

Blaming the Afghan War Failure on — Russia

Another part of the U.S. mainstream media's rash of Russia-bashing is to claim that Moscow is arming Afghanistan's Taliban, but again the evidence doesn't match the accusations, writes Jonathan Marshall.

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Featured image: Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter pilots fly near Jalalabad, Afghanistan, April 5, 2017. (Army photo by Capt. Brian Harris)

News flash: The United States is supplying spiffy new Humvees and Ford Ranger pickup trucks to the Taliban, who brazenly parade their troops in those vehicles "without fear of being targeted by Afghan or Coalition forces," according to a senior fellow at the neoconservative Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

As Bill Poggio [observed](#) in the foundation's *Long War Journal*,

"The Taliban displayed their military power in the contested district of Bakwa in a newly released video titled From the Fronts of Farah. The video which was released on the Taliban's propaganda website, Voice of Jihad, 'is dedicated to . . . showcasing the strength, control and advances of the Mujahideen of Islamic Emirate,' according to an accompanying statement."

Poggio concluded, more reasonably than I suggest in my opening sentence, that the trucks displayed in the Taliban video were "captured from Afghan Army and police units," not ordered directly by the Afghan insurgents out of a Pentagon catalog.

But U.S. officials have not shown the same good sense in their continued, but unsupported, denunciations of Russia for supplying the Taliban with assault rifles and other small arms.

I demolished that canard in a [May 29 article](#). I pointed out that, contrary to a raft of news stories based on Pentagon leaks about Russian backstabbing, the director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency admitted in a Senate hearing, "I have not seen real physical evidence of weapons or money being transferred" by Russia to the Taliban.

The chairman of NATO's military committee restated that conclusion in almost the same words just a few days ago. He told reporters in Washington,

"I don't have and I haven't seen any hard evidence on the delivery of weapons from the Russians to the Taliban."

Despite such authoritative denials, leading U.S. national security reporters — and

government officials — have been keeping the story alive, as it fits the larger Washington narrative about Russia’s threat to U.S. security and Western values.

In late August, following President Trump’s address to the nation committing to a long-term battle in Afghanistan, Andrea Mitchell of NBC [asked](#) Secretary of State Rex Tillerson,

“why didn’t the President mention Russia’s rearming of the Taliban, which General [John] Nicholson has been talking about very openly? He seemed to be letting Russia off the hook in his speech.”

(Nicholson, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, has long complained of Russia’s “malign influence” in Afghanistan, and said in April that he was “[not refuting](#)” claims of Russian help to the Taliban.)

In response, Secretary Tillerson also chose not to refute such claims.

“To the extent Russia is supplying arms to the Taliban, that is a violation, obviously, of international norms and it’s a violation of UN Security Council norms,” he said. “We certainly would object to that and call Russia’s attention to that.”

Russia vigorously denies doing any such thing. Of course it may be lying — providing arms to bog down the United States in war, or to curry favor with the Taliban as it racks up military gains across the country.

Dated Weapons

But many of the Russian weapons in the hands of the Taliban date back to Russia’s own misadventure in Afghanistan in the 1980s, according to one small arms expert [interviewed](#) by an editor at *The Atlantic*. Other weapons in Taliban hands are Chinese or Pakistani knock-offs.

“Russian-made weapons of those calibers can be obtained in many places,” said Thomas Ruttig, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

As I documented previously, Moscow has been shipping assault weapons and providing flight training to Afghan *government* forces, not the Taliban. The insurgents don’t need to buy their weapons from abroad when they can simply take them from the Afghan army or police. “It’s simple and cheaper,” one Taliban commander told an American reporter.



Seen through a night-vision device, U.S. Marines conduct a combat logistics patrol in Helmand province, Afghanistan, April 21, 2013. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Anthony L. Ortiz)

As a result, U.S. taxpayers are going to great expense to arm the very people who are killing U.S. soldiers and their allies in Afghanistan.

The Taliban don't just use those captured Humvees and trucks for show. In a stunning operation in mid-October, insurgents drove explosives-laden vehicles "captured from security forces" into an Afghan Army base in the southern province of Kandahar, killing most of its 60 members and leaving only two unhurt.

A day or two earlier, Taliban forces used the same tactic in two southeastern provinces, killing more than 40 police officers by detonating explosives in "Humvees paid for by the United States military," [according](#) to the *New York Times*.

After 16 years of failed war in Afghanistan, U.S. officials may find it convenient to look for scapegoats like Russia. But the fault, with apologies to the Bard, is not in Moscow but in ourselves.

Jonathan Marshall's previous articles on Afghanistan include "[Alleged Russia-Taliban Arms Link Disputed](#)," "[The Goal of 'Not Losing' in Afghanistan](#)," "[Afghanistan: President Obama's Vietnam](#)," and "[Why Washington's War on Drugs in Afghanistan Isn't Working](#)."

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