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Afghanistan–Pakistan: U.S. Must Ensure that Its Military Gear Does Not Exacerbate Regional Tensions

Lisa Curtis

After 12 years of fighting against the Taliban in Afghanistan and failing to convince Pakistani leaders to crack down decisively on terrorist bases on their side of the border, American military planners are considering providing Pakistan with billions in leftover equipment from the war. A *Washington Post* story from last weekend indicates that U.S. military planners are in discussions with their Pakistani counterparts about the possibility of leaving behind, for Pakistani use, armored vehicles and other equipment deemed too expensive to ship back to the U.S.

While giving the Pakistanis U.S. military equipment, including mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles, might make sense from a cost and logistical standpoint, the U.S. also needs to take into account the impact of such decisions on regional security dynamics. Washington should ensure that any military equipment it leaves in Pakistan does not exacerbate regional tensions. Washington should also condition the transfer of such military equipment on Islamabad's meeting certain counterterrorism benchmarks, including cracking down on groups that are destabilizing Afghanistan, such as the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network.

Afghanistan Retrograde: Massive Undertaking. As the U.S. winds down military operations in Afghanistan and withdraws its troops, it must carry out a major logistical feat in shipping out, selling, or disposing of massive amounts of military equipment. The total Afghan retrograde operation is expected to cost between \$5 billion and \$7 billion and to involve nearly 20,000 filled shipping containers.

Because of their size and shipping costs, the U.S. must decide what to do with more than a thousand MRAP vehicles—turn them into scrap metal in Afghanistan or leave “as is” with the Pakistani military. The MRAPs were used by U.S. and NATO soldiers to protect themselves from improvised explosive devices across the country and likely saved countless lives. Each MRAP is worth about \$1 million and would cost over \$100,000 each to ship back to the U.S.

The U.S. is reluctant to leave the MRAPs with the Afghans, whom it assesses as incapable of operating and maintaining them. Most other countries that would like the MRAPs are unwilling to pay the high cost of shipping the roughly 20-ton vehicles, making Pakistan—which shares a 1,500-mile border with Afghanistan—a more practical destination. Pakistan has expressed interest in the MRAPs for use in its fight against Pakistani Taliban insurgents. The Central Asian states that border Afghanistan may also be interested in obtaining the American leftover military hardware.

But logistical and efficiency considerations should not be the sole drivers behind U.S. decisions on what to do with the MRAPs and other military equipment from the war in Afghanistan. U.S. poli-

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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Afghans are resentful of what they perceive as lack of U.S. focus on pressing Pakistan to crack down on Taliban insurgents on its territory, and have already expressed concern over the possibility of the bulk of the leftover equipment going to Islamabad. Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman General Zahir Azimi this week said his government would request that the U.S. leave the equipment with Afghan security forces, insisting that the Afghan army had the capability to use the advanced equipment.

Recommendations. As the U.S. debates the fate of the leftover military equipment in Afghanistan, it should:

- **Ensure that any transfers of equipment to Pakistan not exacerbate regional tensions.** The U.S. must conduct a thorough interagency analysis of the likely impact on regional security dynamics of any potential transfers of excess military equipment. Afghan–Pakistani relations have experienced high tension over the past year. Afghan leaders meet frequently with Pakistan’s civilian leaders but blame Pakistan’s military and intelligence service for attacks in Afghanistan. Kabul has balked at Pakistani demands that Afghanistan scale back its relations with India and allow Pakistani training of Afghan security forces. There have been some flare-ups along the shared border over the past year, and the absence of international troops in the region raises the possibility of future border confrontations.
- **Condition transfers of excess military items on Pakistan’s meeting the same conditions required for it to receive other U.S. military equipment or support.** U.S. legislation requires a yearly certification from the U.S. Secretary of State for the release of security-related aid to Pakistan. Among other things, the certification requires that Pakistan make progress on ending

support to terrorist groups and that it prevent them from operating on Pakistani territory. In February 2013, the U.S. Administration failed to certify Pakistan for military aid and instead issued a partial national security waiver to allow the release of some military equipment in fiscal year 2013. Despite nearly \$27 billion in civil and military aid to Pakistan over the past decade, the U.S. has been unable to persuade Pakistani leaders to adopt consistent and comprehensive policies that crack down on terrorism in all its forms. Providing any excess military items to Pakistan should be contingent on credible information that Pakistan is supporting, not countering, U.S. antiterrorism goals in the region.

- **Restart Afghan–Pakistani military dialogue.** Afghan and Pakistani military leaders have met on several occasions in the past, but the dialogue has been dormant for some time. As soon as a new government is formed after Afghanistan’s April elections, the U.S. must encourage a meeting between the new Afghan defense chief and Pakistan’s Chief of Army Raheel Sharif to smooth tensions and foster greater transparency and trust on military matters.

Conclusion. Providing Pakistan with military equipment that the U.S. is unwilling to leave with the Afghans could send the wrong signal in the region. While it may be logistically expedient to give the MRAPs to Pakistan, the U.S. must ensure that such a decision will not negatively affect the regional security situation. There is enough uncertainty already about Afghanistan’s future because of the U.S. and NATO drawdown, and Washington must not make problems worse through hasty decisions about what to do with excess military equipment from the war.

—*Lisa Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*