



US WEAPONS IN AFGHANISTAN: FACTSHEET AND ASSESSMENT

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According to a UN report released in August 2023, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-calibre weapons associated with the former Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) are being transferred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) by groups affiliated with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (TIP).¹ After the Taliban took over Afghanistan, there was fear in the international community about the proliferation of these weapons in the region and further into West Asia and Africa.

Background

The security apparatus of Afghanistan during two decades of war was mainly managed by the ANDSF, which was created by the United States and its coalition partners. This was seen as a viable alternative to the expansion of international forces in Afghanistan, which were not able to control the situation and produce the desired results, like a decrease in enemy attacks and violence.² Despite the lack of any proper policy, doctrine, or resource allocation, the US took the lead in formulating the overall structure of the ANDSF, which was responsible for maintaining the external and internal security situation in Afghanistan.³ The ANDSF comprised of the Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan Air Force (AAF), and Afghan National Police (ANP).

Over the years, the US filled the gap in Afghan capability by providing them with training, equipment, logistics, and leadership. However, all this came to an abrupt end in February 2020 with the signing of the Doha agreement, which stipulated the US withdrawal of its own forces and contractors, along with the military support to ANDSF.

The withdrawal of US forces allowed the Taliban to regain control over the security architecture of the region and thereby attack the Afghan government and ANDSF.

As per the US Department of Defense report, the US left behind weapons worth US \$7.2 billion when it pulled out of Afghanistan.

Assessment of the US Weapons

The disarrayed nature of the US withdrawal resulted in the abandonment of a significant number of weapons. However, if the words of Rob Lodewick, a US Department of Defense spokesperson, are to be believed, nearly all the equipment used by US military forces in Afghanistan was either retrograded or destroyed prior to the withdrawal.⁴ Therefore, the majority of weapons used by the Taliban and other organisations today are those provided to the ANDSF. What does it mean for the Taliban and for other organisations operating in the nearby region? How it will impact the security apparatus in Afghanistan and other countries like Pakistan, with whom it shares borders, remains a point of concern.

This abrupt abundance of American military hardware can potentially make the Taliban weapon dealers in the decades to come. According to Open the Books, a government spending watchdog, the US has deployed 75,000 military vehicles, including 50,000 light medium-tactical vehicles, 22,000 Humvees, and 928 mine-resistant vehicles, to Afghanistan since 2001.⁵ In addition to the arms and ammunition, Washington also equipped Kabul with 110 Black Hawk helicopters, 20 A-29 Super Tucano attack aircraft, and seven C-208 light attack aircraft. Aerostat surveillance balloons, drones, and thousands of night goggles were also given to enhance the surveillance and reconnaissance capacity.

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Table 1: Types of Weapons Left Behind by Americans in Afghanistan

Types of Weapons	Numbers
Air-to-ground Munitions	9,524
Ground Vehicles	43,139
Ground Munitions	1,537,000
Weapons (Types not specified)	316,260
Specialized Equipment	Nearly all of this equipment remains in Afghanistan

Source: "Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed", *Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction*, February 2023. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf>. Accessed on June 01, 2023.

Since the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, it has been restoring several weapons, as mentioned by Afghanistan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) in a series

of social media posts. In March 2023, it restored nearly 300 vehicles, which included 150 Russian-origin Kamaz trucks, 140 High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs), 15 M977 ambulance variants, and two tanks.⁶ In addition to these weapons, some other equipment retrieved and used by the Taliban are mentioned in table 2.

Table 2: Equipment Used by the Taliban

Equipment	Numbers
Night vision devices	16,000
Radio Monitoring Systems	120
Ground-based Surveillance Systems	22
Unmanned Air Systems	8
Surveillance Balloons	6

Source: Abhinandan Mishra, “Weapons Left in Afghanistan by US End Up with Pak Military”, *The Sunday Guardian*, November 13, 2021. <https://sundayguardianlive.com/news/weapons-left-afghanistan-us-end-pak-military>. Accessed on June 03, 2023.

The ‘Badri 313 Battalion’, a unit of the Taliban that is closely associated with the Haqqani Network, is extensively using some of the weapons left behind. Based on other Pentagon assessments, more than 180,000 air-to-ground munitions are under the control of the Taliban, which includes 18,000 precision and non-precision ‘gravity’ bombs and 1,60,000 precision and non-precision aviation rockets.⁷ Some of the heavy munitions included 1845 D-30 60-82mm mortar systems along with one million mortar rounds, as well as 224 D-130 122mm howitzer artillery guns.⁸ A few thousand night glasses, more than 90 drones, 23,825 Humvees, and 900 combat vehicles have further filled the equipment vacuum of the Taliban.

Many of these highly technical devices used for night ambushes are used by the TTP to carry out attacks in Pakistan.⁹ After the withdrawal of US forces, the TTP has once again become active in the northwest tribal areas of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. In one of the videos released by the TTP, they were training with modern US-made weapons like M24 sniper rifles, M4 carbines with Trijicon ACOG scopes, and M16A4 rifles with thermal scopes.¹⁰ Further, in a report released by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, American military gear and weapons are being used by armed groups, like the TPP, to fight the Pakistani government.¹¹ The use of such weapons, though, will not alter the balance of power, but it has significantly enhanced

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the capability of TTP and assisted them in conducting terrifying attacks. These weapons have also added to the lethality of such groups.¹² It is helping the groups wage insurgencies against the government in Pakistan.¹³ However, not all of the weapons were provided by the US. Russia was the second-largest supplier of arms and ammunition to the Afghan forces, according to SIPRI.

High-tech weapons and night vision gadgets left behind by the US troops in Afghanistan have also made their way into the hands of the terrorists in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK), who are trying to infiltrate India.

Implications for India

In an interview, a senior Indian Army officer opined that high-tech weapons and night vision gadgets left behind by the US troops in Afghanistan have also made their way into the hands of the terrorists in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK), who are trying to infiltrate India.¹⁴ Thus, proving that American weapons have found their way into the Kashmir valley through terrorist organisations like Laskar-i-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). The surfacing of weapons in another zone of conflict, Kashmir, may just well be the beginning of the global journey of weapons.¹⁵ Weapons such as M4s and M-16s have rarely been used in a conflict before in Kashmir. But now they are making inroads there too. The other outflow is found in Russia in exchange for Putin recognising the Taliban, according to a report in the British tabloid.¹⁶

This has also led to the emergence of a black market for weapons across the borders of Pakistan. For instance, a US-made M4 assault rifle in good condition can be purchased for between US \$1500 and US \$3000; an M-16 for between US \$1600 and US \$2000; US military communication gear for US \$3500; and popular American pistols such as Glock, Beretta, and Smith and Wesson 9mm can be purchased for US \$300 to US \$800.¹⁷ The arms and weapons have fallen into the hands of various organisations like the Balochistan Liberation Army, Baloch Nationalist Army, Sindhudesh People's Army, and Islamic State Khorasan Province.¹⁸

Any free flow of weapons into the hands of any organisation can threaten the security of the region. Though in the short term it might fulfil their ends, in the long run it has the ability to handicap the security, economy, and polity of the region.

Notes:

¹ “NATO-Calibre Weapons Being Transferred to ISIL-K BY Taliban, Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups Like TTP: U.N. Report”, *The Hindu*, August 12, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/nato-calibre-weapons-being-transferred-to-isil-k-by-taliban-al-qaeda-affiliated-groups-like-ttp-un-report/article67188133.ece>. Accessed on August 24, 2023.

² “Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed”, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, February 2023, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf>. Accessed on August 22, 2023.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jack Detch, “The U.S. Left Billions Worth of Weapons in Afghanistan”, *Foreign Policy*, April 28, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/28/the-u-s-left-billions-worth-of-weapons-in-afghanistan/>. Accessed on June 07, 2023.

⁵ “Is Russia Eyeing Weapons from the Taliban for Ukraine War”, *First Post*, January 27, 2023. <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/russia-us-weapons-taliban-afghanistan-ukraine-war-12058112.html>. Accessed on June 04, 2023.

⁶ Kapil Kajal, “Taliban Restores Afghan National Army’s Military Vehicles, Weapons”, *IHS Janes*, April 04, 2023. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/taliban-restores-afghan-national-armys-military-vehicles-weapons>. Accessed on June 03, 2023.

⁷ Jimmy Quinn, “U.S. left Over \$7 Billion Worth of Weapons in Afghanistan: State Department”, *National Review*, August 19, 2022. <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/u-s-left-over-7-billion-worth-of-weapons-in-afghanistan-state-department/>. Accessed on June 05, 2023.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Are Leftover US Weapons in Afghanistan Being Used for Violence in India and Pakistan?”, *First Post*, March 23, 2023. <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/taliban-ttp-militants-leftover-us-weapons-in-afghanistan-being-used-for-violence-in-india-pakistan-12283522.html>. Accessed on June 04, 2023.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “US Arms Left Behind in Afghanistan Fall into TPP Hands”, *Dawn*, March 31, 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1745094>. Accessed on June 04, 2023.

¹² Abubakar Siddique, “Pakistani Armed Groups Obtain U.S. Weapons Left Behind in Afghanistan”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 29, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-armed-groups-obtain-us-weapons-left-in-afghanistan/32340664.html>. Accessed on June 06, 2023.

¹³ “US Weapons Left in Afghanistan Being Used by TTP, Baloch Separatists for Militancy in Pakistan: Report”, *Radio Pakistan*, April 07, 2023. <https://www.radio.gov.pk/07-04-2023/us-weapons-left-in-afghanistan-being-used-by-ttp-baloch-separatists-for-militancy-in-pakistan-report>. Accessed on June 04, 2023.

¹⁴ Snehesh Alex Philip, “Weapons, Night- Vision Devices’ Left by U.S. in Afghanistan Found at LoC, Says Senior Army Officer”, *The Print*, February 19, 2022. <https://theprint.in/defence/weapons-night-vision-devices-left-by-us-in-afghanistan-found-at-loc-says-senior-army-officer/837751/>. Accessed on June 08, 2023.

¹⁵ Junaid Kathju, “U.S. Arms Left in Afghanistan are Turning Up in a Different Conflict”, *NBC News*, January 30, 2023. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/us-weapons-afghanistan-taliban-kashmir-rcna67134>. Accessed on June 06, 2023.

¹⁶ FirstPost, n 5.

¹⁷ Tariq Ullah, “Pakistan Militants Launch Attacks with Advanced US Weapons Left Behind”, The National News, May 05, 2023. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/2023/05/05/pakistan-militants-launch-attacks-with-advanced-us-weapons-left-behind-in-afghanistan/>. Accessed on June 05, 2023.

¹⁸ Ibid.



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