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India Considers Stepping up Military Assistance to Afghanistan

India is purportedly evaluating whether to repair grounded Afghan helicopters and transport aircraft.

By Franz-Stefan Gady
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India is mulling stepping up its military assistance to war-torn Afghanistan by offering to pay for repairs to grounded Afghan Air Force (AAF) helicopters and military transport aircraft, *Reuters* reported on March 22.

According to the Indian ambassador to Afghanistan, Manpreet Vohra, India dispatched a team of experts in 2016 to assess the needs of the AAF. Following a visit to Kabul, the Indian aviation experts estimated that it would cost about \$50 million to procure spare parts and make repairs on 11 grounded Mi-35 helicopters and seven military transport aircraft.

“We have been looking at the scale of the challenge the ANSF [Afghan National Security Forces] faces, particularly in one segment, close air support,” Vohra said in an interview in Kabul this week with *Reuters*. “We are trying to see how we can help. They have a large number of attack helicopters and transport aircraft grounded for want of spares, for expiry of certification.”

The AAF is currently operating five Mi-35 helicopter gunships, supplied by the Czech Republic in 2008. However, poor maintenance and missing spare parts grounded the the helicopters for

most of last year's fighting season. NATO countries cannot purchase Russian-made hardware, including the parts needed to repair the Mi-35s, due to Western-imposed sanctions on Russia,

During the Afghan-Soviet War, the Soviet Union delivered over 100 Mi-24s — the Mi-35 is the export version of the Mi-24 — to Afghan government forces. Most of the helicopters were destroyed during the subsequent civil war; however, a number of gunships remained in service until the 2001 toppling of the Taliban regime. Despite being inoperable and slowly rusting away at AAF airbases, these helicopters were not scrapped.

Consequently, it is likely that the Indian expert team referred to this stockpile of Soviet military hardware in addition to the Czech-supplied Mi-35s currently grounded. In December 2016, India delivered the last of four Mi-25 (Mi-24D) helicopters to the AAF — the first time India had transferred lethal military equipment to Afghanistan. As I reported in 2016, the delivery of the last helicopter was delayed due to missing spare parts.

Russia has also expressed interest in supplying an unknown number of Mi-35 (likely the M or "Hind E" variant) attack helicopters (See: "Russia to Sell Modern Attack Helicopters to Afghanistan"). According to some media reports, Russia will take over maintenance of the recently delivered Mi-25s from India and also agreed to overhaul the AAF's aging fleet of Mi-17 transport helicopters.

The AAF currently does not operate Russian military transport aircraft, but until 2009 the service flew a number of Antonov An-32 twin-engined turboprop planes. This could be the aircraft mentioned by the Indian ambassador. Outfitted with bomb racks under its wings, the An-32 could potentially also be deployed as a bomber. The aircraft has never been in service in India. However, it remains operational with the Pakistan Air Force.