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Implications for Regional Security**

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# NATO's Leftover Weapons in Afghanistan: Implications for Regional Security

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## Abstract

*The influx of NATO weaponry, particularly those left behind in Afghanistan, has far-reaching implications for the security landscape of South Asia. The hasty withdrawal of US forces in August 2021 created a vacuum, leaving behind a significant arsenal ripe for exploitation. While the exact quantity of abandoned equipment remains contested, estimates suggest billions of dollars worth of arms, including small arms, vehicles, and sophisticated communication devices, fell into the hands of the Taliban. The Taliban's initial response was predictably celebratory, showcasing captured weaponry as a symbol of their victory. However, their capacity and, perhaps more importantly, their willingness to fully secure and control these weapons is questionable.*

*Pakistan's concerns are deeply rooted in its ongoing struggle against terrorism. Several terrorist groups, especially*

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*the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), were responsible for countless attacks within Pakistan and have demonstrably benefited from the availability of NATO weaponry. Enhanced firepower and improved tactical capabilities afforded by these weapons have emboldened the TTP, increasing the frequency and intensity of its operations. Moreover, the proliferation of these arms across the black market empowers other terrorists and militant organizations such as Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and several terrorist groups within Afghanistan as well like Islamic State of Khorasan, the ISK. This paper analyses the abandoned US weapons in Afghanistan following August 2021, examining US and Taliban efforts to address the issue, and the concerns of Pakistan and other regional/international actors. It offers recommendations for recovering these weapons and mitigating their contribution to terrorism in Pakistan and the wider region.*

**Keywords:** *US Leftover Weapons, NATO Weapons, Arms Proliferation, TTP, BLA, Terrorism*

## **Introduction**

The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 was both hasty and tumultuous. Despite two decades of substantial investment totaling billions of dollars in funding, training, and support, the Afghan security forces crumbled in a matter of days. The entire focus of the US and its allied forces was on a safe departure, which resulted in a significant mismanagement of the weapons used by both the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, as well as NATO forces. Several international reports, including those from the United Nations, have raised concerns regarding the presence of NATO weapons in Afghanistan and their mismanagement, which has contributed to the growth of black markets, making it easier for terrorists to access these weapons. Pakistan was the first country to express concern about the proliferation of weapons left behind by the United States and the potential for these weapons to fall into the hands of terrorists. This concern was validated when Pakistani security forces recovered weapons abandoned by NATO forces in Afghanistan during various operations targeting terrorists.

Today, this widespread availability of NATO weaponry among terrorist groups severely threatens regional stability, necessitating a concerted regional and global efforts to prevent the region from descending into terrorism again. This paper offers a comprehensive overview of the abandoned US weapons in Afghanistan in August 2021. While doing so, it also highlights US and Taliban's tackling the issue of the abandoned weapons since 2021 to date, and also discusses Pakistan and other regional and international countries' concerns and perspectives regarding the abandoned weapons. The paper also provides key recommendations to address the lingering issue of the recovery of the weapons that is fueling terrorism in Pakistan and beyond.

### **Snapshot of US Leftover Weapons in Afghanistan**

The US provided billions of dollars in funding, training, support, and the equipment to Afghanistan to arm its security forces and the alternative government the US attempted to support. While some equipment may have been evacuated with US personnel, the majority, difficult to transport, was abandoned during the chaotic withdrawal and ultimately fell into Taliban control. Interviewing to BBC, one of the former Afghan government officials, stated that after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban gained control of nearly one million weapons that included, *inter alia*, M4 and M16 rifles and pieces of military equipment. In 2024, the Taliban admitted to the UN Security Council's Sanctions Committee in Doha that: "... half of this equipment is now unaccounted for," clearly indicating that it has either been lost or smuggled.<sup>1</sup> The *Times of London* reports that the US abandoned a significant arsenal, including an estimated 22,174 Humvees, nearly 1,000 armored vehicles, 64,363 machine guns, 42,000 trucks/SUVs, 358,530 assault rifles, 126,295 pistols, and nearly 200 artillery units (Annex, figure 1).

According to a report by the US-based Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (Sigar), the Afghan Air Force was having 167 aircraft that included attack helicopters and planes. (Annex, figure 2). According to US Government Accountability Report, between 2003 and 2016, the US unloaded a huge amount of military hardware on the Afghan forces it fought alongside: 358,530 rifles of different makes, more than 64,000 machine guns, 25,327 grenade launchers and 22,174 Humvees (all-terrain vehicles).<sup>2</sup>

According to CNN, abandoned weapons worth over \$7.2 billion that included arms, munitions, military vehicles, communications equipment, and PVS night-vision goggles, some of which was even non-US sourced but left behind in the botched withdrawal of the NATO forces.<sup>3</sup> A report from the Pentagon, cited by CNN on April 28, 2022, indicated that from 2005 to August 2021, the United States supplied \$18.6 billion worth of equipment to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. As of August 2021, approximately \$7 billion of that equipment left behind by the US is now under the control of the Taliban.<sup>4</sup> The report further stated that upon US withdrawal from Afghanistan, considerable military equipment remained, including: 78 demilitarised aircraft (\$923.3 million); 9,524 air-to-ground munitions (\$6.54 million), mostly non-precision; over 40,000 of 96,000 provided military vehicles (including 12,000 Humvees); over 300,000 of 427,300 provided weapons; less than 1,537,000 specialty munitions and small arms ammunition (\$48 million); nearly all communications equipment (base stations, mobile radios, etc.); nearly all night vision, surveillance, and biometric equipment (approximately 42,000 pieces); and nearly all explosive ordnance disposal and demining equipment (17,500 pieces).<sup>5</sup>

The Briefing Paper published by Small Arms Survey titled 'Open Markets: Documenting Arms Availability in Afghanistan Under the Taliban' also provides the estimates of equipment left behind in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> (Annex, figure 3). The report also reveals that US supplied nearly 20,000 M16 rifles in 2017 alone. In subsequent years, it contributed at

least 3,598 M4 rifles and 3,012 Humvees among other equipment to Afghan security forces between 2017 and 2021. Between 2017 to 2021, the Afghan National Army had 3,012 HMMWV, (Humvees), and around 3,598 M4 Carbines, and 31 Mobile Strike Force Vehicles (MSFV) by 2020.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it had 20,040 grenades, 10 AC-208 Light counter-insurgency planes, 7,035 Machine guns, 1,394 Grenade Launchers.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Aftermath: (Mis)Handling Leftover Weapons**

Managing the leftover arms remains a challenge for the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan (IEA), owing to incapability and internal tensions among various factions of the Taliban. The Briefing Paper by the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey mentioned above, attributed the proliferation to the weak control of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) on the captured arms and munitions of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) some of which were either sold or redistributed immediately after their takeover in August 2021.

The report further states that the arms were making it across the border into the tribal areas of Pakistan and elsewhere. The report documented the export of 258,300 M-4, M-16, and AK variant assault rifles; 6,300 sniper rifles; 56,155 machine guns of various kinds; 31,000 rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers; 64,300 pistols of various kinds; and other small arms to Afghanistan between 2005 and 2021. It estimated that 316,270 such weapons worth around \$512 million were still remaining in Afghanistan. It further highlighted tens of thousands of mortar rounds and small arms munitions left over by the NATO forces in Afghanistan to support the Afghan forces after their departure but were captured by the Taliban after their takeover of Kabul.

More recently, the UN's Security Council's 35<sup>th</sup> Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team published in February 2025, also mentioned that: "In Afghanistan, Al-Qaida-affiliated groups, including TTP, IMU, ETIM/TIP and Jamaat Ansarullah, continued to have access to weapons seized from the former Afghan National

Army, transferred to them by the *de facto* authorities/Taliban or purchased from the black market.”<sup>9</sup> According to Mr. Asfandiyar Mir, a senior analyst at the United States Institute of Peace, said that “these weapons have added to the lethality of such groups which resulted in a “robust and in many ways growing black market” for US weapons is thriving in the region.<sup>10</sup> In July 2023, the Australian investigative journalist Lynne O’Donnell wrote an article for the *Foreign Policy* magazine in which she documented how the members of the Taliban movement, including functionaries of the IEA, were involved in arms dealings.<sup>11</sup>

The leftover weapons from NATO forces at the disposal of the Taliban do not seem limited to light arms. In January 2025, the Taliban government announced completion of a one-month training course for its armed forces personnel on operating the armour-piercing infantry-operated Konkurs and Milan guided missiles.<sup>12</sup> The announcement of the training alluded to the availability of the Russian-made Konkurs and the Franco-German Milan missiles in the Taliban’s arsenal.<sup>13</sup> A more recent news report<sup>14</sup> refers to the release of a video by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) that shows their rank and file receiving training on the use of the US-made shoulder-fired Javelin missiles renowned for their ability to lock targets and guide themselves to it. While Javelins were not part of the \$28 billion worth of arms US transfers to the Afghan government from 2002 to 2017, the then Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Shoigu claimed that the US had left behind over 100 Javelins in Afghanistan during its withdrawal in August 2021.<sup>15</sup>

The US National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan acknowledged the US lacks full accountability for all supplied defense materials. Compounding this, looting occurred at Bagram Airbase after the US withdrawal due to a miscommunication with the Afghan National Army.<sup>16</sup> Even before the US withdrawal, the Taliban possessed a substantial arsenal, including Kalashnikov-pattern assault rifles, light and heavy machine guns, RPGs, mortars, shotguns, and handguns.<sup>17</sup>

President Trump during his first cabinet meeting of the new administration said that "Afghanistan is one of the biggest sellers of military equipment in the world, you know why? They're selling the equipment that we left, I want to look into this. If we need to pay them, that's fine, but we want our military equipment back."<sup>18</sup>

In response to President Trump's claim of "getting a lot of it back,"<sup>19</sup> the Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid asserted that the military equipment leftover by NATO was now the property of Afghanistan, calling them the 'spoils of war' which no one could take away.<sup>20</sup> The reality, however, deviates from this statement. Had the Taliban followed through with their assertion, keeping the weapons confined solely to use within Afghanistan by the Taliban to defend their sovereignty and independence, Pakistan's concerns might have been limited to regional security implications. The weapons Mujahid promised to utilise to repel invaders have instead contributed to the booming business in illicit arms in Pakistan, becoming an easy path to acquire top of the line equipment for the terrorists in Pakistan.

### **Growing Concerns Over Terrorists Using US Weapons**

The fear of proliferation and small arms may start appearing on the black market and fueling other insurgencies within the region and around the world was well predicted following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistani officials have for long been making noises<sup>21</sup> about the threat posed by this proliferation of US leftover weapons. More recently, Pakistan's Counsellor at its Mission to the UN Security Council told an "Arria-Formula" meeting held in Sierra Leone that terrorists in Pakistan were in possession of large caches of weapons from the billions of dollars' worth of arms left over by the NATO forces in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Pakistan has also released an official statement 'calling upon the *de facto* authorities in Kabul to take all



necessary measures to ensure that these weapons do not fall into the wrong hands.<sup>23</sup>

Pakistan has also provided 'sufficient proof' to Afghan Taliban that militants were using US-left weapons for cross-border terrorism.<sup>24</sup> Recovered weapons from militants in terrorist incidents since 2021 corroborate Pakistan's long-held claim that US-abandoned weapons are being used against its forces.

More recently, Rick Novak's report for *The Washington Post*<sup>25</sup> about how Pakistani militants have gained a deadly advantage due to access to the leftover US weaponry from Afghanistan is significant because, first, it traces 63 of the weapons used in the deadly terrorist attack on a train in Pakistan that resulted in the loss of at least 21 lives to NATO's leftover stockpiles in Afghanistan. Second, it verifies the weapons initially provided by NATO to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) by tracing their identification numbers, establishing a definitive connection between NATO-issued arms and their subsequent procurement by militant factions operating in Pakistan. The group's access to advanced weaponry has terrorised Pakistan, leaving its under-equipped police force vulnerable to militants.<sup>26</sup> Although militant groups especially the Tehreek-i-Taliban (TTP) have conducted deadly attacks in Pakistan for years, the recent increase in the precision and lethality of its raids against Pakistani security forces was concerning.

The news emanating from Kabul is that the IEA officially rejects the *Washington Post* investigation regarding American weapons in Afghanistan falling into the hands of terrorists in Pakistan. The IEA Deputy Spokesperson, Hamdullah Fitrat claims that even though the practice of selling leftover NATO weapons took place in the past, that was not the case anymore. Fitrat instead suggested that the illicit flowing of weapons could have originated from previous attacks on NATO convoys passing through Pakistani land, particularly from Karachi and other ports, where shipments for foreign forces in Afghanistan were

frequently intercepted during their presence. Fitrat pressed on the fact that all necessary measures had been taken to prevent smuggling.<sup>27</sup>

While reports of stealing from NATO-bound shipments in Afghanistan through Pakistan are available,<sup>28</sup> the stolen cargo did not generally involve high-level military equipment the presence of which in the hands of terrorists in Pakistan is questioned by the Pakistani government. Moreover, the magnitude of the leftover weapons in Afghanistan and evidence presented above suggesting the mismanagement of the weapons by the IEA indicates that the weapons in possession of terrorists in Afghanistan most probably landed in their hands through the Taliban after the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan.

A February 20, 2025 press release from the London-based Tactics Institute for Security and Counter terrorism raised concerns about proliferation. It mentioned that the US provided the Afghan National Army with approximately 427,300 arms during its two-decade presence in Afghanistan, but left behind nearly 300,000 upon withdrawal. These advanced weapons, including M4 Carbine rifles and grenades, are now being supplied by the FAK (Freights of all Kinds) to terrorist groups like the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA). The seizure of a shipment of new American-made weapons concealed in onion sacks in an Afghan vehicle on December 13, 2024, highlights the ease with which these weapons are being smuggled across borders, empowering terrorism and endangering civilians.<sup>29</sup>

Having said that, the larger mismanagement by the Taliban government, combined with the porous nature of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, is playing a crucial role in the recent proliferation of arms. The rugged terrain and established smuggling routes, which have traditionally been used for narcotics and other contraband, are now being exploited to transport US-made weapons to various militant groups. In particular, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) are utilising these arms to intensify their attacks

against Pakistani security forces and civilian infrastructure, further destabilising an already volatile region.

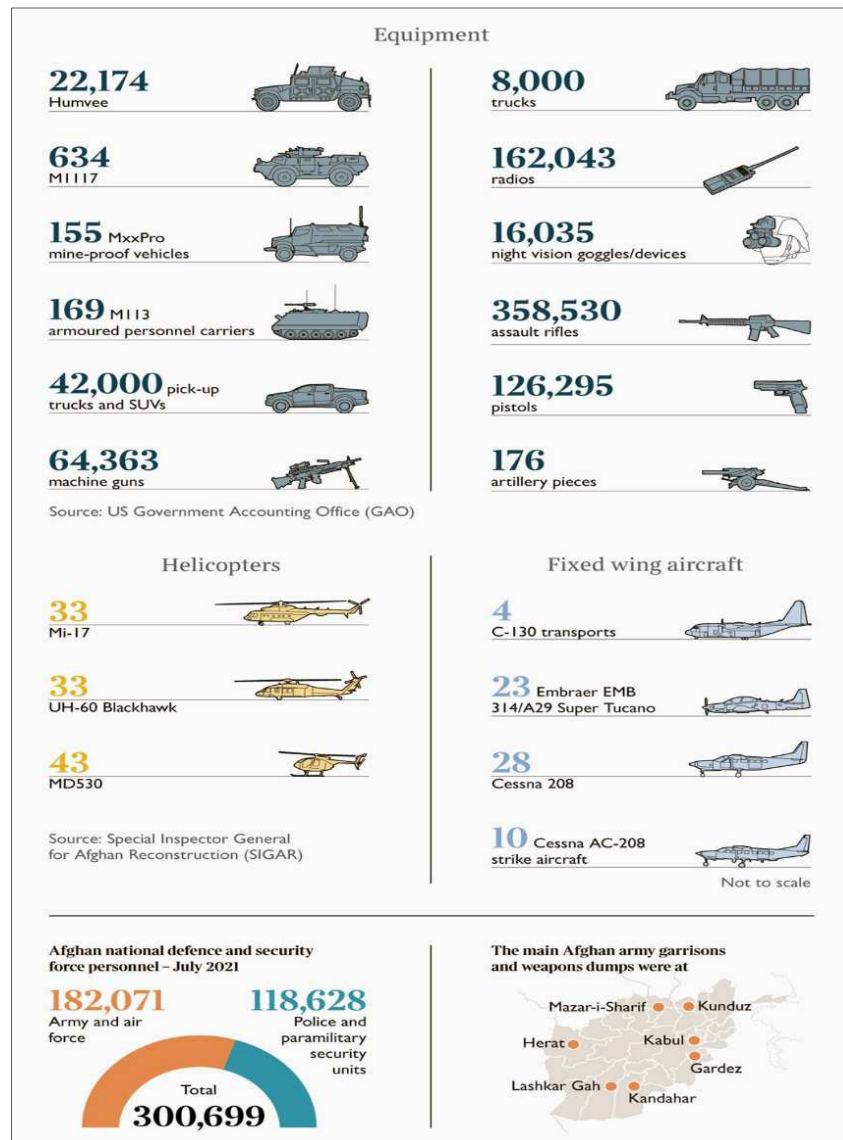
## **Conclusion**

The fear of proliferation and small arms may start appearing on the black market and fueling other insurgencies within the region and around the world was predicted immediately after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This proliferation is posing serious security challenges for Pakistan. It has fueled a surge in terrorism in Pakistan, exacerbating its two-decade struggle against the terrorism. Since the 2021 US withdrawal, Pakistani security forces have conducted operations, recovering foreign weapons from the terrorists killed during the operations. Several international reports have substantiated the acquisition of these weapons, and its usage by the militants. This widespread availability of NATO weaponry among terrorist groups severely threatens Pakistan and regional stability, necessitating a concerted regional and global efforts to prevent the region from descending into terrorism again.

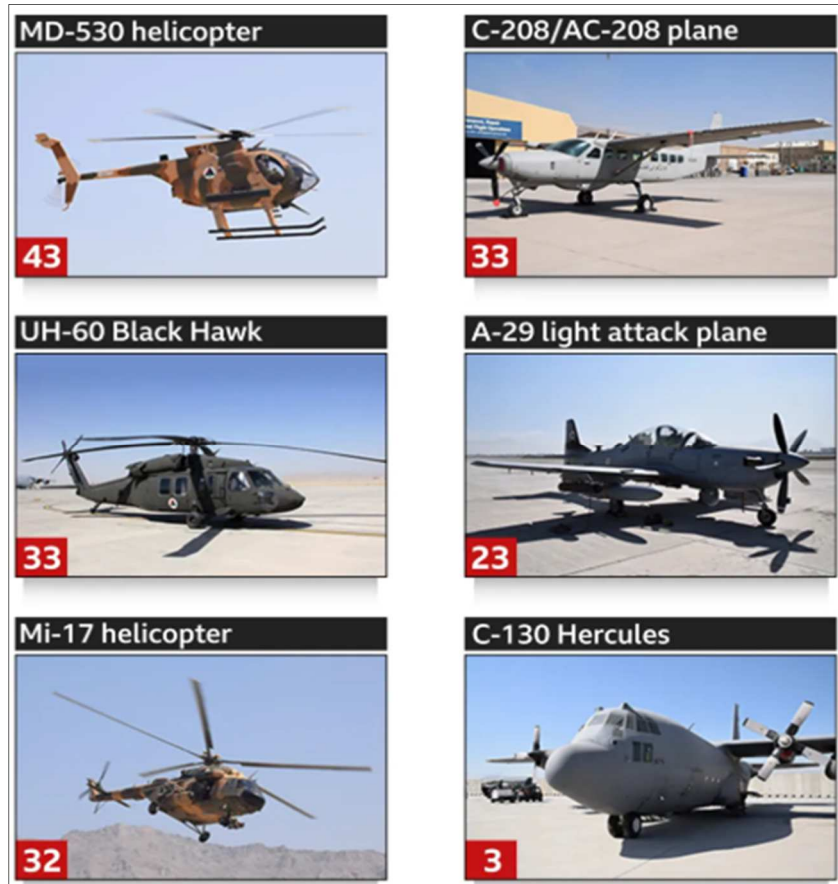
This proliferation is continued, fueling a large illicit arms market in Afghanistan. Terrorists profit from and use these weapons, particularly against Pakistani security personnel, making Pakistan the primary victim. This readily available arsenal destabilizes the region, exacerbated by porous borders and difficult terrain.

The influx of sophisticated weaponry, such as night vision equipment and advanced explosives, enables more complex and devastating terrorist attacks. Failure to address this issue will embolden terrorists and further destabilise the region, leading to increased terrorism and extremisms. Whether a coordinated weapons recovery effort will occur remains to be seen; meanwhile, concerns persist about proliferation in the region and access by militant groups. Preventing this proliferation hinges on the US' will to pursue a concerted and coordinated approach.

To mitigate the growing threat from abandoned weapons in Afghanistan, the US should devise a strategy focusing on their recovery, dismantling, preventing their use by militants, and stopping illicit arms sales in the region. The US should engage the Taliban, on the lines of the Doha Agreement, to recover or dismantle the abandoned weapons and combat the illicit arms trafficking. Pakistan's involvement is key as it can provide necessary support that can contribute significantly to the wider non-proliferation strategy and for that, a greater coordination between Pakistan and the US would be required. It is essential for Pakistan and Afghanistan to actively engage on this critical issue, alongside working with Iran.

**Figure.1:****Equipment left by the US (August 2021)**

Source: Thetimes.com

**Figure 2:****Aircraft under the control of Afghan National Army by 2021**

Source: US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (Sigar)

**Figure 3:****Arms and Ammunition in Afghanistan by 2021**

Category	Items	Quantity exported (2005–21)	Value of exports (2005–21)	Quantity remaining in August 2021
Weapons	M4/M16 and AK-variant rifles	258,300	USD 150.7 million	<b>316,260 weapons<sup>a</sup>/ USD 511.8 million</b>
	Various pistols	64,300	USD 31.6 million	
	Various sniper rifles	6,300	USD 33 million	
	Individual and crew-served light (such as M249), medium (such as M240B/PKM), and heavy machine guns (such as M2/DShk)	56,155	USD 233.7 million	
	Rocket-propelled and various mobile and hand-held grenade launchers	31,000	USD 51.4 million	
	12-gauge shotguns of various models	9,115	USD 4 million	
	60–82 mm mortar systems	1,845	USD 41.6 million	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>427,015<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>USD 546 million</b>	
Weapons accessories	Associated machine gun mounts	5,500	USD 5.7 million	<b>Unspecified</b>
	M150 weapon optics and PEQ-2/15/18 laser aiming devices	41,350	USD 41.8 million	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>46,850</b>	<b>USD 47.5 million</b>	
Other ground munitions	120 mm and 122 mm mortar rounds	188,000	USD 121.7 million	<b>Unspecified</b>
	81 mm and 82 mm mortar rounds	769,000	USD 84.8 million	
	60 mm mortar rounds	249,000	USD 89.6 million	
	40 mm and 73 mm rocket-propelled or cartridge grenade rounds	3,768,000	USD 269.5 million	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4,974,000</b>	<b>USD 565.6 million</b>	
Small arms ammunition and specialty munitions	Rounds of specialty 23 × 115 mm and .50 calibre ammunition	6,895,000	USD 38.3 million	<b>1,537,000 rounds total (~1,167,000 rounds of small arms ammunition)</b>
	Rounds of common small arms ammunition (such as 9 mm, 5.56 mm, 7.62 mm)	Millions	USD 3.19 billion	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>USD 41.49 million</b>	

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> This figure is roughly consistent with the Taliban's estimate of the numbers of small arms and light weapons it seized from the ANDSF. In February 2022, the head of the Taliban's Ranks Clearance Commission told reporters that his group took possession of more than 300,000 'light arms' in August 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2022).

<sup>b</sup> These figures exclude 224 D-30 Howitzers listed in the original report because the Survey does not categorize Howitzers as small arms and light weapons, which are the focus of this paper.

<sup>c</sup> Data was compiled from the Core Inventory Management System (CoreIMS) and unspecified 'US DoD records' and only includes US DoD-funded materiel procured through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programme, Pseudo-FMS cases, and the Excess Defense Articles programme (US DoD, 2022, p. 5).

Source: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org>

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