A survey conducted in Afghanistan in September 2004 by the Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium (HRRAC), a group of seven Afghan and six international organisations, found that 65 per cent of the respondents viewed disarmament as the single most important action for improving security in the country. The survey report, called Take the Guns Away: Afghan Voices on Security and Elections, bears witness to the fact that the gun remains an omnipresent feature of daily life in Afghanistan, perpetuating chronic insecurity and obstructing the internationally supported state-rebuilding process.

After more than two decades of conflict, Afghanistan is awash with weaponry, a warehouse of military hardware. Not only has the abundant supply of arms fuelled Afghanistan’s cycle of violence but it has also been a driver of conflict and criminality in surrounding regions—Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East—and beyond. In a classic case of ‘blowback’, weapons supplied by the West to the Afghan mujahideen to support their 1979-88 resistance against the Soviet Union have found their way into the arsenals of numerous non-state actors.

The expansion of criminal and terrorist networks, paralleled by the growth of the global black market in arms over the past decade, has ensured that weapons channelled to Afghanistan through the Cold War arms pipeline have been dispersed widely— as far afield, indeed, as the Philippines. This shows that the glut in weapons in Afghanistan represents a truly international security threat.

A disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) system, known as the Afghan New

Mark Sedra advocates a measured approach to disarmament and weapons control in Afghanistan.

Ammunition and ordinance confiscated by UK forces in Afghanistan. Although most of the heavy weaponry in Afghanistan has been accounted for, small arms remain ubiquitous in the country.
CASE STUDY

Beginnings Programme (ANBP), was launched in October 2003 to set in motion the demilitarisation of Afghan society. The overarching goal of the process is to dismantle active military formations, primarily the various militia groups that comprised the former Northern Alliance, in order to foster development and reconstruction.

It would be more appropriate to describe the ANBP as a demobilisation and reintegration effort, as the disarmament component was viewed from the outset as purely symbolic. With the exception of an initiative supported by the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to canton heavy weapons, the Afghan government and international community have been reticent on the establishment of a comprehensive disarmament campaign. This stems from three factors:

- The gun has become an inalienable part of Afghan culture, a sign of manhood that is fired in the air at celebrations such as weddings or to mark the birth of a child.
- With the security situation still precarious, Afghan men will be reluctant to relinquish their weapons, which serve as the principal guarantor of their property and physical security. The collective memory of some 25 years of invasion, central government repression and internecine conflict militates against a handover of weapons.
- With the country's economy a shambles, featuring an unemployment rate of 25 percent, serving in a militia represents one of the few viable employment options for Afghan men.2

Overcoming these obstacles — and, in so doing, containing the threat posed by the proliferation of weapons in Afghanistan and their diffusion across its porous borders — requires a measured and pragmatic approach that balances disarmament initiatives with systems of weapons control.

The arms pipeline

Millions of tons of military supplies, worth more than US$8 billion, were transferred to Afghanistan over the period 1979-2001.3 Much of the weaponry was provided by the US in the 1980s through a covert arms pipeline channelled via Pakistan. Directed by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in co-ordination with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the pipeline primarily delivered weapons of Soviet design or origin, emanating from US stocks or procured from third-party countries.

Among the arms supplied were around 400,000 Russian Kalashnikov assault rifles; Swiss-designed Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns; UK-manufactured Blowpipe shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile (SAM); Egyptian mortars; Chinese rockets; and 100 million rounds of ammunition from Turkey.4 The flow of arms did not cease in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal in 1988, with Afghan factions acquiring arms from three sources: foreign governments; small-scale manufacturers in the region; and black market suppliers.5

Estimates of the number of arms circulating in Afghanistan range from 1.5 million to 10 million.6 The country also holds one of the world’s largest stockpiles of ammunition — more than 100,000 tonnes according to some estimates.7

Guns remain inexpensive and easy to acquire, particularly along the border with Pakistan. A genuine Kalashnikov assault rifle can be bought for as little as US$120-US$150, while copies manufactured in small workshops doted around the region — there are an estimated 200 illicit workshops and 1,900 illegal arms shops in the Peshawar district of Pakistan alone — can be bought for as little as US$70.8

How the US received a sting

Given the ubiquity of small arms in Afghanistan, the country has become a ‘guaranteed stock’ and ‘one-stop shop’ for terrorists, anti-government insurgent groups and transnational criminal organisations.9 Arms that originated in Afghanistan have been found in the former Soviet Central Asian republics and Chechnya; India; Lebanon; and Pakistan.10

There are even reports that in the late 1990s, guerrillas from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a Philippines-based Islamist separatist movement, ordered a large shipment of arms from Afghanistan that included 3,000 assorted high-powered weapons.11

More recently, in November 2004 Pakistan’s Minister for the Interior, Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao, claimed that foreign militants fighting Pakistani forces in the country’s tribal areas were using weapons smuggled into the country from Afghanistan.12

Perhaps the most potent symbol of the ‘blowback’ from the Cold War arms pipeline is the FIM-92 Stinger missile, a man-portable air defence system (MANPADS) that was a decisive factor in the success of the mujahideen against the Soviets. It has been reported that the CIA supplied approximately 1,000 FIM-92 Stingers to the mujahideen, up to 600 of which were never recovered.13

The Stinger has become a prized item on the international black market, having turned up in North Korea; Qatar; Somalia; Sri Lanka; Turkey; the United Arab Emirates; and Zambia.14 It is believed that between 16 and 30 were transferred illegally to Iran, some of which were subsequently supplied to Hizbullah in Lebanon.15

MONITOR

AFGHANISTAN PROGRAMME SEeks to REDUCE THE RULE OF THE GUN
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The danger posed by the proliferation of MANPADS has been highlighted by three incidents. In November 2003, an A300B4 freighter operated by the parcel carrier DHL was hit by a Russian-manufactured SA-7 (or a more modern variant) at a height of about 8,000 ft during climb-out from Baghdad. The aircraft lost all three hydraulic systems and all flight controls, but the pilots were able to carry out a safe landing using only engine power settings.

This incident was followed in December 2003 by a similar attack on a US Air Force C-17 airlifter carrying 46 passengers and crew, again on climb-out from Baghdad. Once again, the crew recovered the aircraft safely. The third incident was the firing in November 2002 of two SA-7 SAMs against a B-757 operated by the Israeli carrier Arkia Airlines during climb-out from Mombasa in Kenya.

In the mid-1990s, the CIA allocated US$55 million to buy back the Stingers on the black market, offering up to US$150,000 each; this proved to be largely ineffective, however.17 The Afghan government has launched its own campaign to collect Stingers inside the country; however, only four had been collected by January 2005, leading many to believe that most of the weapons are in the hands of insurgents or have left the country.18

Some success but gun rule remains

The ANBP had collected approximately 24,200 small arms by February 2005 and the Afghan government, through ad hoc disarmament initiatives, confiscated an additional 60,000 pieces of military hardware.19 More importantly, with support from ISAF, the ANBP had successfully cantoned 8,354 heavy weapons by February — including tanks, rocket launchers and artillery pieces — accounting for 95 per cent of the estimated number in the country.20

Despite these accomplishments, however, the ‘rule of the gun’ continues to prevail over the ‘rule of law’ in contemporary Afghanistan. The principal threats to Afghan security — the persistent Taliban-led insurgency, warlordism and the revitalised drug trade — are sustained by the ready availability of weapons.

Curbing and managing the supply of weapons would not only advance Afghan government efforts to assert a monopoly over the use of force (a prerequisite of statehood) but would also contain the threat posed by illicit weapons transfers to external non-state actors.

With the first phase of the DDR process on schedule for completion in June, the ANBP has begun planning a second phase that is aimed at the more than 680 irregular militias across the country. These militias together comprise up to 80,000 men.21 It is important that this initiative, which targets paramilitary arms, features a community focus and is owned and operated by Afghans.

Furthermore, under the second phase of the ANBP incentives for the handover of weapons should be delivered to communities rather than individuals, avoiding counter-productive cash-for-weapons programmes. The Afghan Ministry of Defence says that the programme will also seek to establish a code of conduct for weapon ownership and institute modes of punishment for illegal possession of firearms.

While the notion of taking guns out of every Afghan home is arguably implausible as a weapons-free Texas, a system can be put in place to register and
manage weapons. In light of ingrained suspicions of centralised authority, the system should be decentralised — based and overseen at the district level.

Regardless of the design and mandate of a putative disarmament and weapons control programme, if progress is not made to improve security and economic conditions and develop a stable and representative political system, it will be a fruitless endeavour. Afghans must feel secure; have access to economic opportunity; and possess confidence in the viability and sustainability of the political dispensation if they are to consider laying down their arms.

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