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Why India Transferred Attack Helicopters to Afghanistan

India's attack helicopter transfer to Afghanistan suggests a new era in ties between New Delhi and Kabul.

By Ankit Panda
February 01, 2016

Earlier this month, the Afghan Ministry of Defense inducted three Mi-25 attack helicopters into the Afghan Air Force (AAF). The helicopters were supplied by India and mark the first time that New Delhi has transferred lethal military equipment to Afghanistan. The AAF inducted three of four scheduled Mi-25 helicopters. The Mi-25s will replace Afghanistan's aging Mi-35 attack helicopters and provide a much-needed boost to Afghanistan's air support capabilities in the ongoing struggle against the Taliban across the country.

On January 20, Afghanistan confirmed that three multirole Mi-25 had been assembled and were ready for operational use. The Mi-25s will likely see their first use in the ongoing struggle against Taliban fighters in Helmand province. "We have always been helped by India. The helicopters donated by India to Afghanistan have been assembled and will help us fight terrorists," Ghulam Sakhi Ahmadzai, deputy chief of procurement at the Afghan defense ministry, told *Tolo News*.

The Mi-25 agreement between the two countries was announced in November 2015, when Afghan National Security Adviser Hanif Atmar and Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister

Hekmat Khalil Karzai visited New Delhi. India had previously supplied three Hindustan Aeronautic Limited (HAL) Cheetal trainer helicopters to the AAF.

The Afghan Air Force already has experience with Russian-made Mi-24 attack helicopters and operates five older Mi-35s, that were supplied by the Czech Republic in 2008. The AAF's existing Mi-35s, however, are not commonly used. As Franz-Stefan Gady explained in *The Diplomat* in November, the "Mi-25 is a close-air support aircraft armed with a YakB four-barrelled, 12.7mm, built-in, flexibly mounted machine gun, as well as rocket and grenade launchers. It can be deployed against ground troops including armored and slow moving air targets. It can also serve as a low-capacity troop transport (up to eight paratroopers), and be used for medical evacuation missions." The helicopter is thus well-suited for the AAF's role in helping the Afghan National Army take Taliban positions with close-air support.

Unfortunately, given the many challenges facing Afghan security forces in Afghanistan, the Indian transfer of Mi-25s is not a game changing development on the battlefield. Instead, the broader significance of the transfer is in what it tells us about New Delhi's approach to security in Afghanistan. Despite close ties between India and Afghanistan, New Delhi took until early 2016 to deliver lethal weaponry to Kabul due to concerns that doing so could aggravate Pakistan, which sees increased Indian support for the Afghan government as a potential threat.

The Indian government, however, is moving away from that old paradigm in managing its relationship with Afghanistan. Indeed, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi showed his interest in decoupling India's approach to Afghanistan from its approach to Pakistan when he made a surprise stopover in Lahore just hours after having declared his support for Afghanistan before the Afghan parliament.