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THE US WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN AND THE FATE OF THE MRAPS

Summary: This article describes the problems connected with the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and focuses on the hardships of transporting the MRAPs from the area of operations.

Keywords: military logistics, MRAP, Global War on Terror, bilateral agreement, Afghanistan, IED

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after 9/11 the US and its allies started so called the Global War on Terror (GWOT), and Afghanistan (among other countries) became a battlefield. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Operation Enduring Freedom is made up of the coalition of NATO countries, but the biggest contributor to the cause is without doubt the USA. Since 2001, they have deployed most of the soldiers and the equipment to the area.

Now the US is considering the withdrawal from the country and is faced with a huge amount of problems. When and how exactly will they leave the country? How can they manage the withdrawal efficiently from the logistic point of view? To better understand the significance of these questions, we must take a look into the history of the war and the current situation.

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the opening stages of the war, the invasion of the country went extremely fast, faster than the intelligence officers at the CIA would predict. At the beginning air strikes and a limited number of ground troops (mostly CIA paramilitary officers and special operations forces) with the help of the local anti-taliban militias launched successful campaigns against enemy strongholds and captured important cities such as Mazar-i Sharif, Kabul, Kunduz and Kandahar². It seemed that the US and its allies would achieve a fast victory over the Taliban. They successfully overthrew the regime, and set up bases and garrisons to secure their victory.

However, the war was far from over. The Taliban moved into the mountains, realising they could not battle the technologically advanced and much better equipped coalition forces head on. They changed their tactics: during the day they could be the peaceful Afghan citizens greeting soldiers in their villages, but during the night they could set IEDs or prepare ambushes and raids.

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² G. Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan*, 2005.

A new threat emerged for coalition forces, one which could only be dealt with new technological answers and the change of TTPs. The IEDs (*Improvised Explosive Devices*) were responsible for most of the casualties from 2008. The analyst started to call the war „the IED war”³. The technological answer was MRAPs (*Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles*⁴), in which the crew could survive multiple explosive attacks. These vehicles are designed to withstand enemy fire from RPGs, machine guns, mines and IEDs.



Fig. 1. A Cougar HE tested in January 2007

Source: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d6/FPCougar.jpg>, [downloaded on 17.05.2014].

2. MRAPS

The main requirement for these vehicles was survivability. MRAP vehicles usually have „V”-shaped hulls to deflect explosive forces originating below the vehicle, thereby protecting the vehicle and its passenger compartment. Typically, these explosions are from land mines, but they can also be IEDs. This design dates to the 1970s when it was first introduced in specialized vehicles built by and for the Rhodesian army, and further developed by South African manufacturers, starting in 1978 with the Buffel (Buffalo) armored personnel carrier (APC). However, the TSG/FPI Cougar (designed by a British-led U.S. team in 2004 for a U.S. Marine Corps requirement) became the springboard from

³ LTC Dipl. Eng. Jaroslav Kozůbek, Ph.D., *IED case study*, University Of Defence Faculty Of Economics And Management, 2014.

⁴ Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles are armored fighting vehicles used by various armed forces, whose designed purpose is surviving improvised explosive device (IED) attacks and ambushes. Source: R. W. Russell, *Does the MRAP meet the U.S. Army's needs as the primary method of protecting troops from the IED threat?* (Master of Military Art and Science thesis), US Army Command and General Staff College, 2009.

⁵ <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d6/FPCougar.jpg>, [downloaded on 17.05.2014].

which the MRAP program was launched. The concept was to replace Humvee-type vehicles with a more robust, survivable vehicle when on patrol „outside the wire”.

If we consider the mobility of the vehicles, it's safe to say that these are highly mobile on roads and can pass different obstacles, although they do not have tracks and are not designed like IFVs. They do not fit into that category. Additionally, some types like, the MaxxPro can easily tilt and fall over if not driven carefully.

Firepower wise, most of the common weapons found on APCs can be mounted on them from medium caliber 7,62 machine guns and heavy machine guns to automatic grenade launchers and guided missiles. They do not have a cannon.

From the design we can see that the vehicles are made for peacekeeping purposes⁶. After the deployment of these vehicles the rate of the casualties caused by IED attacks shrank (Table 1).

Table 1. The rate of the casualties caused by IED attacks on the vehicles before and after (2012-2013) deployment MRAPs

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM - AFGHANISTAN - III			
Year	Overall Losses	Losses by IED Strikes	IED Losses Rate [%]
2004	27	12	44.44
2005	73	20	27.40
2006	130	41	31.54
2007	184	78	42.39
2008	263	152	57.79
2009	451	275	60.98
2010	630	368	58.41
2011	492	252	51.22
2012	312	132	42.31
2013	105	48	45.71

Source: R. W. Russell, *op. cit.*

3. THE WITHDRAWAL PROCESS

After 13 years of the war, it is hard to tell how effective the coalition was, and in this article it is not going to be discussed. "Sometimes the end of a conventional war is a very clear-cut deal. Wars end cleanly when one party is able to decisively establish a

⁶ R. W. Russell, *op. cit.*

particular reality and the other is incapable of challenging the new status quo. Historically, the immediate post-conflict routine for the winner is typically straightforward: bases are built, garrisons are established, troops get rotated home, equipment is stored, paperwork is filed, and forces are demobilized. It is also reasonably clear for the losers; they leave the field of battle according to terms set by the victor. The soldiers of the defeated, broken army return to their families and homes — or what's left of them — and try to readjust to the new post-war reality"⁷.

This war however is not a conventional type, and although on January 11, 2012 Karzai and Obama agreed to transfer combat operations from NATO to Afghan forces by spring 2013, some still doubt that after the coalition forces leave the country, the ANA (*Afghan National Army*) and the ANP (*Afghan National Police*) will be able to keep the much needed peace and security.

The process of leaving the country is as complicated as staying and reconstructing. The withdrawal process is an expensive and complex logistical task. Bringing back 20.000 containers of equipment, 24.000 vehicles/major equipment and 38.000 troops to the states causes a huge problem to the Obama administration⁸. Until now the Afghan government have not signed the bilateral agreement about US troops stationed in the country post 2014. The US has declared that it will not keep troops in Afghanistan unless such an agreement is signed. Because of the US ultimatum, Pentagon planners have started examining the details of the US withdrawal. Gen. Dunford told the Senate in a hearing that *physical and logistical constraints mean that US forces will need 102 days to move out of the country in an orderly manner. That is, assuming there are no delays, aircraft maintenance issues, weather problems, or other headaches, the US would need to start the process of leaving Afghanistan by September 20 to be finished by December 31*. Adding some days in case of contingencies pushes that up, meaning that the US has to figure out what it intends to do by the end of August, at the latest. If it waits longer than that, US forces are going to have to cut corners, leave some tasks unfinished, and make tough choices⁹.

Because of the fact that Afghanistan is landlocked, the cheap transport by sea is unavailable without ground routes, and airlifting everything by transport planes is impossible both physically and financially.

This is further complicated by geography. There are three sets of land routes out of Afghanistan. One leads west to Iran. It is safe to say that Iran will not grant a stream of US troops and equipment free passage through its territory. Another set of routes goes through Pakistan, although Pakistan has seen fit to block these when it is sufficiently irate with the US. The last set goes north, through central Asia, into Russia. Given current tensions with Russia, it is always possible that Russia might not permit the US withdrawal across its territory either. The Pentagon has said that it will be able to manage these issues, but one has to wonder if losing major ground supply routes will not turn a complex withdrawal into a nightmare.

The most likely scenario of the withdrawal is a complex one, going through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Georgia to Europe, avoiding Iran, Russia and Pakistan. Alt-

⁷ *The US really has no idea how it'll withdraw from Afghanistan*, OAF Nation, <http://www.oafnation.com/international/2014/3/18/the-us-really-has-no-idea-how-itll-withdraw-from-afghanistan>, [downloaded on 18.03.2014].

⁸ *The mammoth military task of leaving Afghanistan*, BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-25848662>, [downloaded on 28.01.2014].

⁹ R. Faith, *The US Really Has No Idea How It'll Withdraw From Afghanistan*, <https://news.vice.com/article/the-us-really-has-no-idea-how-it-ll-withdraw-from-afghanistan>, [downloaded on 15.03.2014].

though US representatives want to convince Pakistan to let them free passage, but it is unlikely that they will agree to that. The tensions between the countries following the US drone strikes in Pakistan have risen. It worsens the situation which both sides know that the Pakistani ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) was backing the Taliban unofficially throughout the years¹⁰ (Fig. 2).

Routes for withdrawal from Afghanistan



Fig. 2. Possible withdrawal routes

Source: http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/72450000/gif/_72450521_afghan_withdrawal_976.gif, [downloaded on 17.05.2014].

Moreover, in fact the security agreement, the budget and the withdrawal are so connected that it seems "Hamid Karzai is capable of holding up the entire US defense budget by dragging his heels on the bilateral security agreement". Since the status of US forces in Afghanistan is unclear beyond 2014, the budget submitted by President Obama to Congress contains a \$79 billion placeholder for „Overseas Contingency Operations” – the funding used to pay for overseas operations during the conflict – instead of an actual commitment.

4. FATE OF THE ARMORED VEHICLES

The Pentagon knows that the withdrawal will be expensive and in fact, they do not want to bring back everything. There are almost 1,230 „excess” Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Protected vehicles (MRAPs) still in Afghanistan. They do not want to give these to the local forces, mostly because they could not keep the complex system running¹¹.

Selling these vehicles without bringing them back (the buyer has to cover those expenses) would be a good deal for the military, but it poses at least 2 problems.

¹⁰ *The mammoth...*, op. cit., [downloaded on 28.01.2014].

¹¹ *The US really...*, op. cit., [downloaded on 18.03.2014].

4.1. Selling them on a fair/cheap price, but the buyer transports the vehicle from Afghanistan

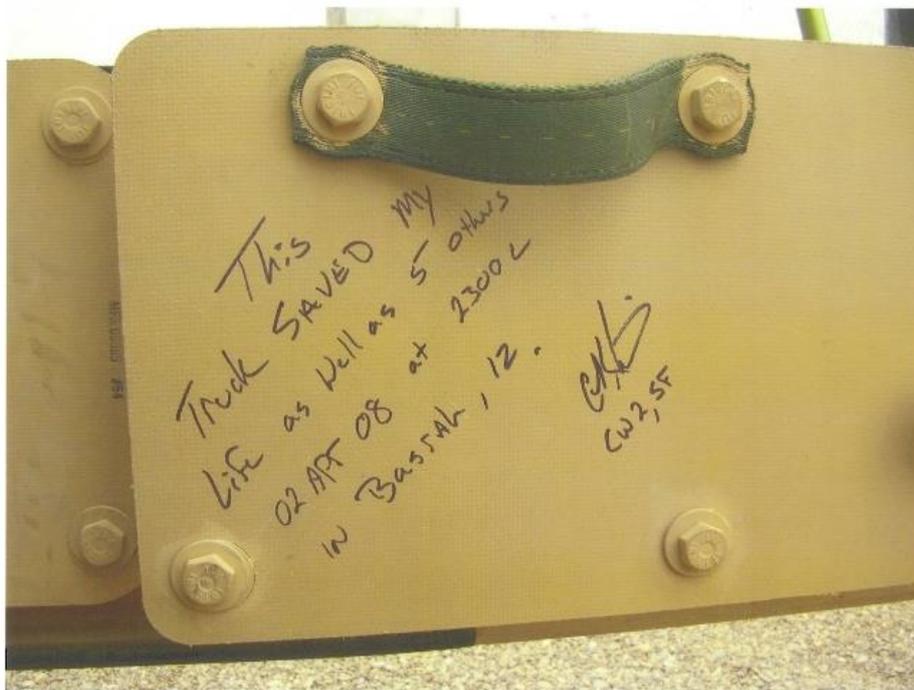
From the buyer's point of view, it would probably be cheaper to buy a new vehicle from the „local retailer” than to buy a used one which they somehow have to evacuate from a war zone. For a few companies operating in the country, maybe it will be worth it if they have logistic elements in the area.

4.2. Who needs those vehicles?

Each of the hulking military vehicles costs around \$500,000, and before the MRAPs can be used by law enforcement agencies they have to be refitted for civilian use. Even after retro-fitting, the vehicles are still limited. Because of their size, the vehicles are unable to cross some bridges and travel on narrow roads. However, they can be useful for battling armed civilian criminals, like drug cartels, but other than that they are too intimidating in a civilian environment.¹²

CONCLUSION

The fate of the withdrawal and the MRAPs remains to be seen, heavily depending on whether the bilateral agreement between the US and Afghanistan will be signed before August. Nevertheless, it will be a mammoth logistical task for the US.



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Fig. 3. The proven ability

Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/9/94/Army_mil-2008-06-13-162413.jpg, [downloaded on 17.05.2014].

¹² U.S. Police Given MRAPs - Good or Bad Idea?, funker5, <http://www.funker530.com/u-s-police-being-given-mraps/>, [downloaded on 17.05.2014].

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WYCOFYWANIE WOJSK AMERYKAŃSKICH Z AFGANISTANU – LOS POJAZDÓW OPANCERZONYCH TYPU MRAP

Streszczenie: Artykuł opisuje problemy związane z wycofaniem wojsk amerykańskich z Afganistanu oraz koncentruje się na trudnościach przetransportowania pojazdów opancerzonych typu MRAP z regionu operacji.

Słowa kluczowe: logistyka wojskowa, pojazdy MRAP, globalna wojna z terrorem, porozumienie dwustronne, Afganistan, ładunki improwizowane IED