

SALW Proliferation and State Fragility: The Case of Afghanistan

Gyula Speck

Speck.gyula@uni-nke.hu

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Supervised by Erzsébet N. Rózsa

Institute of World Economics

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Abstract

The illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) remains a security challenge, especially in a local and regional context. One of the drivers of SALW proliferation is fragile statehood. SALW proliferation and fragile statehood are typically discussed in separate contexts in the literature, but the two cannot be separated, with Afghanistan providing an illustrative example. Throughout its history, Afghanistan has not only been the theatre of “great games” played by foreign powers, but also of enduring internal conflicts that have generated an ideal demand factor for SALW inflows. The aim of our study is to examine the interaction between state fragility and SALW inflows and illicit diversion in Afghanistan, particularly during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Our conclusion is that Afghanistan's historically fragile statehood has been unable to control the proliferation of SALW, which have thus conserved and contributed to state fragility. However, US malpractice played a major role in uncontrolled SALW proliferation and diversion too. Our analysis also highlights that cases of illicit proliferation arising from state fragility may vary from state to state, as each state has its own historically evolved state characteristics.

Keywords: small and light weapons, proliferation, state fragility, Afghanistan, arms control

Contents

List of Acronyms	4
Introduction	5
Methodological note.....	6
1. Conceptual framework	6
1.1. State fragility	6
1.2. Small and Light Weapons.....	8
1.3. SALW proliferation along the authority-legitimacy-capacity triangle.....	10
2. State fragility and SALW proliferation: The case of Afghanistan	13
2.1. SALW flows to Afghanistan, 1973-2001	14
2.2. SALW proliferation and the failure of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.....	17
2.3. SALW exports to Afghanistan after 9/11	21
2.4. Situation after August 2021	26
2.5. Regional risks of illicit SALW proliferation and diversion.....	28
3. Conclusions	30
Literature	33

List of Acronyms

ANA - Afghan National Army

ANDSF - Afghan National Defence and Security Forces

ANP - Afghan National Police

APW - Afghan Peace Watch

ATT – Arms Trade Treaty

CIA - Central Intelligence Agency

CoreIMS - Core Inventory Management System

CSTC-A - Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan

DDR - disarmament, demilitarisation and reintegration

FATA - Federally Administered Tribal Areas

ISAF - International Security Force

ISI - Inter-Services Intelligence

ISKP - Islamic State affiliate Islamic State Khorasan Province

MANPAD – man-portable air-defence-system

Navy IPO - Navy's International Programs Office

OSCE - Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

OVERLORD - Operational Verification of Reliable Logistics Oversight Database

SALW – small and light weapons

SCIP - Security Cooperation Information Portal

SEESAC - South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons

SIPRI - Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

TTP - Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan

UNAMA - United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

UNODC - United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

US DoD - US Department of Defense

US GAO - US Government Accountability Office

US SIGAR - US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

USASAC - US Army Security Assistance Command

Introduction

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has put nuclear weapons back on the agenda of the Western world. Yet, small and light weapons (SALW) are still considered as an important security issue, especially by international organisations and developing countries. Amid the increase in armed conflicts and global crises, illicit SALW proliferation and diversion remains a risk, especially in regional and local contexts. As the UN Secretary-General reported, in 2022 SALW caused most civilian deaths after heavy weapons and explosives in the world's 12 major armed conflicts.¹ It is not a coincidence that SALW are sometimes referred to in the literature as the "real weapons of mass destruction".² However, the uncontrolled proliferation of SALW has further implications for human security and global development beyond the loss of life. This link is recognised in the UN 2023 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Goals target 16, Promote Justice and Strong Institutions. One of the main drivers of SALW proliferation, in addition to the conflict-affected environment, is fragile statehood.³

While the challenges posed by SALW are often examined in the context of armed conflict and organised crime, less light has been shed on the links between state fragility and SALW proliferation. There is a rich literature on both state fragility and SALW, but the two phenomena are often discussed separately. Research on SALW proliferation and state fragility to date has either discussed the topic from certain specific aspects⁴ or mainly focused on African countries⁵ and to a lesser extent on other countries.⁶ However, Afghanistan, where state-building efforts have notoriously rarely succeeded, is also noteworthy for such an analysis. Although the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 hit the headlines, not least because the Taliban had acquired a significant amount of sophisticated US and other Western weapons, SALW proliferation has had a significant interaction with Afghan statehood and security since the second half of the 20th century.

The link between fragile statehood and SALW in Afghanistan has been discussed explicitly in only a few previous works.⁷ Moreover, recent publications on the subject have rarely incorporated recent theories on fragile statehood. The following paper aims to examine the relationship between these two areas, state fragility and SALW proliferation, systemically. In

¹ Secretary-General 2023a, 2.

² Danczuk 2015

³ Wisotzki 2022, 254

⁴ See Bromley & Dermody & Griffiths & Holtom & Jenks 2013

⁵ See Kwaja 2021; Danczuk 2015; Klare 2004; Chávez & Swed 2022a; RECSA 2023a; RECSA 2023b; Varisco & Wezeman & Kuimova 2022; Stanley O. & Dominique D. 2018

⁶ Greene & Penetrante 2012

⁷ Bhatia & Sedra 2008

our research, we sought to answer the question, what is the relationship between SALW proliferation and statehood? How do the two factors interact with each other? In the following, we first describe the phenomenon of state fragility and the characteristics of SALW within a theoretical framework, and then, in the second half of the paper, we examine Afghanistan as a case study to gain a more in-depth understanding of the topic. In the analysis of Afghanistan, we will trace the SALW flows since the 1970s and the challenges to Afghan statehood, with a particular focus on the period 2001-2021.⁸

Methodological note

In our study, we consider both legal and illicit SALW transfers. Currently, there is no database on global SALW flows, and illicit SALW are particularly difficult to track due to a lack of data. The database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) includes only the values of major conventional weapons, not SALW's. Therefore, for our study, we will predominantly rely on the January 2024 report of the Small Arms Survey⁹ for data on SALW flows to Afghanistan.

1. Conceptual framework

1.1. State fragility

There is only one official, internationally accepted definition of state. It is included in the Montevideo Convention of 1933, Article 1 which declares that a state must meet four criteria: a permanent population, a defined territory, the existence of a government and the ability to establish relations with other states.¹⁰ These are the essential elements of the Westphalian state model, which emerged in 1648 and which Europe 'exported' to other continents of the world. These four criteria are accepted by all states, regardless of the form of government. In addition to the four criteria of the state, the monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force must also be included, as emphasised by Max Weber, hence the term Weberian state.¹¹ In the case of the modern state, the legal use of force is the exclusive responsibility of the state, i.e. the internal

⁸ The author would like to thank for the invaluable advice and support provided by Professor Erzsébet N. Rózsa (Institute of World Economics), Pál Dunay (OSCE Academy in Bishkek), László Szatmári (Permanent Mission of Hungary to OSCE), Ádám Kéri (Institute of World Economics) and Virág Novák-Varró (Ludovika University of Public Service).

⁹ The report is the first comprehensive publication which is based on the annual arms export reports of the Council of the European Union, UN Comtrade, UN Arms Register, the US Department of Defense (US DoD), the US Government Accountability Office (US GAO), the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (US SIGAR) and the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) to try to build a comprehensive picture of SALW imports into Afghanistan.

¹⁰ Montevideo Convention 1933, Article 1

¹¹ According to Max Weber: "a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." See: Weber 1946, 4.

security forces created and commanded by the state are responsible for the internal security of the country, while the armed forces guarantee the security of the state against threats from outside.¹²

State fragility came onto the international security agenda after the Cold War, as the stability of many states lacking modern state foundations faltered and aid from the great powers dried up. The literature uses the terms failed, collapsed, weak and fragile states, but there is no universal definition. The literature on fragile statehood today no longer draws a sharp distinction between fragile and non-fragile states, but instead emphasises the gradual nature of fragility, of which the ultimate phase is a failed or collapsed state. Carment et al. have pointed out that all states can be said to be fragile to some extent. In their definition, fragility is "a measure of the extent to which the actual practices and capacities of states differ from their idealized image." Fragility is therefore "intended to be a general term, one within which related, though more specific, terms, including weakness, failure, and collapse, may be located."¹³ Ulrich Schneckener distinguished fragile statehood between consolidated states, weak states, failing states, and failed or collapsed states, according to the extent to which the state fulfils state functions such as the monopoly of force, welfare, and the rule of law.¹⁴ The Fragile States Index, updated annually by the Fund for Peace, classifies the fragility of states according to a total of twelve main indicators.¹⁵

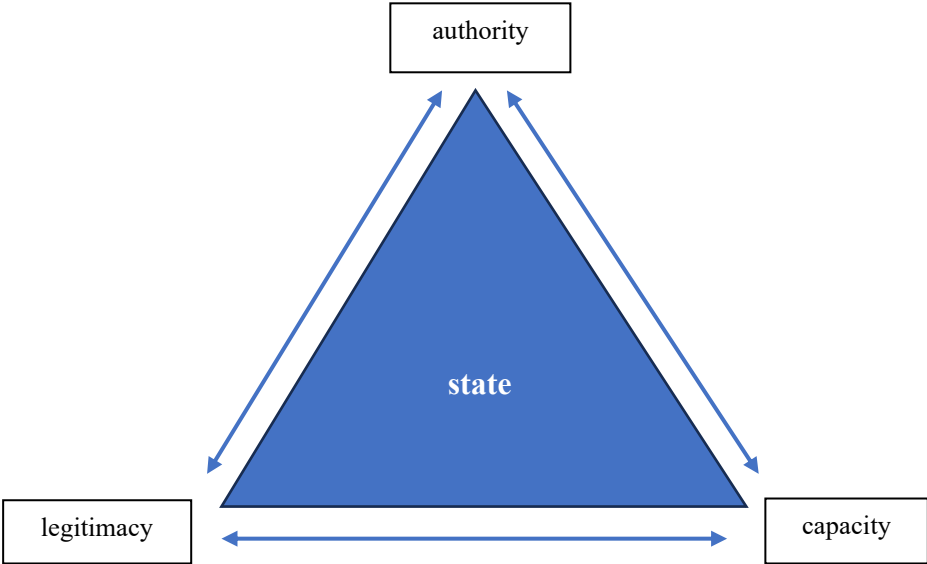


Figure 1 (based on: Löffström 2022, 13.)

¹² Marsai 2019, 187-188.
¹³ Carment & Prest & Samy 2010
¹⁴ Schneckener 2004, 12-17.
¹⁵ Fragile States Index a

According to recent literature, the Weberian state requires authority, legitimacy, and capacity to function, which are closely interrelated (see Figure 1).¹⁶ Authority means the ability of the state to exercise its monopoly of force on its territory. To maintain a monopoly of force, the state must be able to provide security for its population and control its territory. Legitimacy means the ability of the state to obtain the consent of the population to be ruled by the state. In an empirical interpretation, both democratic and authoritarian rule are empirically legitimate if the population accepts it. In contrast, in the normative interpretation, democracy is more legitimate than autocracy because of checks and balances, fair elections, and representative political institutions that protect the population against authoritarianism. Finally, state capacity refers to the ability of the state to provide basic services to its population, for which it needs functioning institutions, properly paid professional civil officials, public services, infrastructure and administrative capacity. Capacity also requires that it is not overly dependent on external aid and military support and that state administration is carried out by independent institutions composed of local elites.¹⁷

If there is a serious deterioration in one of these three dimensions of statehood, there is a spill-over effect, the other two dimensions are also negatively affected.¹⁸ As Schultze-Kraft and Rew write: "Fragile states suffer from serious deficits or 'gaps' concerning three core dimensions of statehood: authority (control of violence), legitimacy (acceptance of rule) and state capacity (provision of public services and goods)."¹⁹ In other words, a state can be considered fragile according to the extent to which it suffers deficits in any of the dimensions of authority, legitimacy and capacity compared to other states.²⁰ There is overwhelming agreement in the literature that a failed or collapsed state is the most severe state of fragility, where the state can no longer fulfil any of its functions.²¹

1.2. Small and Light Weapons

International attention turned to the issue of small arms and light weapons in parallel with state fragility in the 1990s, when a series of intra-state conflicts occurred, particularly in Africa (e.g. Rwanda, Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone). These conflicts, which claimed hundreds of thousands of victims, were fought largely with small arms and light weapons.²²

¹⁶ Grimm 2023, 25.; Carment & Prest & Samy 2010; Löffström 2022, 13.; Ziaja & Grävingsholt & Kreibaum 2019, 303-305.

¹⁷ Grimm 2023, 25-30.

¹⁸ Ibid. 30.

¹⁹ Schultze-Kraft & Rew 2014, 10.

²⁰ Carment & Prest & Samy 2010

²¹ Schneckener 2004, 16; Rotberg 2004, 5-10; Löffström 2022, 14.

²² Schroeder & Stohl 2006

With the end of the Cold War, millions of SALW were released into circulation. As a consequence, armed groups, warlords and transnational criminal organisations had relatively easy access to them. By the early 2000s, an international consensus had emerged that high levels of SALW proliferation could push fragile states into a spiral of conflict or worse, state collapse. This view was reflected, inter alia, in UN expert reports of 1997 and 1999, statements by regional international organisations and the 2001 UN Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons.²³

There is no internationally agreed definition of SALW.²⁴ The simplest definition is provided by the 1997 report of the United Nations Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms, which states that "small arms are those weapons designed for personal use, and light weapons are those designed for use by several persons serving as a crew."²⁵ Similarly, the OSCE says: "Small arms and light weapons are man-portable weapons made or modified to military specifications for use as lethal instruments of war. Small arms are broadly categorised as those weapons intended for use by individual members of armed or security forces. They include revolvers and self-loading pistols; rifles and carbines; sub-machine guns; assault rifles; and light machine guns. Light weapons are broadly categorised as those weapons intended for use by several members of armed or security forces serving as a crew. They include heavy machine guns; hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers; portable anti-aircraft guns (MANPADs); portable anti-tank guns; recoilless rifles; portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems; portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems; and mortars of calibres less than 100 mm."²⁶

SALW proliferation occurs through legal or illicit transfers, driven by demand and supply factors. Many states consider Article 51 of the UN Charter, the right of states to individual or collective self-defence, as the legal basis for the sale and purchase of arms. The difference between legal and illicit arms transfers is that legal arms transfers are carried out in compliance with national and international law and in accordance with the export and import laws and licensing procedures of the States Parties. Illicit arms transfers, on the other hand, break the national and international law. However, legal arms transfers are common source of illicit

²³ Greene & Penetrante 2012, 139-140.

²⁴ Here it is worth noting that the „firearm” definition of the UN Firearms Protocol covers all small arms, which have portable barrels. However, light weapons cannot be considered as firearms, because they employ a tube or rail instead of a barrel, such as man-portable air defence systems. Furthermore, only light weapons utilising cartridge-based ammunition qualify as „firearms” under the definition of the Firearms Protocol. See: Parker & Wilson 2016, 15.

²⁵ UN 1997, paragraph 25.

²⁶ OSCE 2012, 1.

proliferation, as the arms supplied are often diverted illicitly, i. e. when arms are transferred to an unintended end-user usually by non-state actors, like brokers, companies, arms traders, criminal groups. Another problem is that it has become a practice for states to covertly support non-state actors with SALW.²⁷ Arms transfers to non-state actors have not been regulated globally. This problem was not addressed in the UN Programme of Action on SALW. The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), legally binding for the states which signed and ratified it, does not explicitly prohibit arms transfers to non-state actors (particularly because of US objection).²⁸ Arms supplied to non-state actors have also significantly extended the illicit SALW market. The proliferation of illicit SALW is crucially determined by demand factors such as state fragility, inter- and intra-state conflicts, terrorism, organised crime or lack of human security.²⁹

SALW, unlike major conventional weapons, are widely available, more accessible and harder to trace. According to the UN Secretary-General's November 2023 report, only 28% of illicit weapons were traced between 2016 and 2020.³⁰ The use of SALW is particularly prevalent among non-state groups, as they are cheap, low maintenance, durable, easy to carry and use, and can be obtained illicitly. While large weapon systems are generally in the possession of regular forces, SALW are predominantly in civilian ownership.³¹ According to Small Arms Survey, in 2017 there were nearly one billion firearms in global circulation, 85% (857 million) of which were in civilian hands, 13% (133 million) in military ownership and 2% (23 million) in the arsenals of law enforcement agencies.³²

1.3. SALW proliferation along the authority-legitimacy-capacity triangle

As explained above, fragility is best understood in the triangle of authority-legitimacy-capacity. Josef Danczuk's theoretical framework for SALW proliferation and state collapse, based on William Reno's work³³, considers the weakening of institutions within capacity as the main trigger for SALW proliferation, especially in the case of heavily armed countries. The absence of bureaucratic institutions leads to the rise of political entities (such as warlords) beyond the state. Weak state institutions enable SALW proliferation by reducing control over production, storage, transport, sale and smuggling. According to Danczuk, before the collapse of a state, state institutions usually try to prevent or limit SALW proliferation. As an example,

²⁷ Wisotzki 2022, 253-254.; Bourne 2007, 39-40.

²⁸ Bromley & Maletta & Brockmann 2018, 5-6. Nevertheless, the ATT prohibits states from transferring weapons to countries where they could be used for committing crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, attacks on civilian facilities and objects, or genocide. See: Arms Trade Treaty, Article 6 (3)

²⁹ Wisotzki 2022, 249., 254-255.

³⁰ United Nations Security Council 2023, 4.

³¹ Clear 2004, 121-123.

³² Small Arms Survey 2018

³³ Reno 2008

he cites the collapse of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Libya in 2011, where in both cases state collapse was followed by widespread proliferation of SALW.³⁴ In stressing the role of modern state bureaucratic institutions, it should be noted that in many non-Western countries, such as Afghanistan (see later), a Weberian statehood has never been able to emerge. In the Islamic world, the traditional patrimonial system continued to operate in parallel with modern institutions, as such, local authorities (family leaders, tribes) played a strong role in maintaining communities.³⁵ Consequently, in our view, the weakness of modern institutions alone cannot be considered as the sole trigger for SALW proliferation in these states. However, in a weak state there is a higher chance that more weapons end up in non-state hands, which can result in the further weakening of the state.

In addition to weak institutions, weak state capacity facilitates SALW proliferation in other ways. In states where security forces are corrupt, non-state actors are more likely to gain access to SALW. SALW can also be easily transferred to non-state groups when corrupt politicians covertly support gangs with weapons. There is also a high chance of SALW proliferation if illicit arms manufacturers operate in the country, such as in Ghana, where some estimates suggest that 200,000 weapons can be produced locally each year, or in South-Eastern Nigeria, where 60% of illicit weapons are produced locally. The investments in armaments and the corruption that goes with it increase state spending and drain resources from improving public services or infrastructure.³⁶ In addition, weak state capacity, including corruption, weak institutional control, and low salaries of public officials, negatively affect arms control mechanisms for effective stockpile management and non-proliferation.³⁷

In examining the linkage between state fragility and SALW proliferation, one can assume that the large presence of SALW in itself weakens the authority of the state. This is contradicted, however, by the fact that in the United States or Switzerland, there are many SALW in civilian hands, yet this does not correlate with state fragility. According to the Small Arms Survey Global Violent Deaths database, the highest rates of firearm deaths in 2021 were in North America (81%) and South America (71%),³⁸ while the Fragile States Index 2023 shows that of the 10 most fragile states in the world, six are in Africa and four in Asia.³⁹

³⁴ Danczuk 2015, 22-23., 67-71.

³⁵ N. Rózsa 2018, 19., 22.

³⁶ Kwaja 2021. 117-118., 122.

³⁷ Pinson 2022, 12.

³⁸ Small Arms Survey 2023

³⁹ Fragile States Index 2024

The high availability of SALW increases fragility rather when organised non-state armed groups (militias, rebels, organised crime groups, pirates, warlords) become stronger in the country and gain access to weapons, as such, the state will no longer be able to assert its monopoly on the use of force, i.e. its authority will be threatened.⁴⁰ Authority is also undermined if mercenaries (e.g. after the fall of the Qaddafi regime in Mali and Chad) or private military companies (e.g. the Wagner Group in Africa) are permanently operating in the region because they are largely responsible for the proliferation of arms. Lack of authority results in poorly functioning border management, weak border control regulations, corrupt border guards or ineffective border control by security forces, which means that SALW or dual-use items can easily fall into the hands of non-state armed groups. Arms smuggling is particularly active at porous, poorly guarded borders.⁴¹

If the monopoly of the use of force is broken, the state administration and public services will become dysfunctional, gun violence will become permanent and human security will deteriorate significantly. Consequently, citizens lose confidence in the state, thus state legitimacy is undermined.⁴²

Finally, if a heavily armed state falls apart, arms proliferation may perpetuate the collapsing or already collapsed situation and negatively affect the fragility of other states. Research conducted by Kerry Chávez and Ori Swed has highlighted that the collapse of well-armed states is followed by the opening of weapon stockpiles, which contributes significantly to the rise of non-state armed groups and thus to the perpetuation of regional threats. A spectacular manifestation of this was the case of Libya, which under Qaddafi amassed one of the largest stockpiles of weapons in Africa. As the foreign intervention began, the Libyan government began distributing weapons to more than one million people. After the fall of the regime and the collapse of Libya, the military and militias looted the stockpiles, which were sold for profit in the region, allowing smuggled arms to spread easily throughout the Middle East and the Sahel. In Darfur and Azawad, the arms supported rebel groups, while in Nigeria and Mali they enhanced insurgents' capabilities and contributed to the rise of new terrorists (Islamic State) and armed rebel groups (Syria).⁴³ Similarly, in Iraq, the arming of militias⁴⁴ prior to the 2003 invasion and the looting of stockpiles after the invasion resulted in at least 4.2 million SALW being diverted from military hands to non-state armed groups and civilians. Where state arms

⁴⁰ Greene & Penetrante 2012, 140-141.

⁴¹ Kwaja 2021, 116-120.

⁴² Klare 2004, 120.

⁴³ Chávez & Swed 2022a, 8., 19.; Reuters, 2011

⁴⁴ The militias later became the armed forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

control standards were ineffective initially, weapons can be trafficked or smuggled from the country before the state collapses. Libya was already a major source of illicit arms transfers before 2011, which were controlled by groups under the supervision of the Qaddafi regime.⁴⁵

Based on the above, we can conclude the following. SALW proliferation contributes significantly to state fragility when any or all the dimensions of the authority-legitimacy-capacity triangle become dysfunctional. Large-scale and uncontrolled SALW thus play a catalyser role in state fragility. In the event of a complete collapse of the state, SALW proliferation can create a domino effect of lasting instability in a region, increasing the fragility of other states.

2. State fragility and SALW proliferation: The case of Afghanistan

Afghanistan has never been a permanently stable state in a Weberian sense in its history. Moreover, the country has never had a colonial government that could have established the foundations of a Weberian state. The division of power was never able to function. Afghanistan, like many non-Western states, has lacked the economic, political, social and cultural structural development that has taken place in European history. Because of the tribal nature of the political elites, the Afghan state has different sources of legitimacy than in the Western world. These are primarily the norms of trust and reciprocity, kinship and patronage.⁴⁶

The centralising efforts to create a model of a Weberian state, which began in the late 19th century under Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901), failed. King Amanullah Khan (1926-1929), who had sought to modernise the country in the 1920s along the model of Kemal Ataturk, was driven out of the country by the Saqqawist uprising which was against the modernisation reforms. The only period of consolidation was under Mohammad Zahir Shah (1933-1973).⁴⁷ During the Soviet occupation, the attempts of the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) at state-building were successful in the Soviet-occupied territories, especially in the urban areas, but radical reforms were alien to the rural population. The "National Reconciliation Policy" announced by President Mohammad Najibullah (1986-1992) in 1987 led to relative stabilisation. However, Najibullah's regime ultimately collapsed because of the conflicts within the PDPA and the fall of the Soviet Union.⁴⁸ The Islamic Republic of

⁴⁵ Bromley & Maletta & Brockmann 2018, 4-5.

⁴⁶ Edwards 2011, 980.

⁴⁷ Edwards 2011, 972-973.

⁴⁸ Kipping 2010, 8-11.

Afghanistan, which existed from 2001-2021, also failed to implement the Weberian model effectively.

2.1. SALW flows to Afghanistan, 1973-2001

Over the course of Afghanistan's 20th-century history, the intensity of SALW flows has been closely linked to political changes. The distribution of power has been accompanied by an influx of weapons from outside, with the opposing parties acquiring internal arsenals during redistribution and the central government seeking disarmament during consolidation.⁴⁹

Implementing the pro-Soviet policy of Prime Minister Prince Muhammad Daoud Khan (1953-1963), Afghanistan made a significant arms deal with the Soviet Union in 1956, receiving a substantial amount of military equipment, infrastructural development and training. As a result, the Soviet Union became the sole arms supplier of Afghanistan.⁵⁰ During the uprisings before the Soviet invasion in Nuristan, Hazarajat and Herat provinces local communities seized local armouries. Pakistan began supporting the Mujahedin in 1973.⁵¹ In reaction to the Soviet invasion, the United States established a massive arms supply pipeline to the Afghan Mujahedin in 1980, coordinated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) with the help of the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). The US supplied weapons mainly of Soviet origin or design, sourced from China, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, India and Pakistan. In this context, the US has supplied at least 400,000 AK-47 assault rifles and, after 1986, US-made Stinger surface-to-air missiles. In addition to the US, China, Pakistan and Egypt also supplied arms by themselves, and Saudi Arabia played a significant role in financing arms transfers. Arms transfers continued after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, with the United States supporting Afghan guerrillas with Stinger and Milan anti-tank missiles against the pro-Soviet Kabul government. The Soviet side not only left behind a significant number of arms and ammunition but also continued to supply arms to the Kabul government. However, by the mid-1990s, the US ceased supplying arms to Afghanistan.⁵²

In the 1990s, the Mujahedin were unable to consolidate their power, and the Taliban gained ground. In 1994, they captured Kandahar and two years later the capital Kabul. With the rise of the Taliban, the country was split into two camps, the Taliban, and the opposing Northern Alliance. The Pakistani government, through the ISI, provided substantial financial, logistical and military aid to the Pashtun tribes, which in large part created the Taliban movement. By

⁴⁹ Bhatia & Sedra 2008. 40.

⁵⁰ Rubinstein 1983, 319.

⁵¹ Ibid. 2008. 40., 44.

⁵² Pirseyedi 2000, 14-18.

supporting the Pashtun, Pakistan sought to prevent the tribes from establishing an independent state in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban were also supplied by Saudi Arabia through Pakistan with massive quantities of arms purchased from Ukraine. Iran perceived Saudi Arabia's support for the Taliban as a hostile move and became the main arms supplier to the Northern Alliance, in which Shia Tajik and Hazara ethnic groups were dominant. The weapons were transferred partly by air and partly by train over land via Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The rise of the Taliban, which followed radical Islamic doctrines, also alarmed Russia, which feared that its influence could spread beyond Afghanistan's borders in Central Asia. Russia therefore also supported the anti-Taliban forces with arms shipments in cooperation with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In addition, India and China also supplied weapons to the anti-Taliban forces. While the former wanted to counterbalance Pakistan's influence, the latter feared the spread of Islamic extremism and weapons into the Xinjiang province.⁵³

Beyond governmental suppliers, a significant proportion (nearly 60%) of SALW in Afghanistan came from black market suppliers. British and Russian arms dealers (including the notorious Russian arms dealer Victor Bout⁵⁴) regularly sold small arms from Eastern European (e.g. Bulgarian and Albanian) sources in Afghanistan.⁵⁵

Many of the weapons shipped during the Cold War and the Afghan civil war were also illicitly retransferred to the Central Asian republics, Pakistan and Chechnya, creating a blowback effect. For example, weapons formerly supplied by the Pakistani government were smuggled to Pakistani criminal organisations and anti-government forces, taking advantage of the porous borders between the two countries. Afghanistan itself has thus become a major source of SALW. In 1999, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front of the Philippines acquired nearly 3,000 small arms and light weapons, including Kalashnikovs and anti-tank weapons from Afghanistan, but weapons were also smuggled into Kashmir, Burma and Sri Lanka.⁵⁶

With the Taliban coming to power in 1996, consolidation began, including the introduction of arms bans and confiscation of weapons in Kabul. In 2000, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Afghanistan, with the Northern Alliance enjoying an exemption.⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid. 19-25.

⁵⁴ Victor Bout after spending 10 years of his prison sentence in the US, has been released in a prisoner exchange for American basketball Brittney Griner in 2022. Currently he is a member of parliament of Ulyanovsk Oblast's regional parliament,

⁵⁵ Pirseyedi 2000, 27.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 28-30.; Bhatia & Sedra 2008, 15.; Thrall & Dorminey 2018

⁵⁷ Bhatia & Sedra 2008, 51.

A significant proportion of Afghanistan's SALW are still being produced in the north-western Pakistani area, not far from the Afghan border. This area was formerly part of the semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which Pakistan merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018. The town of Darra Adam Khel, located there, has been producing guns for more than 200 years. According to Aquab Malik's research, Darra had nearly 60 small arms factories and 300 workshops in the 2000s. Nearly 10,000 families depended on local arms production for their livelihoods. Darra produces an extremely diverse range of weapons, including British, American, German and Chinese small arms. On the former FATA territory, there are a lot of black markets where looted weapons such as mines and RPG-7s are sold. Pakistan estimates that between 144,000 and 252,000 weapons are produced annually in Darra alone. The material for weapons and ammunition was previously sourced from Pakistani scrap metal, destroyed Soviet combat vehicles, ammunition and then from war materiel supplied by the US and its allies in the 1980s. Arms production and arms trafficking were significantly facilitated by the fact that the FATA was not covered by Pakistan's arms production and arms transfer laws. Although arms smuggling was officially banned, it was permitted by a loophole in the 1965 Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement.⁵⁸ Despite the territorial administrative change in 2018, illicit arms production has continued.⁵⁹

The flow of SALW in Afghanistan is closely connected to drug trafficking, given Afghanistan's status as a major opium producer. Armed clashes between drug traffickers and border guards in neighbouring countries are frequent, as drug trafficking groups are equipped with small arms. Both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance have used drug sale incomes to acquire weapons. Additionally, illicit drug trafficking and small arms trafficking often occur together, with both commodities transported along the same routes by smugglers.⁶⁰

The widespread proliferation of SALW contributed greatly to the humanitarian disaster of the 1990s. As a result of the Soviet-Afghan war, 6.2 million Afghans were forced to flee their homes to Iran and Pakistan by 1990, of whom 4 million returned by 1998. Atrocities and human rights violations during the Afghan civil war were facilitated by the proliferation of small arms, which perpetuated the already existing culture of violence. In August 1998, for example, the Taliban carried out mass executions in Mazari-i-Sharif in the north-west, avenging the mass execution of Taliban fighters by anti-Taliban forces a year earlier. Both incidents resulted in

⁵⁸ Malik 2016, 73-79, 85.

⁵⁹ Tasci 2022; Hashim 2019

⁶⁰ Pirseyedi 2000, 30-32.

nearly 2000 casualties each.⁶¹ The armed conflict has not only resulted in wave of refugees and claimed human lives but has also significantly set back human development, resulting in a collapse of the health system and basic education, as well as uncontrolled exploitation and destruction of the natural environment.⁶²

2.2. SALW proliferation and the failure of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

The state created by the 2001 Western intervention sought to extend its rule from the centre to the periphery, which provoked social resistance. The new Afghan regime was largely based on a patrimonial network of Northern Alliance elites (which was a minority of the population) and Western support. State-building was based on centralisation of power, ethnocentrism and corruption. Centralisation was opposed by Mujahedin and rebel leaders, whose legitimacy was derived primarily from Islam, ethnicism as well as arms and financial resources. The centre had no strategic approach to how to integrate local authorities in governance, as such, local leaders were only pro-state when they were in government positions. President Hamid Karzai (2002-2014) and President Ashraf Ghani (2014-2021) lacked legitimacy because they were Western-backed leaders who had not spent most part of their lives in Afghanistan. In addition, both were Pashtuns, who were not recognised as credible leaders by ethnic groups or the Taliban. The Northern Alliance elite failed to win the support of the Afghan population, especially the Pashtun, leaving the legitimacy void to be filled by the Taliban, especially in the south. State legitimacy was challenged in the 2014 and 2019 elections. Electoral irregularities and fraud led to conflict between the political camps of President Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah on both occasions. Moreover, during the 2014 election, Abdullah rejected the results. With US Secretary of State John Kerry's mediation, Ghani and Abdullah formed the National Unity Government in which Ghani became president and Abdullah the Chief Executive Officer (de facto prime minister). The 2019 election also resulted in a power-sharing government under US pressure.⁶³

Legitimacy had been also weakened by the fact that the armed violence and human security that had existed since the 1990s - often perpetrated with SALW - had hardly improved, and in many provinces had rather deteriorated. In the second half of the 2000s, for example, assassinations and suicide bombings became a regular occurrence in Kandahar. Both government and rebel groups maintained illegal checkpoints in the country. Property and land disputes were often settled by government or rebel commanders. Humanitarian personnel were

⁶¹ Ibid. 33-37.

⁶² Bhatia & Sedra 2008, 20.

⁶³ Ibrahim 2023, 286-290.; Edwards 2011, 983.

often threatened with weapons.⁶⁴ Domestic violence against women was often committed with illicit small arms. According to a 2020 survey by the Afghan Women's Network, 64% of women surveyed did not feel safe at home if a weapon was kept at home.⁶⁵ Data from the Small Arms Survey Global Violent Deaths database also illustrates the insecure environment: the number of violent deaths per 100,000 people rose from 10,5 to 112,3 between 2004-2021 (see Figure 2).

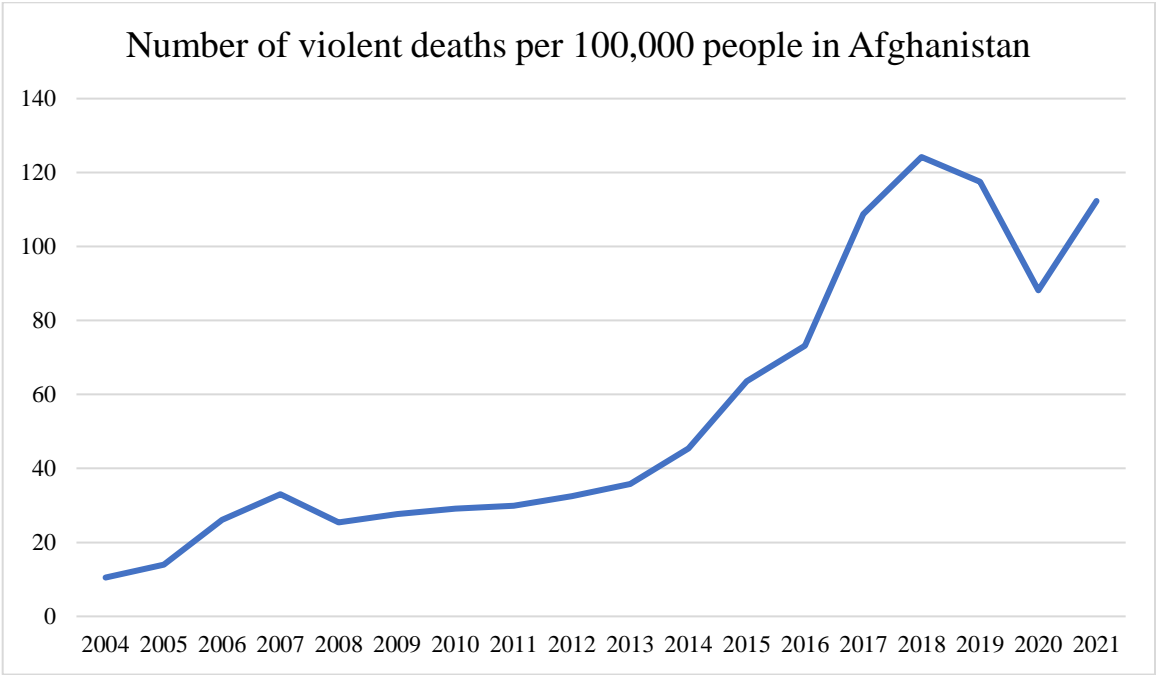


Figure 2 (Source: Small Arms Survey)

Corruption has also poisoned the capacity of the state. According to Transparency International, Afghanistan was the sixth most corrupt country out of 180 countries measured in 2021.⁶⁶ (See figure 3.)

⁶⁴ Bhatia & Sedra 2008, 22-24.
⁶⁵ Afghan Women's Network 2020, 15.
⁶⁶ Transparency International 2021

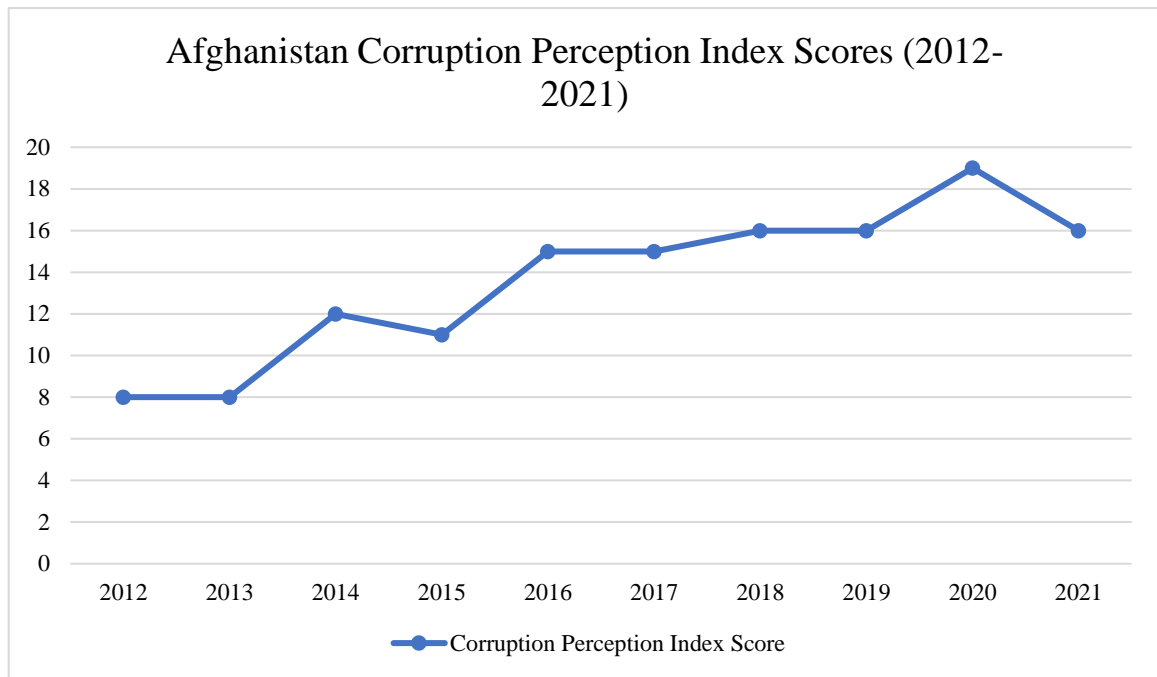


Figure 3 (Source: Transparency International 2021)⁶⁷

Corruption pervaded all state institutions, including the military, police, courts and public services. Half of state revenues were lost to corruption. By the last years of the Republic, corruption had completely undermined the legitimacy of the state, as the population had no trust in either officials or institutions. Meanwhile, the traditional local institutions, like the *shuras* and the *jirgas* were much more effective in jurisdiction. In the Taliban occupied territories, the Taliban set up its own judicial institutions free of bureaucracy, the Shari`a Courts. Even in government-controlled areas, reports suggest that the population went to Taliban courts, where they did not have to pay high salaries to judges and attorneys. In doing so, the Taliban delegitimized the Republic and built an alternative state system.⁶⁸ It is illustrative that according to a survey by the Asia Foundation covering the years between 2007-2019, the local *shuras*, *jirgas* and religious leaders had more support than parliament, election commissions or the government ministers. For example in 2019, 67% of the respondents had confidence in the community *shuras* and *jirgas*, 71% in the religious leaders, whereas only 44% and 47% in the government ministers and the parliament.⁶⁹

The influx of SALW since the 1980s has decisively altered Afghanistan's internal balance of power, weakening the authority of the state. The widespread availability of small arms emboldened commanders and militias opposed to the government. Since the 1980s, a new

⁶⁷ The graph contains data only from 2012 because Transparency International changed its methodology in 2012.

⁶⁸ Ibrahimi 2023, 292-293.

⁶⁹ The Asia Foundation 2019, 140-141.

warlord class from the ranks of the Mujahedin has emerged, able to distance itself from both the traditional elite and the central state. The warlords influenced all levels of politics, able to intimidate voters and persuade voters. The warlords were able to put their own people into the judiciary through arms and bribery. Although the Kabul government has reduced the power of the warlords by relocating them to the periphery, their networks and provincial influence remain.⁷⁰

At the same time, post-2001 disarmament, demilitarisation and reintegration (DDR) efforts have further complicated the internal balance of power. As a result of the Bonn Agreement (2001), the dominant faction of the Northern Alliance, the Tajik Shura-e-Nezar, gained control of the Ministries of Defence, Interior and the National Directorate of Security intelligence agency. The Tajik faction has not subjugated its militias to demilitarisation to prevent the Pashtun from regaining power in the government. This had a decisive impact in alienating the Pashtun population and other ethnic minorities.⁷¹ After 2004 centralisation measures by the Kabul government have deprived the warlords of their territorial control. However, in the 2009 presidential elections, President Karzai faced opposition from the international community and increased his vote by relying on the warlords. With the Taliban insurgency gaining momentum and emerging news of a future withdrawal of US forces, the warlords have begun to mobilise and rearm once again.⁷² The four different DDR programs initiated in Afghanistan were used by powerful factions to weaken their rivals thus securing their positions in the government, while many former militia members joined rather to the Taliban insurgency.⁷³

Corruption mentioned earlier, has also been key to the erosion of state authority and the effectiveness of the Afghan police and military forces. It was a common phenomenon to have 'ghost soldiers': the salaries of positions which existed only on paper were seized by Afghan officers. In 2019, for example, the Afghan forces numbered 352,000, but in fact, there were only a maximum of 50,000 soldiers and police officers in the country.⁷⁴ Corruption has led to a diversion of arms. Afghan National Army (ANA) personnel regularly sold ammunition to locals, including the Taliban in Uruzgan province, to retrieve their salaries stolen by their commanders. Equipment provided to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), including M4 rifles, night vision equipment and armoured Humvees, fell into Taliban

⁷⁰ Bhatia & Sedra 2008, 16-18, 19.

⁷¹ Ibid. 18.

⁷² Malejacq 2021

⁷³ Derksen 2015, 44-45.

⁷⁴ Ibrahimi 2023, 291.

hands through battlefield loss and corruption.⁷⁵ The US-supplied weapons also appeared in black markets on the Afghan-Pakistan border. The high rate of desertion (30-60%) of Afghan troops during or after their training also contributed to arms diversion.⁷⁶ In 2012 a former sub-governor of Laghman province named Nangyalai was sentenced by an Afghan court to five years in prison for stealing wheat and weapons. Corrupt Afghan officials and police officers have regularly stolen government weapons.⁷⁷ According to a March 2019 US SIGAR report, ANDSF personnel have confiscated more than 780,000 dollars worth of contractor-owned maintenance equipment. The report also found that Afghan forces have repeatedly used force to coerce Afghan contractors.⁷⁸ Corruption has caused morale in the armed forces to plummet.

As explained above, state fragility indicates a process, not an end state. The degree of state fragility has therefore also varied during the years of the Republic. As shown by the Fragile States Index, Afghanistan was regularly ranked among the 10 most fragile states in the world, but the fragility index increased radically from 2006-2010, declined to some extent until 2014, and then reached a higher level again between 2014 and 2021 (see Figure 3).

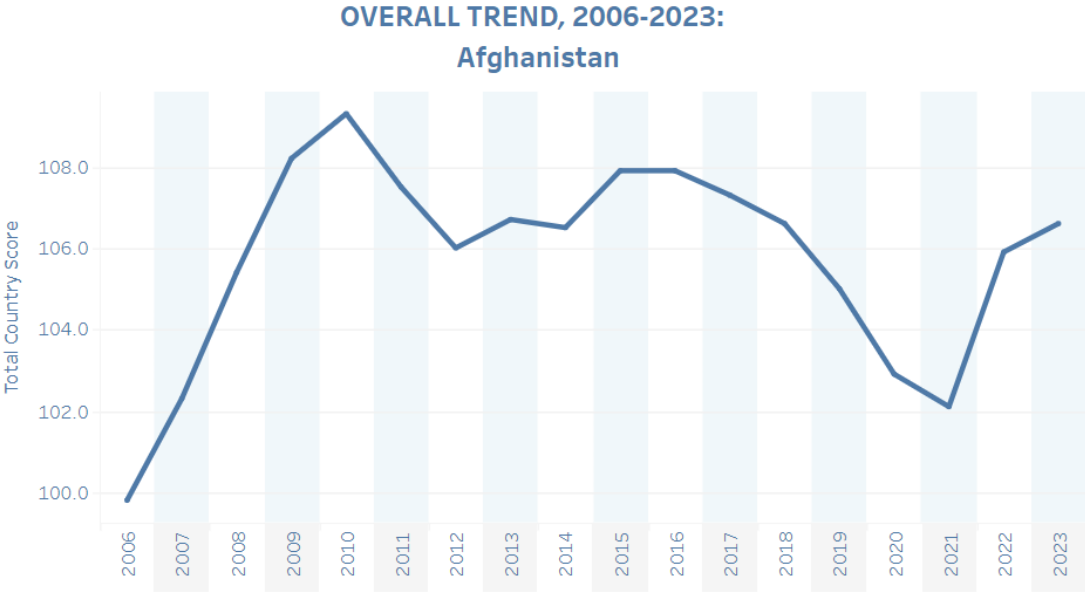


Figure 4. Fragile States Index scores of Afghanistan, 2006-2021 (Source: Fragile States Index b)

2.3. SALW exports to Afghanistan after 9/11

Following the inception of the military operation of the United States and its allies in Afghanistan, another wave of SALW entered the country. During Operation Enduring Freedom, which followed 9/11, there was a resurgence of purchases from Pakistani border markets, and

⁷⁵ Snow 2017
⁷⁶ Mumford 2022
⁷⁷ Axe 2012
⁷⁸ US Sigar 2019, 8., 10.

the Northern Alliance bought assault rifles, mortars, grenade launchers, anti-tank weapons and mines from Uzbekistan. The Western allies provided the ANA and the Afghan National Police (ANP) with arms, mainly from external sources and partly through local arms redistribution. With the 2004 Presidential Decree, the government distinguished between state and non-state and between legal and illicit arms transfers, thus allowing paramilitary armed groups to survive and collecting arms from those not considered part of the Afghan armed forces. Although the arms markets on Afghan territory were closed, many weapons were sold in Pakistan and Tajikistan and then smuggled back to Afghanistan. Anti-coalition forces and the Taliban have continued to have easy access to arms in the country through donations and opium revenues.⁷⁹ An internal document of the International Security Force (ISAF) estimated that there were four to six million small arms in Afghanistan.⁸⁰

From 2001-2021, US and NATO allies provided military assistance worth 88 billion dollars to the ANDSF. It is estimated that less than a third of this amount was spent on material procurement.⁸¹

As the January 2024 Small Arms Survey report highlighted, it is difficult to estimate the number of weapons supplied by the Coalition, as different data are available. On the one hand, the timeframe of the available data reports is not consistent, and on the other hand, the figures refer either to SALW delivery authorisations or to actual units delivered (see Table 1).

Data source	Time frame	Authorised/delivered	Number of items
US Department of Defense (2022)	2005-2021	Delivered	427,015
US Government Accountability Office (2017)	2004-2016	Authorized	599,690
US Government Accountability Office (2009)	2004-2008	Delivered	242,203
US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2014)	2004-2013	Delivered	465,000
UN Arms Register (US exports)	2017-2020	Authorised (2018) / delivered (2017, 2019-2020)	10,658
US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (2023)	2002-2021	Letter of Offer and Acceptance implemented date	245,583

Table 1. Reported exports of US-procured SALW to Afghanistan 2004-2021 (Source: Schroeder 2024, 5.)

According to the often-cited US GAO 2017 report, the US authorized a total of 599,690 SALW transfers between 2004 and 2016, while the US DoD 2022 report lists 427,015 SALW transfers. As the Small Arms Survey outlined, one explanation for the discrepancy is that the US GAO counted the number of licenses for arms transfers and since not all transfers were

⁷⁹ Bhatia & Sedra 2008, 53-56.
⁸⁰ Derksen 2015, 11.
⁸¹ Mehra & Demuyneck & Wentworth 2022, 4.

completed, the number of licenses is higher. In addition, a 2014 report by the US SIGAR pointed out that there were several problems with US DoD data, including incomplete information, duplicate data and inconsistencies between the two DoD databases, the Security Cooperation Information Portal (SCIP) and the Operational Verification of Reliable Logistics Oversight Database (OVERLORD).⁸²

The transfers covered a wide array of weapons and their ammunition, including pistols, machine guns, assault rifles, sniper rifles, shotguns as well as grenade launchers, heavy machine guns, mortar systems, portable anti-tank rocket systems and recoilless rifles, mortar rounds, projected grenades, RPG rounds and hand grenades.⁸³

The Small Arms Survey emphasises that the weapons flowing into Afghanistan after 2001 are not only American-made, as is widely reported in the media but come from more than 30 countries. Most of the weapons and ammunition were manufactured in the United States, but between 2002 and 2008, at the beginning of the training and equipping programme, the US bought up massive amounts of SALW from the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.⁸⁴ During this period, 80% of the weapons purchased by the US were non-US standard weapons, including 79,000 AK-47 assault rifles.⁸⁵ As of the second half of the 2010s, in addition to weapons of Central and Eastern European origin, NATO standard weapons were provided to the ANA and ANP. Based on available data, the Small Arms Survey showed that beyond the US, significant quantities of SALW originate from Hungary (55,673), Romania (43,222) and Serbia (30,707) (see Table 2). Of the 28 countries, 15 were former socialist countries.⁸⁶ It is important to stress that the table below only includes countries and values for which open data are available.

Country of origin	Items (quantity/value)	Years
Albania	10,918	2002-2006, 2011
Austria	670,143 euros	2005-2008, 2010, 2013
Bosnia and Herzegovina	4,900	2007
Bulgaria	16,909	2002-2006, 2008-2011, 2012, 2017, 2019-2020
Canada	2,547	2002-2006, 2014-2016, 2018
Croatia	16,012	2002-2006, 2011
Czech Republic	17,139 / 2,360,806 euros	2004, 2007, 2011-2017, 2020
Egypt	17,199	2002-2006

⁸² Schroeder 2024, 4-5.

⁸³ Ibid., 10-12.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁵ US GAO 2009, 7.

⁸⁶ Schroeder 2024, 6-9.

Estonia	4,000	2002-2006
Germany	10,088	2002-2006, 2008, 2010-2013
Greece	308 / 32,917 euros	2002-2006, 2008, 2020
Hungary	55,673	2007
India	3,864	2002-2006
Lithuania	10,000	2002-2006
Montenegro	6,500	2007, 2009
Netherlands	52	2019
Norway	200	2008-2009
Pakistan	801	2002-2006
Poland	7805	2002-2006, 2009, 2012
Portugal	327,203 euros	2014, 2016, 2018-2019
Romania	43,222	2002-2006, 2008-2011, 2014, 2018-2020
Serbia	30,707 / 166,627 euros	2009-2013, 2015-2017
Slovakia	1,500	2006
Slovenia	18,713	2002-2006, 2011
Spain	259	2002-2006
Turkey	5,182	2002-2006, 2010
Ukraine	666	2002-2006
United Kingdom	16,301	2007-2019, 2021

Table 2: Reported exports of SALW to Afghanistan from countries other than the US, 2002-2021 (Source: Schroeder 2024, 7-9.)

Multi-nationality is also reflected in the type and calibre of the weapons. The Small Arms Survey identified nearly 100 models of SALW supplied to the Afghan government. The weapons from Hungary include PKM, PKT/PKB and RPK machine guns, AMMS and AMD-65 assault rifles.⁸⁷ According to information provided by the Hungarian government to Conflict Armament Research, Hungary has provided 35,173 AMD-65 rifles to the Afghan Ministry of Interior for the exclusive end use of the ANP under the US Army Security Assistance Program.⁸⁸

Conflict Armament Research has revealed that the Taliban had access to the arsenal of the Afghan security forces long before they took power in August 2021. This was because there were serious deficiencies in both US and Afghan arms control mechanisms.⁸⁹ The procurement of weapons for the Afghan security forces was carried out mainly by the US Army Security Assistance Command (USASAC) and the Navy's International Programs Office (Navy IPO) through US Foreign Military Sales. The transfer and monitoring of weapons in Afghanistan was

⁸⁷ Schroeder 2024, 6., 10-11.

⁸⁸ Conflict Armament Research 2021, 6.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 9.

executed by the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A). However, according to a 2009 US GAO report, the US MoD did not instruct US personnel to implement accountability procedures for these weapons, i.e. registering and reporting serial numbers. US Central Command has not established clear procedures for accountability, control, and physical security of US-supplied weapons for Afghan security forces. USASAC and CSTC-A did not maintain complete records for 36% (87,000 weapons) of the 242,000 weapons delivered between 2004 and 2008. The serial numbers of 46 000 weapons were not registered and the location and destination of 41,000 weapons were not documented. In addition, the CSTC-A did not maintain reliable records of nearly 135,000 weapons from international donations between 2002 and 2008. The report also found that no inventory of the central armouries was conducted until June 2008 and that 47 pistols were stolen from one of the depots following the inventory in June 2008. The proper inventory of weapons was also limited by the lack of basic mathematical skills and the illiteracy of ANA staff. The CSTC-A was unable to carry out inventory, security duties and training of Afghan security forces simultaneously due to staff shortages.⁹⁰ For the inventory of weapons and ammunition distributed to the ANA and ANP, the Core Inventory Management System (CoreIMS) was gradually put into use in 2010. Still, ad hoc solutions with Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and handwritten records were being widely used, except for central warehouses. In 2019, the Afghan security forces still did not use CoreIMS in 78 of 191 local warehouses, for which they had neither the skills nor the technical infrastructure. In addition, the CoreIMS server crashed in early 2021, resulting in the loss of inventory data after March 2021, but the US DoD continued to rely on CoreIMS data. The different inventory systems (OVERLORD, SCIP, CoreIMS) made it impossible to accurately track weapons, with duplications and incomplete information in various systems.⁹¹

In addition to Western arms transfers, Iranian weapons have also entered the Islamic Republic, albeit on a limited scale. Iran aimed to counter the Western presence in the country by supporting the Taliban. According to US intelligence reports, Iranian support included small arms, explosives, and a limited number of MANPADs as well as training for the latter. The exact number of these weapons is unknown. However, Iranian involvement remained limited, as Iran had no interest in strengthening the Taliban.⁹²

In summary, the exact quantity, quality, type, location and security of SALW exported to Afghanistan over the 20 years of the Republic of Afghanistan has been surrounded by

⁹⁰ US GAO 2009, 8-12., 14., 18-19.

⁹¹ Conflict Armament Research 2021, 8.; Schroeder 2024, 15.

⁹² Snow 2020

uncertainty. Monitoring, accountability, and end-use gaps were not addressed by the US DoD until the Taliban took power. For this reason, it is impossible to say how many US-supplied weapons the Taliban seized after the takeover.⁹³ This raises serious questions about arms export practices to fragile states. In addition, the period 2001-2021 shows that when large amounts of external aid (arms, aid, investments, money) arrived in Afghanistan, the illicit arms trade, smuggling and drug trafficking intensified simultaneously.

2.4. Situation after August 2021

According to Conflict Armament Research, the acquisition of weapons from the Afghan security forces when the Taliban came to power "probably constitutes one of the most significant large-scale diversions of military equipment in recent history."⁹⁴ Taliban fighters capturing US helicopters, armoured vehicles, drones, communications equipment, night vision goggles and firearms has been a major media story.⁹⁵ Based on US DoD data, Small Arms Survey estimates that nearly three-quarters of the SALW procured by the US between 2005-2021 remained in Afghanistan.⁹⁶

According to the Afghan Peace Watch's (APW) field research, arms markets and arms smuggling continue to operate in border settlements under Taliban rule, but simultaneously the Taliban is seeking to control arms flows. One of the main centres of arms smuggling is the town of Torkham in Nangarhar Province, which lies on the main trade route between Kabul and Pakistan. Arms made in Dara Adam Khel have flowed through Torkham in the past. Following the takeover, the Taliban carried out house raids and collected hundreds of weapons from civilians, leading to a surge in arms prices. In Jalalabad, for example, more than 545 weapons were seized in one month. Initially, many Taliban fighters sold or traded the seized weapons. Where the ANDSF surrendered en masse, Taliban fighters initially kept the weapons and later sold them, smuggling most of them into Pakistan. According to media reports, Western weapons have flooded Pakistan's black markets. The night-vision devices used by Afghan special forces are being sold to the Chinese, among others, for 2,500 dollars each.⁹⁷ The initial boom in arms sales is illustrated by the fact that within a month of the takeover, hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of Humvee armoured vehicles and other military equipment, including helicopters and drones, were already being shipped to Iran.⁹⁸

⁹³ Ibid. 8-9.

⁹⁴ Conflict Armament Research 2021, 1.

⁹⁵ McLeary & Hudson 2021; Forrest 2021; Ali & Zengerle & Landay 2021

⁹⁶ Schroeder 2024, 3.

⁹⁷ Fleischner 2023, 3-5.; Siddique 2023

⁹⁸ Middle East Eye 2021

Arms smuggling and trafficking quickly started to lose its momentum as the Taliban, in order to consolidate its power monopoly, introduced tighter arms control. However, the implementation of the consolidation policy has been inconsistent: although the Emir has often declared that he demands full compliance with certain policies, in practice unpopular measures are not implemented by local bodies. This dichotomy is also evident in the Taliban's arms management.⁹⁹

Restrictions on gun smuggling have been reflected in rising gun prices, with US M4 and M16 rifles fetching 1,200 to 1,600 dollars and sometimes 2,400 dollars, according to APW. The Taliban routinely seizes weapons from smugglers and civilians who do not have Taliban gun licences. Licences are issued by Taliban officials, and senior officials may also decide to close down open-air arms bazaars.¹⁰⁰ The Taliban's crackdown on arms smuggling may also be an indication of the Taliban's crackdown on drug trafficking, which is closely intertwined with arms smuggling. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in April 2022 the Taliban banned poppy cultivation and the use, transport, manufacture, trade, export and import of all narcotics. As a result of the measure, opium poppy production has been radically reduced by 95% in one year, from 6,200 tonnes to 333 tonnes. Many farmers have therefore switched from opium poppy production to wheat production (the former Taliban regime did the same in 2000-2001).¹⁰¹

The Taliban attempts to tighten the distribution of weapons to troops, as well as to control advanced US weapons (M4 and M16 rifles) and other equipment (night vision devices, thermal sights). The registration of SALW started already in August 2021. However, in practice, this has often not been implemented: for example, 6,000 to 7,000 weapons disappeared from Kunduz airport. Stockpile management improved over time, facilities were kept closed, weapons were maintained to some extent and Kabul officials carried out regular inspections.¹⁰²

The Taliban lacks experience in arms control and management. Before the takeover, unit commanders were responsible for tracking weapons, and after the takeover, this practice continued but also relied on previous procedures from the republican era. A key feature of the Taliban's arms control practices is the central authorities' desire to avoid fractures within the movement by regulating SALW, otherwise, internal armed conflict could easily develop.¹⁰³ The Taliban has found tighter arms control difficult to implement, partly for the same reasons as the

⁹⁹ Jackson & Maiwand & Weigand 2023, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Fleischner 2023, 5.

¹⁰¹ UNODC 2023, 3, 6, 15.

¹⁰² Jackson & Maiwand & Weigand 2023, 3-4; Fleischner 2023, 1.

¹⁰³ Jackson & Maiwand & Weigand 2023, 3.

Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the past. Institutional capacity and expertise are still lacking thus arms management is carried out either by unqualified new officials or by staff from the former regime. Another problem is that, due to internal divisions, many combatants, especially influential commanders, do not want to register their weapons, considering them as personal property. Personal links are crucial in arms trafficking and smuggling: arms dealers who have links to the Taliban can continue to trade. A further problem in tracing weapons is that local units are constantly rotating and taking their weapons with them so that a weapon registered in one province is taken to another. Weapons of Taliban fighters are often missing from the registers: according to field research by the Centre on Armed Groups, despite instructions from the Kabul leadership, barely half of Taliban units have registered weapons. The central administration is therefore trying to establish general policies, but practices are not uniform and vary from province to province.¹⁰⁴

In addition, according to the Corruption Perception Index, corruption has barely decreased since the Taliban took power.¹⁰⁵ This suggests that the Taliban have no intention of tackling corruption. The Taliban do not seek to establish effective governance in Afghanistan, but rather to maintain their rule. This can be seen in the fact that in 2022 38% of the population, needed humanitarian assistance and 19.7 million people experienced high levels of acute food insecurity.¹⁰⁶

2.5. Regional risks of illicit SALW proliferation and diversion

The current threat is that smuggled weapons will flow out of Afghanistan and fuel other conflicts in Central and South-East Asia. Most of the US-made weapons is illicitly transferred to Pakistan. Fighters of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, (TTP, which is not the same as the Taliban in Afghanistan but is an ally of it), have reportedly obtained weapons from the Afghan Taliban, although US officials have denied this. According to local reports, the militants can attack Pakistani forces from a distance with weapons equipped with lasers and thermal sights. In November 2022, the TTP broke the ceasefire with Pakistan's current government led by Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar. The government intends to take strong action against the TTP in preparation for elections in 2024. The Pakistani leadership fears that the TTP is acquiring advanced combat capabilities through weapons in Afghanistan: in December 2023, it called on the UN to investigate how the weapons got into the hands of Pakistani terrorists.¹⁰⁷ The TTP

¹⁰⁴ Jackson & Maiwand & Weigand 2023, 3-4; Fleischner 2023, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Transparency International 2023

¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch 2022

¹⁰⁷ Ahmed, 2023; Arab News Pakistan 2023; Siddique 2023

caused relations between Pakistan and the Taliban to reach a low point. One of the consequences of it was that the Pakistani government began mass repatriation of Afghan refugees in October 2023 and imposed restrictions on transit goods to Afghanistan.¹⁰⁸

In addition to Pakistan, US weapons have subsequently also appeared in Kashmir. According to Indian authorities, Pakistani militant groups have obtained M4 and M16 rifles and other US-made equipment. According to Indian analysts, the groups obtained the weapons either directly from the Taliban or through Pakistani arms smugglers.¹⁰⁹

A further problem is the presence of the Islamic State affiliate Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which has grown especially strong in Nangarhar province since the return of the Taliban. The terrorist organisation claims itself as the only pure Islamic caliphate. It carries out attacks against both the Taliban and Pakistan. The ISKP also recruits fighters from al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban and the TTP, giving them access to the weapons of the former ANDSF.¹¹⁰ Since mid-2022, the Taliban has stepped up their campaign against the ISKP.¹¹¹

Uncontrolled diversion of SALW from Afghanistan is a regional risk which is acknowledged by the UN. The problem in Central and South Asia is that there are no comprehensive regional or subregional SALW control organisations and mechanisms as in the Western Balkans or West Africa. Moreover, weapons from Afghanistan could easily spill over into the Middle East and North Africa, where multilateral arms control suffers from implementation weaknesses.¹¹² To prevent the illicit trafficking and destabilising effects of SALW, the UN Security Council, through Resolution 2626, expanded the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in 2022 to address the risk.¹¹³ UNAMA has requested the Taliban authorities to take measures to ensure the safe management of ammunition and explosives in urban depots.¹¹⁴

The OSCE has also addressed the security situation of Afghanistan in 2021 under the Central Asian Border Management Initiative. The OSCE stressed that effective border management in Central Asia is key to reducing the spread of organised crime, terrorism, radicalisation and illicit weapons.¹¹⁵ The OSCE is also conducting a programme to reduce illicit SALW and explosives across the border of Kyrgyzstan between 2023-2026. The 5,76-million-

¹⁰⁸ International Crisis Group 2024

¹⁰⁹ Kathju 2023

¹¹⁰ Fleischner 2023, 6.

¹¹¹ International Crisis Group 2024

¹¹² Bromley & Maletta & Brockmann 2018, 8-9.

¹¹³ United Nations Security Council 2022, article 5 (j)

¹¹⁴ Secretary-General 2023b, article 23

¹¹⁵ OSCE 2021

euro programme aims to improve Kyrgyzstan's border service against the proliferation of illegal SALW, ammunition and explosives. It includes the development of border security equipment, canine service for detection of explosives and the physical security and stockpile management of SALW.¹¹⁶

There is undoubtedly a risk that the massive quantities of weapons available in Afghanistan could proliferate and 'contagion' regional instability, as happened in Libya.¹¹⁷ However, the real risk, scale and regional impact of SALW proliferation after August 2021 is difficult to assess at this stage. The Taliban's measures to tighten arms transfers, sales and smuggling appear to have reduced proliferation somewhat, but the selective nature of the regulations means that proliferation remains a risk for the countries of Central and South Asia.¹¹⁸ It cannot be ruled out that SALW from Afghanistan will eventually pop up in conflicts in the Middle East.

3. Conclusions

In this study, we sought to answer the question of how SALW proliferation and state fragility interact in Afghanistan. As explained, fragile statehood occurs when all or some of the three dimensions of statehood - authority, legitimacy, and capacity - are shaken. A review of the history of Afghan statehood in the 20th century shows that the Weberian state model has never taken root. None of these three dimensions has been able to function effectively in the Islamic Republic between 2001-2021. The Afghan state built by external actors after 2001 was a weak but at the same time an oppressing state. The Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is hardly different.

SALW flowing to Afghanistan has external and internal drivers. As a landlocked country bordering six other states, with a porous border, unstable statehood, and nearly fifty years of internal conflict, Afghanistan has a particularly favourable SALW demand capacity. At the same time, the country has been a theatre of regional and great power rivalries since the end of the 19th century. In this "great game" for the region these powers have constantly tried to influence Afghanistan's internal balance of power, including through covert or legal military aid. On the one hand, massive SALW deliveries have greatly contributed to the rise of warlords and armed groups. It is important to underline that in Afghanistan, warlords have traditionally not been perceived as legitimate, but they have been able to stabilise their rule and maintain their influence through arms.¹¹⁹ Arms transfers have not only strengthened the warlords but also the

¹¹⁶ OSCE

¹¹⁷ Chávez & Swed 2022b

¹¹⁸ International Crisis Group 2024

¹¹⁹ Edwards 2010, 985.

central government in Kabul, which lacked stable legitimacy during the Republic. After 2001, when Western allies exported arms to the country, weak state capacity was unable to control SALW, and they were gradually diverted and acquired by the Taliban. In parallel to this process, the presence of SALW sustained armed violence in the country, which, together with corruption, led to the delegitimisation of the Kabul government. In sum, SALW have played a significant amplifying role in perpetuating state fragility in Afghanistan.

The case of our study highlights that the internal characteristics of a country's statehood matter when SALW diversion occurs. We conclude that it would be far-fetched to compare unconditionally the cases of states with different statehood development in relation to SALW proliferation. For instance, drawing conclusions from the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to post-war Ukraine, where there are more solid roots of Weberian statehood, would be misleading. The specificities of statehood can be used to infer the extent of SALW proliferation following conflict or state collapse.

However, what policy makers should definitively learn from the from Afghanistan's case is the crucial importance of effective post-shipment control stockpile management, especially for small and light weapons. The exporters (i. e. the United States) should bear responsibility for the illicit diversion of weapons, contributing to diversion through negligent and regulatory flawed stockpile management and end-use monitoring. The example of Afghanistan should serve as a warning to EU Member States, which, in addition to national training and capacity-building programmes (such as Germany's *Ertüchtigungsinitiative*), can now export small arms and ammunition to fragile regions through the EU Peace Facility.¹²⁰ The case of Afghanistan also shows that the dynamics of state fragility as well as the local historically developed characteristics of statehood, cannot be ignored in future state-building and post-conflict reconstruction practices, to which arms control measures should be comprehensively integrated.

The question rightly arises as to what can be done to mitigate the illicit SALW proliferation from Afghanistan. It is highly questionable whether Afghanistan can be effectively governed centrally at all, given its geographical and social characteristics. The fragility of Afghanistan may hardly change in the future. However, international actors should engage in the region to reduce proliferation risks. The OSCE's initiative to support the reinforcement of border management of Kyrgyzstan may be exemplary, which can be extended to other Central Asian

¹²⁰ Maletta & Berman 2021

countries.¹²¹ However Russia's current behaviour limits the OSCE's options to take effective action. Although outside its immediate sphere of action, it is worth considering how the European Union - in line with its SALW strategy adopted in 2018 - could actively support OSCE programmes or encourage regional actors to create and enhance efforts against illicit SALW proliferation. The OSCE and the EU has already significant experience in tackling the risks of SALW proliferation which can be used to build comprehensive arms control mechanisms in Central Asia.

¹²¹ It is worth noting, that the OSCE Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe, Tajikistan has already gained valuable experience in the field of border management training in the last 20 years.

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