and beyond are being fuelled by the unclear whereabouts and condition of the massive arsenal left behind by the US and international troops, how much of it now belongs to the Taliban, and how much of it remains unaccounted for. These weapons exist as more than just a trafficked commodity, they also act as tools of coercion and income-generating instruments. We will explore for what purposes the Taliban uses these newly acquired ‘spoils of war’, which range from controlling a territory, to propaganda purposes, to financing their activities. Finally, we will provide some policy recommendations on how to contain the flow of SALW in and out of Afghanistan, and draw lessons on how to better manage future withdrawal of international troops in other countries.

The fall of Afghanistan and impact on the flow of SALW

Prior to the US withdrawal, the Taliban already controlled a significant arsenal, notably comprising (predominantly Kalashnikov-pattern) automatic assault rifles, light and heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers, as well as mortars, shotguns and handguns.⁶

1 David Zucchino and Najim Rahim, “A Wave of Afghan Surrenders to the Taliban Picks Up Speed,” *The New York Times*, 27 May, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/world/asia/afghan-surrender-taliban.html>

2 Reuters, “West struggles with Afghanistan chaos, Biden again defends withdrawal,” 21 August, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nato-pledges-speed-evacuations-afghanistan-criticism-mounts-2021-08-20/>

3 Nabih Bulos, “Tanks, attack helicopters, drones, bullets: What the arms left behind by U.S. mean for the Taliban,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 September, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-09-03/taliban-weapons-bonanza-us-withdrawal-afghanistan>

4 The authors have adopted the EU’s definition of small arms (i.e. revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles, and light machineguns) and light weapons (i.e. heavy machine-guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems, portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems, mortars of calibres of less than 100 mm, ammunition and explosives, cartridges (rounds) for small arms, shells and missiles for light weapons, mobile containers with missiles or shells for single-action anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems, anti-personnel and anti-tank hand grenades, landmines, and explosives). See: Tanya Mehra, Méryl Demuyneck, Colin Clarke, Nils Duquet, et al. “Cashing in on Guns: Identifying the Nexus between Small Arms, Light Weapons and Terrorist Financing,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, March 2021, p.3. <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2021/03/SALW-Report.pdf>

5 For more information on what is included under the definition of heavy weapons and military equipment, see the definition used by SIPRI for the Arms Trade Database. See: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “Sources and methods,” 2021. <https://sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods>

6 Schroeder, Matt., and Benjamin King, “Surveying the Battlefield: Illicit Arms in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia,” *Small Arms Survey*, 2012, p.330-336.

A large proportion of these weapons were reportedly Cold War-era models as a legacy of the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s.⁷ Intentional and unintentional diversion⁸ of military equipment from state forces have continued to grow terrorist groups' arsenals in more recent years.⁹ In addition, cross-border arms trafficking also represents a great challenge in South Asia, and yet another way for terrorists operating in Afghanistan to acquire weapons.¹⁰

It is widely known that the Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun group, were created and equipped with weapons by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). In addition to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia had financed many of the madrassas and supplied weapons to the Taliban,¹¹ being the only two countries together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to recognise the Taliban in those days. The Taliban have been listed as a terrorist organisation by the UNSC 1267 in 1999.¹² The period after the 9/11 terrorist attacks saw the international community stand 'undivided' in defeating the Taliban, which was widely denounced for providing support and shelter to al-Qaeda. With the 2015 establishment of the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISK-P) however, a sworn enemy of both the Taliban and the international community, some countries, such as Iran, continued supplying the Taliban with weapons and other forms of support.¹³ The Taliban's acquisition of more advanced technologies, such as night vision goggles or infrared lasers for rifles, has moreover raised growing concerns over recent years due to the tactical advantage it might have provided them with.¹⁴

<https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Small-Arms-Survey-2012-Chapter-10-EN.pdf>

7 The US, with the cooperation of Pakistan, reportedly supplied (mainly Soviet-made) arms and ammunition to the mujahideen, that would later form the Taliban.. According to sources, the CIA provided various types of weapons to the Afghan mujahideen, including AK-47 automatic assault rifles, antitank rocket launchers, rockets, land mines, surface-to-air missiles, heavy machine guns and related ammunition. See: Tim Weiner, "History to Trump: CIA was aiding Afghan rebels before the Soviets invaded in '79," *The Washington Post*, 7 January, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/01/07/history-trump-cia-was-arming-afghan-rebels-before-soviets-invaded/>. See also: Bobi Pirseyedi and United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), *The Small Arms Problem in Central Asia: Features and Implications*, (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2000), 14-15. <https://www.unidir.org/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/the-small-arms-problem-in-central-asia-features-and-implications-117.pdf>

8 Unintentional diversion can take place following the collapse of state control over national stockpiles, accidental leakage of national stockpiles or unintentional retransfers that come down to negligence. Intentional diversion encompasses battlefield capture by non-state armed actors (unauthorised end-users), but also weapons intentionally diverted by corrupted security personnel and state officials (authorised users), as well as state-sponsored diversion, which includes direct state backed supply of weapons and unauthorised retransfers in violation of end-user agreements. See: Tanya Mehra, Méryl Demuyneck, Colin Clarke, Nils Duquet, et al. "Cashing in on Guns: Identifying the Nexus between Small Arms, Light Weapons and Terrorist Financing," pp.106-107.

9 Conflict Armament Research (CAR), "Illicit Weapons in Afghanistan: Taliban seizures of US-equipment are only a fraction of the story," *Frontline Perspective*, Issue 01, September 2021. <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/773ba742c1d1402582bb0ccc38414b34>

10 Arms trafficked across the country's porous borders, particularly with Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan, are believed to have—at least to a certain extent—supplemented terrorist groups' arsenals. Moreover, the production of replica and counterfeit arms near the Afghan border and import into the country is another supply source for terrorist groups. Past reports indicate that "significant quantities of arms and ammunition used by the Taliban were being illegally obtained by, or provided to, the movement from outside Afghanistan." See: United Nations Security Council, "Ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2255 (2015) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan." See also: Schroeder and King, "Surveying the Battlefield: Illicit Arms in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia," p.335.

11 Pirseyedi and United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, *The Small Arms Problem in Central Asia*.

12 <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/1267-%281999%29>

13 Tanya Mehra and Matthew Wentworth, "The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Regional Responses and Security Threats," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, August 2021. <https://icct.nl/publication/the-rise-of-the-taliban-in-afghanistan-regional-responses-and-security-threats/>

14 Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Jawad Sukhanyar, "The Taliban Have Gone High-Tech. That Poses a Dilemma for the U.S.," *The New York Times*, 1 April, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/01/world/asia/taliban-night-vision.html>

By contrast, and while information available on ISK-P's equipment and supply sources remains scant, some reports indicate that the group's weaponry generally appears to be "of poor standard."¹⁵

Since the US invasion in 2001, the US and NATO allies combined have spent hundreds of billions of dollars on a nation-building project aimed at developing the country's democracy, security forces, infrastructure, and civil society. The volume of US military assistance over the past twenty years is staggering; USD 88 billion¹⁶ was allocated to equip the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) through salaries, training, and consumable goods, such as ammunition and petroleum.

The US claims to be struggling to take inventory of all of the equipment that its troops surrendered, and is similarly unclear how much of it was in working condition when the insurgent Taliban forces seized it,¹⁷ but the records of what was supplied to the Afghan army over the past two decades gives an indication of the scale of the problem. It is estimated that less than a third of the USD 88 billion spent on the ANDSF went toward materiel,¹⁸ including nearly 600,000 small arms and their ammunition.¹⁹ In the years between 2017-2019, the US supplied the Afghan military with 7,000 machine guns, and more than 20,000 grenades, and in the past two years alone have given them more than 18 million rounds of ammunition.²⁰ Perhaps more significantly, in the period between the announcement of their withdrawal in April 2021 and July 2021, the US provided materiel valued at over USD 212 million to the ANDSF, including rockets, explosives and ammunition.²¹

Much of the ANDSF and US/international equipment, aircraft, vehicles, and weaponry was either destroyed or removed from Afghanistan, a process which began shortly after the Doha Agreement in February 2020.²²

15 United Nations Security Council, "Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan," 27 May, 2020, p.17. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2020_415_e.pdf

16 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," 30 July, 2021. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-07-30qr.pdf>

17 The lack of US military and intelligence presence throughout the country may mean that we are unlikely to get a precise and complete picture of where every item of defence material has gone. See: Paul McLeary and Lee Hudson, "U.S.-made weapons seized by Taliban could lead to regional arms bazaar," *Politico*, 19 August, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/19/us-weapons-seized-taliban-506313>

18 Bulos, "Tanks, attack helicopters, drones, bullets: What the arms left behind by U.S. mean for the Taliban"

19 US Department of Defense (DoD) itself acknowledged that 509,321 small arms, including grenade launchers, were sent to Afghanistan between 2001 – 2016, further undeclared DoD contracts reveal this number to be even higher. The 600,000 included 358,530 assault rifles of different makes of which at least 95,981 were AK47s, 289,289 pistols, 64,000 machine guns, 25,327 grenade launchers, 13,227 sniper rifles, 36,575 further unspecified rifles, and 288 unspecified non-standard small arms. See: Oliver Weaver, "Inheritance of loss: the weapons left behind for the Taliban in Afghanistan," AOV, 31 August, 2021. <https://aoav.org.uk/2021/inheritance-of-loss-the-weapons-left-behind-for-the-taliban-in-afghanistan/> See also: Vikas Pandey and Shabad Namzi, "Afghanistan: Black Hawks and Humvees – military kit now with the Taliban," *BBC NEWS*, 29 August, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58356045>.

20 Zachary Cohen and Oren Liebermann, "Rifles, Humvees and millions of rounds of ammo: Taliban celebrate their new American arsenal", *CNN*, 21 August 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/21/politics/us-weapons-arsenal-taliban-afghanistan/index.html>.

21 Over 1,000 2.75' rockets, 61,000 40mm explosive rounds, 900,000 rounds of .50 ammunition and over 2 million 7.62 rounds. See: McLeary and Hudson, "U.S.-made weapons seized by Taliban could lead to regional arms bazaar"

22 During the final weeks of the withdrawal, the US removed the most sophisticated equipment from the country and carried out a number of strikes in Afghanistan, which were designed to destroy American equipment in bases about to be overrun by the Taliban. However, not everything was destroyed because the assessment was that the Afghan forces would be capable of fighting back for longer than transpired. See: Cohen and Liebermann, "Rifles, Humvees and millions of rounds of ammo:

Some planes were already in the US for maintenance and remained there, but US troops reportedly ‘demilitarized’, or rendered inoperable 73 other aircraft at Kabul airport, as well as 70 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs), and 27 Humvees.²³ Additionally, other US and Afghan air force pilots flew themselves and family members to safety on some of the aircrafts, meaning that roughly 61 fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters were moved to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.²⁴ The Taliban now have access to whatever has been left in the military weapons caches across Afghanistan. One US official said, ‘everything that hasn’t been destroyed is the Taliban’s now’.²⁵ From just one base the Taliban are known to have acquired 70 sniper rifles and 900 other guns.²⁶ Everything the Taliban obtain from takeovers like this²⁷ they call ghanima (war booty).²⁸ This ghanima includes more than just SALW. Over 160,000 radios and pieces of communication equipment were supplied by the US, as well as around 16,000 night-vision goggle devices.²⁹ The machine guns, mortars, and artillery pieces acquired have already given the Taliban an advantage against the failed resistance strongholds that once fought in the Panjshir Valley northeast of Kabul.³⁰

The uncertainty surrounding this massive arsenal, how much the Taliban have seized, and how much of it remains sitting unattended on bases and small combat outposts across the country is creating significant regional security concerns.³¹ The projected combat capabilities of the Taliban could either push Central Asian countries like Tajikistan or Uzbekistan to strengthen bilateral security ties with both Moscow and Beijing, or to being more open to dealing diplomatically with the Taliban de facto government, an option which they might not have otherwise seriously entertained.³²

Taliban celebrate their new American arsenal,” <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/21/politics/us-weapons-arsenal-taliban-afghanistan/index.html>

23 Many of the vehicles and aircraft in the hangars were left with their windows smashed, joysticks cut at the handle, avionics bays open and electronic boxes that operate vital systems ripped out, and their starter motors broken. See: Bulos, “Tanks, attack helicopters, drones, bullets: What the arms left behind by U.S. mean for the Taliban”

24 An official statement from the Uzbek government confirms it forced the landing of 46 Afghan aircraft at Termez airport. Additional satellite imagery shows at least 22 aircraft such as A-29 Super Tucano light attack planes, 24-26 helicopters including MI-17s, MI-25s, and UH-60 Black Hawks at Termez and at least 12 C-208/AC-208 utility and light attack planes and 1 PC-12 cargo plane at Bokhtar. See: Daily Sabah, “Uzbekistan says it forced 46 Afghan aircraft to land,” 16 August, 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/uzbekistan-says-it-forced-46-afghan-aircraft-to-land> ;

25 Idrees Ali, Patricia Zengerle and Jonathan Landay, “Planes, guns, night-vision goggles: The Taliban’s new U.S.-made war chest,” *Reuters*, 19 August, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/planes-guns-night-vision-goggles-talibans-new-us-made-war-chest-2021-08-19/>

26 Elsewhere they took seven Boeing-manufactured drones and millions of rounds of artillery. See: Victoria Elms, Jack Taylor and Adam Parker, “Afghanistan: The weapons left behind to the Taliban and what it means for the country’s future,” *SkyNews*, 3 September, 2021. <https://news.sky.com/story/afghanistan-the-weapons-left-behind-to-the-taliban-and-what-it-means-for-the-countrys-future-12397547>

27 When the US handed over control of Bagram Airbase to the Afghan National Army (ANA) in July 2021 it involved the handover of 3.5 million items including an unknown quantity of small arms and ammunition. Though this inventory includes everything from food supplies to door knobs, and the Pentagon denied that weapons had been left behind. The ANA surrendered the airbase to the Taliban just a month later. See: Kathy Gannon, “US left Afghan airfield at night, didn’t tell new commander,” *AP NEWS*, 6 July, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/bagram-afghanistan-airfield-us-troops-f3614828364f567593251aaaa167e623>;

28 Bulos, “Tanks, attack helicopters, drones, bullets: What the arms left behind by U.S. mean for the Taliban”

29 Ali, Zengerle and Landay, “Planes, guns, night-vision goggles: The Taliban’s new U.S.-made war chest”

30 A resistance which despite being low in numbers and capability, reportedly received support from Tajikistan in the form of military equipment, guns, ammunition, and food supplies before the resistance fighters ultimately retreated to Tajikistan once the territory was lost to the Taliban.

31 For a more detailed analysis of the position of the regional states, see: Tanya Mehra and Matthew Wentworth, “New Kid on the Block: prosecution of ISIS fighters by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*, March 2021. <https://icct.nl/publication/prosecution-of-isis-fighters-by-autonomous-administration-of-north-east-syria/>

32 Alessandro Arduino, “What Will the Taliban Do With Their New US Weapons?” *The Diplomat*, 24 August, 2021.

Another uncertainty is whether al-Qaeda and ISK-P – competing global jihadi groups both opposing and fighting against Western countries – will gain access to the weapons in the hands of the Taliban. So far, the Taliban retain close ties with al-Qaeda, with no indications that these ties will be severed, raising concern regarding whether the Taliban will continue to provide al-Qaeda leaders with just safe haven or also supply them with weapons.³³ The Taliban will moreover need to safeguard their stockpiles against increased attacks by ISK-P who may attempt to expand their own arsenal through similar insurgent activity.³⁴ The Taliban’s capability to manage this is relevant for the West because the biggest security concerns arise with the potential for these weapons to fall into the hands of a terrorist group with a global agenda such as IS/ISK-P or al-Qaeda, the former of which have been significantly increasing their attack frequency in Afghanistan since the Taliban’s takeover.³⁵

The power of guns

The power derived from the recent spoils of war goes well beyond the direct impact they may have on the Taliban’s current and future firepower, it also includes their instrumental use as coercion, financing, and propaganda tools.³⁶ While the Taliban’s reliance on newly acquired weapons to conduct attacks will largely depend on their ability to use and maintain this equipment over the long term, their use to control territory, financing and propaganda purposes does not even need these weapons to be operational. After assessing the Taliban’s know-how, or lack thereof, this section will explore these (indirect) powers of guns.

Weapons and (lack of) know-how

Varying levels of know-how are required to use and maintain the different type of arms and weapons that are now in the hands of the Taliban. For decades, predominantly Russian-made guns were circulating in Afghanistan and are likely to remain the preferred choice of weapons for the Taliban, in particular among lower-ranking fighters. To familiarise the fighters with the recent US weapons, the Taliban have persuaded some former members of the Afghan forces to provide training on how to use these weapons.³⁷ According to Conflict Armament Research (CAR), the Afghan forces used to hold workshops on how to repair mainly Russian-made weapons, but still lack the capabilities to maintain and repair US weapons.³⁸ They indicate US rifles are more difficult to maintain, and spare parts are not easily available in the region, although gunsmiths along both sides of the Durand line known for their skills in producing counterfeit weapons, spare parts and ammunition could potentially fill this void.

<https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/what-will-the-taliban-do-with-their-new-us-weapons/>

33 United Nations Security Council, “Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan,” 1 June, 2021, p.3.

34 With several former members of the Afghan forces, including an army officer who commanded a weapons and ammunition depot in south-eastern Afghanistan joining ISK-P, it is imaginable that ISK-P specifically will carry out armed raids to obtain some of these weapons. See: Yaroslav Trofimov, “Left Behind After U.S. Withdrawal, Some Former Afghan Spies and Soldiers Turn to Islamic State,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 October 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/left-behind-after-u-s-withdrawal-some-former-afghan-spies-and-soldiers-turn-to-islamic-state-11635691605?page=1>

35 IS conducted at least 54 attacks between mid-September and late October 2021, a figure which contrasts to shows an increase in both motivation of IS/ISK-P and an increase in the pressure that those defending the weapons depots are under.

36 Tanya Mehra, Méryl Demuyne, Colin Clarke, Nils Duquet, et al. “Cashing in on Guns: Identifying the Nexus between Small Arms, Light Weapons and Terrorist Financing,” p.1.

37 Hollie McKay, “The Taliban’s Return: Preparations for ‘Martyrdom’ Go On,” *NH Journal*, 5 October 2021. <https://nhjournal.com/the-talibans-return-preparations-for-martyrdom-go-on/>

38 CAR, “Illicit Weapons in Afghanistan: Taliban seizures of US-equipment are only a fraction of the story”

Furthermore, some of the more computer savvy and experienced Taliban fighters could find instructions on the internet on how to maintain some of the US arms.

Having access to an even bigger arsenal of US-made weapons may be useful in the short-term for the Taliban to control the territory and to fight against ISK-P and other terrorist groups, but may not be the preferred choice over the longer-term. If the Taliban do not develop the know-how to maintain weapons and produce adequate ammunition, it appears more likely that the US arms will be pushed out on to illicit gun markets within and outside of the country, adding to the proliferation of weapons in the region. The Taliban offered cash and land to those who carry out attacks against the US and Afghan forces, however whether the group will reward (local or foreign) fighters with weapons remains to be seen.³⁹

Carrying out regular maintenance on the armoured vehicles the Taliban have access to should not be too complicated for auto mechanics, but extensive maintenance would require more specialised knowledge, which the US provided by training Afghan mechanics.⁴⁰ Considering the high rate of illiteracy among the Afghan forces this is quite a challenge.⁴¹ When it comes to the most sophisticated types of arms, such as helicopters and aircrafts, most of the maintenance was outsourced to US private contractors who already left in August 2021. To use and sustain this equipment, the Taliban would need to seek support from, for example, Russian or Chinese contractors.⁴² Different factors such as whether the Taliban will have a need to rely on US weapons in addition to those already in their possession, whether they will be able to acquire or buy the know-how through contractors, and will need cash will all determine how the Taliban will use the recent spoils of war in the long-term.

Controlling territory

SALW are instrumental in controlling territory, but what should not be underestimated is the significance of the vehicles which will be used to navigate the country's rugged terrain,⁴³ and the aircraft seized, making the Taliban the only terrorist group with an air force.⁴⁴ Since capturing the numerous Afghan airbases the intact aircraft that the Taliban are reported to be in possession of include thirteen airplanes,⁴⁵ 44 helicopters,⁴⁶ and seven Unmanned Aerial Vehicles.⁴⁷

39 Reuters, "Taliban praise suicide bombers, offer families cash and land," 20 October, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-praise-suicide-bombers-offer-families-cash-land-2021-10-20/>

40 Jonathan Schroden, "Five Myths About the Taliban's New Arsenal," *Lawfare*, 1 September, 2021. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/five-myths-about-talibans-new-arsenal>

41 Sanjeev Miglani, "Afghan forces need reading lessons before security transfer," *Reuters*, 22 June 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-security-training-idUSBRE85L05V20120622>

42 Detsch, "Departure of Private Contractors Was a Turning Point in Afghan Military's Collapse"

43 This includes at least 42,000 pickup trucks and SUVs, 22,174 Humvee vehicles, 8,000 trucks, 634 M117 vehicles, 155 MxxPro Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, and 169 M113 armoured personnel carriers (tanks). Amongst the vehicles the Taliban is confirmed to now be in control of are almost 2,000 Humvees and trucks, over 50 armoured fighting and MRAP vehicles, and a dozen tanks. Prior to the Taliban take-over, June 2021 figures showed the Afghan Air Force operating with 167 aircraft in the country and a further 44 airframes listed in inventory. See: US Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Afghanistan Security: U.S.-Funded Equipment for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces," 10 August, 2017. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-17-667r.pdf>; Bulos, "Tanks, attack helicopters, drones, bullets: What the arms left behind by U.S. mean for the Taliban"; Pandey and Namzi, "Afghanistan: Black Hawks and Humvees – military kit now with the Taliban"; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress"

44 Pandey and Namzi, "Afghanistan: Black Hawks and Humvees – military kit now with the Taliban"

45 1 American A-29B light attack aircraft, 1 American Cessna 208 utility aircraft, 3 Czech L-39 jet trainers (supposedly intact but inoperable), and 8 Chinese An-26/32 transport aircraft (also reportedly intact but inoperable).

46 7 American UH-60A 'Blackhawk' transport helicopters, 11 American MD 530F attack helicopters, 12 Russian Mi-8/Mi-17 transport helicopters, and 15 Chinese Mi/24Mi-35 attack helicopters.

47 7 American Boeing Insitu ScanEagles. See: Oryx, "The Taliban Air Force – An Inventory Assessment," 16 August, 2021. <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/08/the-taliban-air-force-inventory.html>

In addition, amongst the aircraft captured at Kabul airport (though reportedly rendered disabled by US forces) were 28 planes⁴⁸ and 47 helicopters.⁴⁹ Of this, only 24 helicopters are thought to be functioning.⁵⁰

With the distinctions between insurgents and terrorist groups becoming blurred, the Taliban were considered by some to be both at once. The weapons they possess are not only used to fight adversaries, but also to maintain order as the now de-facto government. The power of their guns is wielded to evict minorities - such as the 2400 Hazaras who have been evicted from their homes - and claim property to be given to Taliban fighters as reward.⁵¹ When ISIS had established the caliphate, the massive forceful evictions against members of religious minorities, such as Yezhidis, Christians, and Kurdish Shabak took place.⁵² In a country with a long history of land confiscation, competing property claims, and undocumented property rights, the massive evictions with the help of guns is yet another way for terrorist groups to assert control over territory and people.

Coercion and financing tools

In addition to the combat capabilities they may grant terrorist groups, newly acquired arms and weapons could also provide the Taliban with increased financing opportunities. Concerns over the risk of seeing surplus equipment being sold to generate income are growing.⁵³ Shortly after the Taliban took control of the country, they started to collect weapons from civilians in Kabul and Kandahar,⁵⁴ and arms trafficking in the region has increased. Civilians and even (low ranking) Taliban fighters have reportedly sold their weapons, with some ending up in the hands of Pakistani arm traders.⁵⁵ By contrast, the Taliban have recently been actively patrolling the border with Pakistan, arresting several arms traffickers, seizing their weapons and ammunition, and issuing a temporary ban on trading weapons.⁵⁶

48 Twelve American A-29B light attack aircraft, twelve American C-208/AC-208 utility/attack aircraft, three American C-130 transport aircraft, and one American PC-12NG special mission aircraft. See: Oryx, "List Of Aircraft And Helicopters Captured by Taliban Forces At Kabul Airport," 2 September, 2021. <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/09/list-of-aircraft-and-helicopters.html>

49 Twelve American UH-60A 'Blackhawk' transport helicopters, five American CH-46 transport helicopters, fourteen American MD 530F attack helicopters, fourteen Russian Mi-8/Mi-17 transport helicopters, and two Chinese Mi-24V attack helicopters (likely to have been left untouched by US forces). See: Oryx, "List Of Aircraft And Helicopters Captured by Taliban Forces At Kabul Airport"

50 Eight American MD 530F attack helicopters, around twelve Russian Mi-8/17 transport helicopters, and four American UH-60 'Blackhawk' transport helicopters. However, considering the large number of spare parts acquired by the Taliban via the various inoperable models, the activation of more models is likely, though a lack of qualified technicians may mean that the operational lifespan of the American models is limited.

51 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, JaQoob Akbary, "In Afghanistan, 'Who has the Guns Gets the Land' ", *New York Times*, 3 December 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/03/world/asia/afghanistan-land-ownership-taliban.html>

52 Rehema Jahn, "A Preliminary Assessment of Housing, Land and Property Right Issues Caused by the Current Displacement Crisis in Iraq", *International Organization for Migration*, 2015, https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/our_work/DOE/LPR/A-Preliminary-Assessment-of-Housing-Land-and-Property-Right-Issues-Caused-by-the-Current-Displacement-Crisis-in-Iraq.pdf

53 Council of the European Union, "Afghanistan Counter-Terrorism Action Plan," 29 September, 2021, p.16. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12315-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

54 Reuters, "Taliban in Afghan Capital Kabul Starts Collecting Weapons From Civilians," *US News*, 16 August 2021. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-08-16/taliban-in-afghan-capital-kabul-start-collecting-weapons-from-civilians>

55 Ruhullah Khapalwak and David Zucchini, "For Sale Now: U.S.-Supplied Weapons in Afghan Gun Shops," *The New York Times*, 5 October, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/05/world/asia/us-weapons-afghanistan.html>

56 Rohit Ranjan, "Taliban Issues Order For Temporary Ban On Weapon Trade In Afghanistan: Reports," *Republicworld.com*, 3 October, 2021. <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/taliban-issues-order-for-temporary-ban-on-weapon-trade-in-afghanistan-reports.html>

This inconsistent approach from Taliban members is explained by the division between the central leadership and the military commanders across the country and their lack of control over insubordinate fighters.⁵⁷ If this situation persists, more equipment may continue to be smuggled across Afghan porous borders, fuelling the proliferation of arms in the broader region.

However, an even bigger threat comes from the instrumental use that terrorists could make of these weapons, using them to increase revenue generated from their involvement in miscellaneous criminal activities.⁵⁸ In addition to being an important trafficked commodity, weapons confer coercion powers on their holders, and allow for a wide range of income-generating activities. While difficult to ascertain, the Taliban's annual income may range between USD 300 million and USD 1.5 billion a year,⁵⁹ making it "one of the wealthiest insurgent groups in the world."⁶⁰ In addition to foreign donations from private citizens and third countries, the Taliban have largely relied on mafia-style funding tactics.⁶¹

Operating within a country known to be the largest producer of opium globally, the Taliban have reportedly generated revenue from illegal drugs, although its importance within the group's broader financial portfolio remains a matter of debate. While often described as the organisation's main source of income, with the UN Security Council estimating that the illicit drug economy may have earned the group a total of USD 460 million in 2020,⁶² some reports point to the taxation of legal goods as exceeding by far drug money.⁶³ In addition to levying tax over "opium's production, transportation and selling," the Taliban have indeed developed a tax system that applies to any (licit or illicit) commodities transiting through their checkpoints, to shopkeepers and local businesses,⁶⁴ and even to public infrastructures and services provided by the national government.⁶⁵ Income derived from the under-exploited Afghan mining sector, including through protection-taxation money collected from warlords and mafia groups illegally exploiting mining sites in areas under their control, have reportedly become an additional source of finance for the Taliban.⁶⁶

57 Tanya Mehra and Julie Coleman, "The Fall of Afghanistan: A Blow to Counter-Terrorism and Rule of Law Efforts," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT)*, 23 August, 2021. <https://icct.nl/publication/the-fall-of-afghanistan-a-blow-to-counter-terrorism-and-rule-of-law-efforts/>

58 Mehra, Demuyne, Clarke, Duquet, et al. "Cashing in on Guns: Identifying the Nexus between Small Arms, Light Weapons and Terrorist Financing"

59 United Nations Security Council, "Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," 1 June, 2021, p.14.

60 Dawood Azami. "Afghanistan: How do the Taliban make money?" *BBC News*, 28 August, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-46554097>

61 Colin P. Clarke, "Afghan Taliban: From Strugglers to Smugglers," in *Terrorism, Inc.: The Financing of Terrorism, Insurgency, and Irregular Warfare*, (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2015), pp.113-132.

62 United Nations Security Council, "Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," 1 June, 2021, p.15. <https://www.undocs.org/S/2021/486>

63 Some research indicates that taxes levied on opiates would only amount to USD 19 million in 2020, with a further USD 15 million potentially derived from the production and trade in cannabis and methamphetamine. By contrast, taxes collected through the trade in fuel and transit goods from Iran alone have earned the group an estimated USD 83.4 million in 2019. See: David Mansfield, *A Taxing Narrative: Miscalculating Revenues and Misunderstanding the Conflict in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, October 2021).

64 Ahmed Aboudouh. "Where do the Taliban get their money and weapons from?" *The Independent*, 1 September, 2021. <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/taliban-where-weapons-money-funds-b1911655.html>

65 According to the national electricity provider, the Taliban have earned more than USD 2 million a year by billing electricity consumers in different parts of the country. See: Azami. "Afghanistan: How do the Taliban make money?"

66 Reports indicate that more than 50 percent of the revenue that is coming out of the mine is "handed straight on to the Taliban." Estimates of the income derived from the production and trade in minerals however greatly differ according to sources. While it reportedly netted around USD 460 million in 2020 according to the UN Security Council, other reports depict these estimates as being far-fetched. See: Justin Rowlett,

By providing terrorist groups with increased coercion power, recently seized weaponry is likely to enhance their capacity to generate income. Although controlling the state apparatus might directly provide the Taliban leadership with additional financing opportunities, including in terms of taxation, local commanders may aim to retain some financial autonomy, using acquired weapons to continue cashing in on drugs, minerals and other goods. Whether these various funding sources will suffice, and make up for the loss of foreign aid the former Afghan government used to heavily rely upon, especially when considering the increased expenditures that the transition from insurgency to government implies, however remains uncertain.⁶⁷ While the need for foreign assistance may allow the international community to retain some leverage over the Taliban,⁶⁸ some experts believe that the group—unlike the broader Afghan population—could “survive” without it.⁶⁹

Propaganda

Displaying the capture of this weaponry to the world also serves the purpose of reinforcing the Taliban narrative of the defeat of the US and Afghan national forces. The images of Taliban fighters equipped with US, NATO, and other equipment, and footage of their parades in American vehicles, will likely serve the group by increasing the criticism of the Biden administration’s decision to withdraw remaining US troops, and bolster its position as a victor. This display of force underscores the Taliban messaging that they are the true allies of the Afghan people and the only ones able to protect them.⁷⁰ Similarly, the Taliban’s social media engagement is conducted in multiple languages, targeting an audience beyond the borders of Afghanistan.⁷¹ The Taliban’s mere existence on Western social media platforms, and their free, unimpeded, use lends legitimacy to both the group’s claims and their continued governance.⁷² This will likely remain the case as long as the Taliban have access to the international community’s attention through social media.⁷³

“Corruption soils Afghanistan’s bright blue treasure.” *BBC News*, 6 June, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36424018>; United Nations Security Council, “Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan,” 1 June, 2021, p.14. <https://www.undocs.org/S/2021/486>; David Mansfield, *A Taxing Narrative: Miscalculating Revenues and Misunderstanding the Conflict in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, October 2021).

67 Eighty percent of the Afghan government spending in 2018 originated from foreign aid. See: *Ibid.*

68 Alan Rappeport, “Afghanistan Faces Economic Shock as Sanctions Replace Foreign Aid,” *The New York Times*, 21 August, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/21/business/afghanistan-economy.html>

69 Jeff Seldin. “Where are the Taliban Getting Their Money?” *VoA News*, 13 August, 2021. https://www.voanews.com/a/us-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal_where-are-taliban-getting-their-money/6209559.html

70 Arduino, “What Will the Taliban Do With Their New US Weapons?”

71 This includes English, Arabic, Pashto and Urdu. See: Catherine Thorbecke, “How the Taliban uses social media to seek legitimacy in the West, sow chaos at home,” *ABC News*, 19 August, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/taliban-social-media-seek-legitimacy-west-sow-chaos/story?id=79500632>.

72 The Taliban publishes freely on Twitter and Youtube, but its posts, accounts, and associated pages are regularly removed from Facebook since they are designated as a “dangerous organisation” by the company. See: Sarah Atiq, “The Taliban embrace social media: ‘We too want to change perceptions,’” *BBC News*, 6 September, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58466939>. Additionally, the Taliban website Alemara is hosted via a San Francisco-based online services provider. See: Kabir Taneja, “From ‘Night Letters’ to the Internet: Propaganda, the Taliban and the Afghanistan Crisis.”

73 As of the beginning of November 2021, the Taliban’s three primary spokesmen have actively posted and reached over a combined 1.2 million followers on Twitter. Zabiullah Mujahid, spokesperson of the ‘Islamic Emirate’, has over 419,000 followers on Twitter, Dr M Naeem, spokesperson for the political office in Doha, Qatar, has over 261,000 followers, and Suhail Shaheen, in charge of Taliban foreign media, has nearly 545,000 followers.

Moreover, they will likely continue to control the narrative domestically due to a mix of low internet access,⁷⁴ control over the country's media infrastructure, and the ability to send mass messages to citizens through manipulation of the country's two major cellular networks.⁷⁵

Since the February 2020 New York Times op-ed attributed to Taliban deputy leader Sirajuddin Haqqani⁷⁶, pro-Taliban accounts and their claims were gaining more traction than the information being released by official Afghanistan government accounts making attempts to counter the propaganda.⁷⁷ This is a trend that has continued with several mainstream western outlets sharing the images and videos posted by the Taliban intended to glorify their weapons capture. Most prominent in the initial days and weeks after the Taliban takeover were pictures and videos shared on social media of the supposedly elite Badri 313 special forces unit, which was carrying American weaponry and tactical equipment in full military uniform. This suggests a shift to the Taliban presenting themselves not only as a legitimate governing entity, but as a battlefield victor which is better equipped and more professionally trained than in the past.⁷⁸ Domestically and regionally, this could reassure and intimidate citizens in equal measure and might increase Taliban recruitment.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Afghanistan has no shortage of weapons due to the legacy of former conflicts. The vast number of weapons that have been provided to the Afghan forces, not only by the US but also by NATO over the past twenty years, in combination with those left behind by US forces themselves, contribute to the proliferation of weaponry across a highly unstable country, with one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups. The surplus of weapons will last for decades, prolong insecurity for the Afghan people, and provide further opportunities for the Taliban to consolidate their control over territory, generate increased funding through arms trafficking and other criminal activities, and amplify their success through propaganda. They could also have an impact on regional security, as weapons are smuggled across borders. This flow of SALW cannot easily be reversed and to some extent similar patterns can be seen in both previous conflicts such as Vietnam and Iraq, and in current conflicts such as in Libya, Yemen and the Sahel. If the weapons end up in the hands of al-Qaeda and ISK-P, this could further embolden these groups to carry out terrorist attacks against the West.

Among the following set of policy recommendations, some are meant to be implemented before, during and/or after withdrawal. Several of the recommendations are directed to countries sending troops or exporting weapons, while others are directed to the neighbouring countries or the interim government of the country where the conflict is taking place. Several of the policy recommendations below are therefore intended to have applicability to a range of conflict theatres across the Middle East, West and North Africa, and beyond.

74 Around 22 percent (or 8.64 million) of Afghans have access to the internet making it difficult for the majority to fact-check or counter false statements put out by the Taliban, and increases the likelihood of propaganda being accepted as fact. See: Simon Kemp, "Digital 2021: Afghanistan," *Dataportal*, 11 February, 2021. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-afghanistan>

75 Aakash Hassan, "How the Taliban turned social media into a weapon," *The New Arab*, 8 September, 2021. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/how-taliban-turned-social-media-weapon>

76 Atiq, "The Taliban embrace social media: 'We too want to change perceptions'"

77 Taneja, "From 'Night Letters' to the Internet: Propaganda, the Taliban and the Afghanistan Crisis."

78 AFP, "Taliban shows off 'special forces' in propaganda blitz," *France 24*, 25 August, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210825-taliban-shows-off-special-forces-in-propaganda-blitz>

Establish an effective weapon ammunition programme (WAM)

This is essential in reducing the risk of violence. During the deployment of international troops, trainings provided by international forces should include capacity-building not only in handling and maintaining weapons, but should also place great emphasis on training national forces in effective WAM. In order for these capacity-building efforts to be effective, it is important to take into account the local context. This includes language, cultural norms, but also level of education when training local forces on how to use, maintain, store and secure arms and weapons. This means that training manuals need to be translated to local language(s).

Carefully plan withdrawal

One of the lessons that can be drawn and should be taken into consideration during future withdrawals of international troops is to carefully plan withdrawal and take steps to:

- Deactivate and/or relocate military equipment, if necessary, as has been done with moving certain aircrafts to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan;
- Keep a list of arms and weapons that stay behind;
- In the context of a complete withdrawal, ensure the safety of local staff, and their families, that have knowledge on how to use and maintain arms and weapons including heavy weaponry such as aircrafts and helicopters.

Improve border control

Enhance border control to prevent the illicit trafficking of SALW into and across the region.¹³ As part of the withdrawal strategy, coordination with relevant border control authorities within the state and neighbouring countries should take place. Border control activities should be increased before, during and after the withdrawal of international troops to detect and prevent the movement of illicit SALW across borders effectively.

Reduce diversion

While some forms of diversion of weapons is to be expected, such as battlefield capture or accidental leakage from national stockpiles, the scope and extent of intentional diversion is a major concern in Afghanistan, but also in the Middle East and West Africa. Corruption among Afghan security and defence forces, as well as lack of monitoring has contributed to such a diversion of weapons. If the conditions are not met by the recipient state, third states should refrain from providing further weapons. In order to reduce diversion, states should (have):

- In line with GAO report of 2009, systematically register and track all weapons;⁷⁹
- Carry out effective implementation of post-shipment control measures for SALW;
- Monitor and enforce end-user agreements;
- Enhance pre-existing post-delivery checks and on-site verification inspections;
- Develop incentives for the recipient country to adhere to proper use and management of weapons, by for example conditioning technical assistance to these standards.

⁷⁹ US Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Afghanistan Security: Lack of Systematic Tracking Raises Significant Accountability Concerns about Weapons Provided to Afghan National Security Forces", January 2009. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-09-267.pdf>

Refrain from exporting arms to countries that violate international law

Moreover, countries that are exporting weapons should update their national arms export policies and refrain from trading with countries that violate international human rights law and international humanitarian law. A recent example is the Stop Arming Human Rights Abusers Act (SAHRAA) which – if passed into law – prohibits the US from providing security assistance and prohibits the selling and exporting of arms to countries that have committed genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes.

Such a law would have prevented a country from providing SALW to countries like Afghanistan or Syria.⁸⁰ This does not mean that a country that respects the rule of law and human rights is automatically eligible to receive SALW. In order to prevent terrorist organisations from not only acquiring, but most importantly being able to maintain and use sophisticated armament and more advanced technologies, avenues should also be explored to extend these restrictions to transfers of know-how.

Closely monitor terrorist groups in Afghanistan

In order to prevent weapons from ending up in the hands of al-Qaeda and ISK-P in Afghanistan, States should closely monitor such groups' activities, including by:

- Enforcing existing travel bans and arms embargo imposed against (members of) terrorist groups in Afghanistan listed by the UN Sanctions Committee.
- Despite that the US and other Western countries do not have any eyes on the ground, gathering and sharing intelligence - including battlefield information - to monitor and detect any activities that al-Qaeda and ISK-P carry out in Afghanistan and elsewhere will be crucial to assess and address the threat. This would also include monitoring any activities on-line which could range from financing, recruiting or coordinating terrorist-related activities.⁸¹
- Enhancing cooperation with regional countries' intelligence services to detect illicit trafficking of weapons and flow of (foreign) fighters with the aim of preventing Afghanistan from becoming a hub for arms trafficking and terrorist groups.

Refrain from fueling the propaganda agenda

Internet services providers and mainstream news outlets should refrain from repeatedly showing images and videos posted by the Taliban and associated terrorist groups boasting about their “spoils of war”. First of all, it is not clear how the weapons have been acquired, whether they are still useable and if they can be actually operated by Taliban fighters. Second, publicising this propaganda material allows terrorist organisations to transform the arms from physical weapons to recruitment tools, and potential ideological force multipliers.

⁸⁰ Stop Arming Human Rights Abusers Act 2020, H.R. 5880. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/5880/text?r=9&s=1>

⁸¹ Council of the European Union, “Afghanistan Counter-Terrorism Action Plan,” 29 September, 2021. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12315-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

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