

Small Arms Proliferation and Political Instability in South Asia

Jagat Ballav Pattanaik*

** Jagat Ballav Pattanaik is a Senior Research Scholar in International Politics, SIS, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.*

The post-second world war politics witnessed dramatic changes in international relations. The most important aspects of these changing structures have been the emergence of newly independent states, and the beginning of the Cold War. As the Cold War grew in intensity, the newly independent states of the "Third World" came within the fold of East-West rivalry. The East-West competition took the form of installing and maintaining military bases in several strategic locations in the "Third World" and extending military and financial aid to client states in these regions keeping them on the boil at the time. Small arms and minor weapons in such volatile conditions, played a central role as instruments of death and destruction in all many civil and military engagements, and societies at large bore the brunt of such disturbances.

The trade in small arms has shown its most disturbing development since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet bloc[1]. With the end of the Cold war, the multitude of national and ethnic fault-lines stand out with greater clarity. The problem of ethnic nationalism has become a new danger to the state with each ethnic group perceiving themselves as a separate nation. Small arms dispersal is a significant contributing factor in this situation.

Small Arms Dimension

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) defines small arms as "all crew portable direct fire weapons of a calibre; a measure of bore diameter less than 50mm and will include a secondary capability to defeat light armour and helicopters"[2]. Because terrorists tend to engage the enemy in small numbers in brief and highly mobile encounter, they favour compact, flexible, lightweight weapons as they can lay down concentrated fire. Such weapons are also easier to conceal which is important for violent groups seeking to travel undetected. Moreover, so far as a few terrorists have received military training, a high premium is placed on relatively simple weapons that are easy to load, aim and fire. Terrorists generally prefer simple weapons such as bombs, automatic pistols, assault rifles and sub-machine guns and avoid high tech weapons which are more likely to go wrong[3]. On an almost global level, terrorists now seem to have good access to small arms and anti-tank weapons. This represents a 30% increase in the known number of manufacturing countries as compared to the last decade[4].

The most illustrative case study on proliferation of small arms can be substantively reconstructed after the culmination of the Afghanistan war during the 1980s.

The Mujahideen Arms Pipeline

The 1979 Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan invited the US response in the form of massive aid to the Afghan Mujahideen in terms of money and military hardware[5]. On the eve of intervention, the Mujahideens were loosely organised and highly armed with old *British Enfield Rifles* and a few *AK-47s*, captured from Government troops. In later part, the Mujahideen had access to small arms both from outside countries and through capturing from the enemy.

The USA was running a highly effective military assistance programme to the resistance. Beginning under the Carter administration and accelerating during the 1980s under the Reagan administration, the US supplied Mujahideens with an estimated \$2 billion in covert military assistance[6].

For the first five years, the US provided the rebels with weapons designed and manufactured by the erstwhile Soviet Union or other East-European countries so they could deny that the US was providing such assistance.

But the turning point came in 1986 with the arrival of more sophisticated weapons under a covert CIA programme. The Mujahideen were supplied with British made *Blowpipe*, American made *Red eye anti-aircraft missiles* and *Stinger missiles* besides a large amount of small arms. Routine Soviet anti-SA-7 counter-measures had little effect against the *Blowpipe* and *Stingers*[7]. The *Stinger* is a shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile that can be used to shoot down anything from a fighter plane to a civilian airliner. The initial supply of *Stingers* was limited to only 600 missiles; another 300 or so followed soon afterwards[8].

Pakistan acted as a middleman in regulating the deliveries of arms to the Mujahideen camp. Once these arms reached Pakistan they were handed over to the intelligence service, the Inter-service Intelligence (ISI), and stored in depots at Ojhiri (near Rawalpindi) or Quetta in the Pakistan province of Baluchistan, near the Afghan border[9]. It was the ISI that decided which of the Mujahideen groups would receive which weapons. By the time the weapons reached Mujahideen commanders in the field, they had been loaded and off-loaded at least 15 times over a distance of several thousand kilometers by truck, ship, train and pack animal[10].

Further, Egypt and China were to prove critical to the war as both had vast stocks of Soviet-type arms – either as one-time allies of the Soviets or produced Soviet arms under license using Soviet tools and dies. Supplying the Mujahideens with Soviet arms made good sense, as they would be compatible with any equipment they might capture from the enemy.

Hence, Mujahideen's military capability substantially improved with the inflow of small arms and weapons from a number of sources. They possessed weapons like English *Lee Enfield 303 Kalashnikovs* of various types, M-1 carbines and rifles, Chinese-made *Type-56-1* assault rifle, *PPsh sub-machine gun*, *machine guns of 7.62 calibre (RBK, RPD, rocket launcher RPG-7 and the simplified version of RPG-2)*, rockets, automatic grenade launchers, anti-tank weapons, anti-aircraft weapons, combat vehicles, explosives and finally revolvers like *Makarov* and the *Takarev*.

Small Arms and Drugs: Fallout of the Afghanistan War

“The single most important factor in the introduction of small arms and high weapons into South Asia was the effort by the US and Pakistan to arm the Afghan Mujahideen resistance.”[11] But the pipeline was extremely badly organised and poorly thought out. As a result, the pipeline leaked profusely and virtually ruptured[12]. The South Asian region is now saturated with qualitatively different weapons.

AK-47 assault rifles and automatic of various brands, rockets, explosives and anti-tank weapons are available in the booming arms markets of Pakistan. These markets dominate small towns within Peshawar and its suburbs, North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan. Darra Adam Khel, Bara and Landi Kotal of the NWFP attract customers from all over the world in search of unlicensed weapons. The Darra area, under the control of Adam Khel Afridis, has been involved in arms manufacture since the early years of the 20th century- but the Afghan war brought radical changes in the quality and quantity of arms[13]. Today, Darra has become one of the world’s biggest private weapons markets. Almost all members of each family participate in producing a variety of arms as well as in repairing and selling them in the region. With the passage of time these weapons, started moving slowly beyond the NWFP area. This is because of excess stocks and better mobility.

The arms merchants purportedly in collusion with the police turned “the area from Niazi Chowk to Azadi Chowk in Lahore where at least 25 arms shops were operating, into Darra Adan Khel gradually”[14] Sindh emerged as one of the largest underground arms market. In the arms market of Pakistan a Chinese-made *Type –56* rifle could be bought for about Pakistani rupees 15,000 the *MP-5* for Rs. 70,000 and the *G-3* for Rs. 30,000.[15] Soviet weaponry such as the *AKSU-74 SMG* version of the *AK74* retails at Pakistani rupees 20,000[16].

In addition, however, small arms are also an essential part of the international narcotics trade. The clandestine arms market and the drug mafia both travel along the same route and sustain each other in causing havoc and destruction. Since militants need a lot of finance to buy arms they find drug smuggling the best way to make money. Side by side, the drug carriers and mafia sell arms to the terrorists. The Afghanistan war contributed, to a larger extent to the increasing drug trade. Mujahideen were, reportedly, financing their insurgency partly by the sale of opium[17]. One report identified that by 1992 over 80 percent of the arable land in Nangarhar province was devoted to cultivation of opium[18]. Moreover, since the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India have become major trans-shipment points for heroin. As a result, various arms markets were also flooded with drugs inside Pakistan. Sohrab Goth of Karachi has been known as a famous drugs bazaar within the region. The international drugs dealers also turned Pakistan into their main laboratory. Thus the proliferation of small arms tended to increase the narcotics production or trade centres.

Political Instability in South Asia

South Asia is comprised of a rich mosaic of plural ethnic communities. Its societies are deeply divided by linguistic, ethnic, religious and cultural cleavages. A salient feature of recent political developments in South Asia is the frequent occurrence of violent incidents signifying political

instabilities, which result from encounters between religious groups or ethnic communities. In this situation, the availability of a much larger quantity of small arms in the hands of violent groups tends to alter the power symmetry radically leading to civil strifes and political disturbances.

Ethnic conflict has deeply affected the social structure of Pakistan. The conflicts revolve around the Baluchis, Pathans, Punjabis, Sindis and Mohajirs. The ethnic groups get easy access to arms because of the numerous arms markets within Pakistan and Pakistan's slack gun control laws. One region of Pakistan that has been directly affected by the growing availability of small arms is Sind province[19]. Sind province and its state capital Karachi have been witnessing ethnic violence among Mohajirs and Sindis. The easy availability of small arms and minor weapons in Sind arms market well equips the violent groups.

The state of Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir and North-Eastern part of India have been major internal security problems for India. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan has been accompanied by massive dispersion of small arms into India. The quality and lethal capacity of terrorist groups increased as compared to the bulk of weapons they had earlier. The presence of AK-47 in the Punjab was first recorded in 1987[20]. Sikhs have been spotted in Darra openly bargaining in the weapons shops: these visits were facilitated by International Sikh Youth Federation in collaboration with a Pakistani political party, Jamaat-e-Islami[21]. In addition, there has been a marked increase in smuggling of small arms from Pakistan into Kashmir. Among the weapons provided to the Kashmiri terrorists included *Type 56 rifles*, several types of *machineguns*, *long-range sniper rifles*, *pistols*, *RPGs*, *60mm mortars and automatic grenade launchers*[22]. In J&K, over 8000 *Kalashnikov assault rifles* (of different models) with over a million rounds of ammunition, besides hundreds of highly lethal machine guns and nearly 300 tons of explosives, have been reportedly recovered from the militants since December 1989[23]. It has been reported that all of these weapons used by the terrorists of Punjab and J&K are "identical to those provided by the ISI to the Afghan Mujahideen"[24].

The north-eastern part of India seethes with ethnic, cultural economic and political discontent. Some of this have been due to outsiders, refugee population, land alienation and growing unemployment. There, the terrorist groups have linkages among themselves as well as with external agencies with a vested interest in creating instability in India. The ULFA has links with the NSCN of Nagaland, and the LTTE of Sri Lanka. The north-eastern militants buy weapons from the Cox Bazar of Bangladesh. Further, it has been strongly believed that the ISI of Pakistan has its strongholds in Nepal. The ISI also interferes in the north-eastern part to create instabilities in the region. Hence, the flow of small arms from Pakistan via Nepal to the north-eastern part can never be rule out. In recent years, the transcontinental flights have facilitated transborder movements with great ease.

The episode of arms-dropping in Purulia, West Bengal, in December 1995 reflects the Post-Cold War reality. The An-26 transport plane that dumped the arms in Purulia, took off from Karachi, Pakistan, for India. The transport plane para-dropped three large weapons consignments which included *Kalashnikovs*, *rocket launchers*, *anti-tank grenades*, *hard grenades and 9mm pistols*[25]. Pakistan's involvement in this case becomes clear when the crew admitted that they had picked up the consignment from Karachi and dropped it in Purulia. Thus the Purulia episode strengthened the

fact that Pakistan is engaged in dispersing weapon inside India thereby threatening the country's stability.

Further, the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has affected the political stability of the island for more than a decade. The LTTE controls most of the northern and eastern coastal areas of Sri Lanka but its guerrillas have conducted operations throughout the island and even outside it. The case of Rajiv Gandhi assassination illustrates this point better. Drawing on the loyalties and resources of members of a global Tamil diaspora, the LTTE network links arms dealers and foreign mercenaries[26]. The LTTE acquired small arms from outlets in Singapore and Thailand. Arms have also been procured from Mujahideen groups in Afghanistan and arms markets in NWFP. Pakistani smuggling networks and members of the ISI are reported to have participated in the venture[27]. The LTTE has set up arms manufacturing plants in Jaffna Peninsula. Now, the LTTE's assortment of weapons include *Kalashnikovs, T-56 Chinese assault rifle, pistol, Revolver, G3, LMG, SMG, Rocket launchers, mortars grenades, anti-aircraft missiles and RPG-7 anti-tank weapons.*

There is little doubt that the easy availability and proliferation of small arms in the contemporary South Asian region have increased the levels and quality of violence. The net result is an alarming situation in which the countries are caught in a vicious cycle, arresting the process of economic growth and socio-political stability.

1. Christopher Smith "Light Weapons- The Forgotten Dimension of the International Arms Trade", 1994 (London: Centre for Defence studies) p.277
2. Preface to Jane's Infantry Weapons, 1992-93
3. Richard Clutterbuck "Trends in Terrorist Weaponry" in Paul Wilkinson (ed.), *Technology and Terrorism* (London: Frank Cass &Co. Ltd., 1994) p.138.
4. Swadesh Rana, "Small Arms and Intra-State Conflict", UNIDIR Research Paper No, 34, March 1995.
5. William D. Hartung, "US Weapons at War", *A Special Report*, prepared by the Arms Trade Resource Centre of the World Policy Institute, 1995, p.16.
6. New York Times, 18 April 1988
7. David C. Isby, *War in a Distant Country, Afghanistan: Invasion and Resistance*, (London: Arms & Armour, 1989), p.115.
8. Ibid.
9. Chris Smith, "The Impact of Light Weapons on Security: A Case Study of South Asia, "SIPRI Year Book, 1995. P.588
10. Ibid.
11. Human Rights Watch, Quoted in William D. Hartung, n.5, p.18.
12. Christopher Smith, n.1, p.280
13. A.K.M. Abdus Sabur, "Pakistan: Ethnic Conflicts and the question of National Integration", *BISS Journal* (Dhaka), Vol.2, no.4, October 1990, p.507
14. *Frontier Post* (Lahore), 30 June 1992
15. Chris Smith, *The Diffusion of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Pakistan and Northern India* (London: Brassey's 1993) p.12
16. Ibid.

17. *Washington Post* 17 December 1986
18. Bennett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, (Yale Univ. Press, 1995) p.261
19. Chris Smith, (1995) "Light Weapons and Ethnic Conflict in South Asia, *Lethal Commerce: The Global Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons* (Cambridge) p.66
20. *Ibid*, p.68
21. *Times of India*, 15 August 1992
22. Yossef Bodansky, "Pakistan, Kashmir and the Trans-Asian axis", *Indian Defence Review* (New Delhi), Vol.10, no.4 October-December,1995 pp-68-69.
23. *Times of India*, 3 April 1993
24. *The New Islamist International*, A Report of the Task Force on Terrorism and Conventional warfare, House Republican Research Committee, US House of Representatives 1 February 1993.
25. *Asian Age* (Calcutta), 24 December 1995
26. US Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism* 1994, April 1995, p.48
27. Prashant Dikshit, "Weaponisation of Societies: Selected Region Studies on Processes and Impact of Proliferation of Small Arms and Minor Weapon", *Strategic Analysis* (New Delhi), vol. 18, no.7.