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Why Did Afghanistan Just Suspend a Request for Heavy Weaponry from India?

By Ankit Panda

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in the Afghan press earlier this week confirms that the Afghan government has suspended a request made for heavy weaponry from India. The request, which was originally made by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's predecessor Hamid Karzai during a trip to New Delhi, requested heavy artillery and other weaponry from India. The request was initially rejected but later revisited by the Indian government. A report in Afghanistan's *ToLo News* confirms, based on Afghan government sources, that the request for heavy weaponry has been suspended.

Why the sudden change? Well, there are a variety of explanations. The first, and the least convincing, comes straight from within the Afghan government. Mohammad Mohaqeq, a staffer working for Abdullah Abdullah, Afghanistan's chief executive officer, notes that "If president the has rejected this, there is the possibility that he has thought of another place to confidently get these arms from." The bid for Indian weaponry was one of the more public requests by the Afghan government and there have been no similar requests in the works for months now.

"I believe that the president would have a trip to India and he will not contradict all the works of the former president, we need the equipment and should get it from anywhere," Mohaqeq adds. Relations between Afghanistan and India haven't declined either.

The best explanation is probably that Afghanistan rescinded the request for heavy weaponry from New Delhi amid what appears to be a slow and steady process of rapprochement with Islamabad. Pakistan has made clear its interest in seeing India and Afghanistan keeping at an arm's length. Earlier this week, Pakistan's National Security Adviser Sartaj Aziz recommended that "external actors" following a policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's internal matters, warning against attempts to wage a proxy war. Similarly, both Afghanistan and Pakistan are looking at expanding their cooperation on counter-terrorism amid efforts by the central government in both countries to assert control over various militant groups.

For instance, six of the perpetrators of December's horrific attack against a school in Peshawar were apprehended on Afghan soil. Though these men were initially questioned by Afghan authorities, Pakistani authorities were reportedly in touch with the Afghan government seeing as how Mullah Fazlullah, the mastermind behind the attack, is suspected to be hiding on Afghan soil. Given the growing importance of counter-terrorism to both these countries, improving relations, at least in the short-term, is an area of common interest.

Historically, however, Pakistan's military-intelligence community has seen Afghanistan as nothing more than a buffer state. To this end, Pakistan has been held responsible for bolstering the Afghan Taliban and undermining the ability of the central government in Kabul to govern Afghanistan's borderlands effectively.

The Ghani government's decision to suspend the request for heavy weaponry from India, however, doesn't signal a major realignment in South Asia. Pakistan, although an important factor in Afghan foreign policy, can hardly offer the same sort of long-term financial support and international political ballast as India can for Afghanistan.