

Killing in the Name: The Russia-Ukraine War, Illicit Arms Trafficking and National Security Implications for India

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Abstract

The Russia-Ukraine War has significantly expanded the size of the international arms market as Moscow ramps up domestic military production and Western countries supply Ukraine with vast amount of military aid. Yet, as historical precedent indicates, when large number of weapons are supplied to any side in a war, there remains the tangible risk of several of those arms being trafficked and reaching the possession of transnational violent non-state actors, including terrorist organisations and organised crime syndicates. With the war in Ukraine being no exception, this article assesses the challenges this illicit arms trafficking poses specifically for India. It does so by first evaluating the security threat posed by ISIS' exploitation of the war in Ukraine to acquire these trafficked arms in order to use it for terror attacks worldwide and, especially, in India. The article then looks at the similar danger posed to internal security and policing by smuggling and the use of these arms by domestic organised crime syndicates in India and concludes with a brief series of policy recommendations for the Indian Government to follow.

Introduction

The arms industry has verve and a drive which makes its own logic beyond any arguments about strategy and diplomacy”, noted a British journalist in the 1970s in his seminal work on the global arms trade, *The Arms Bazaar*.¹ “It refuses to accept that it is different in kind from other industries”, he continued— instead,

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“it is only more adventurous and inventive”.² His words continue to resonate with respect to the state of the modern global arms trade over four decades on. Indeed, the Russo-Ukrainian War, in its seventh month of continuation at the time of writing, has borne witness to a significant influx of weapons within global arms markets, as Western governments have stepped up their arms exports to Kiev in its efforts to push back against Russian military advances. Yet, when it comes to the global arms trade, it remains a fact — demonstrated by historical precedent — that the merchandise in question often fails to reach its intended customers, often falling into the hands of other state and non-state actors with an interest in using the weapons in question for private strategic interests.

As total supply on global arms markets has grown amid the war due to large Western weapons arms supplies to Ukraine, so has their access to violent non-state actors worldwide. Jurgen Stock, Secretary-General of Interpol, voiced these concerns in June 2022, predicting, “An influx of weapons in Europe and beyond” as “criminal groups try to exploit the situation and the availability of weapons, even those used by the military and including heavy weapons”.³ Heeding his warning, governments worldwide, including those in the West, have started taking steps to counter the rise in illicit arms trafficking during and following the predicted end of the Russo-Ukrainian War. In July 2022, the European Union (EU) announced the establishment of a 27 member hub in Moldova specifically aimed at countering the illicit trafficking of arms supplied to and from Ukraine.⁴

While Ukraine has long been a flashpoint of the global illicit arms trade, the ongoing war has only exacerbated existing threats emanating from the country. The fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s culminated in a flood of Soviet weaponry being trafficked by ‘conflict entrepreneurs’, such as Leonid Minin (a Ukrainian citizen himself) and Viktor Bout, to war-zones around the world such as the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia during the latter part of the decade — documented in Douglas Farah’s and Stephen Braun’s 2007 book *Merchant of Death*.

At a time when India faces a variety of security threats from internal and external armed conflicts — from the threat of a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan already armed with US military kit to the increased access to military-grade weaponry among

domestic organised criminal networks linked to hostile foreign intelligence services, and to the continuing jihadist violence in Kashmir — the potential threat of illicit arms trafficking from and via Ukraine is something which policymakers in South Block should consider seriously.

Building upon ISIS spokesperson Abu Omar al-Muhajir's April 2022 remarks exhorting its members and sympathisers to "take advantage" of the ongoing war in Ukraine to declare a "global offensive" against its enemies⁵, this section points towards the increased threat posed by ISIS amid the Ukraine War, specifically via the immediate threat of its acquisition of illicit weaponry smuggled from the Ukrainian conflict.

Threat 1: ISIS and Transnational Jihadism

It may be argued that the greatest beneficiary of the Russo-Ukrainian War as a direct consequence of the trafficking of weapons will be ISIS and similar transnational jihadist organisations, who will seek to acquire Western small arms and military-grade weaponry smuggled worldwide from the battlefields of Ukraine. The challenge this poses to Indian national security gains greater salience given the outfit's stated desire to grow its influence amid the war and following the success of the US special operation in February 2022 to kill Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, the self-styled caliph of the Islamic State. This view is supported in particular by the group's characterisation as a hybrid criminal-terrorist organisation within certain academic schools of thought.

ISIS and the conflict in Ukraine share a long and chequered history, dating back to at least 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ensuing frozen conflict in the Donbass between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russia separatists. Since 2014, the instability in Eastern Ukraine has provided ISIS fighters with opportunities to smuggle unregistered weapons and foreign fighters to war-zones in Iraq and Syria, collect identity documents, revenue (often in conjunction with local organised crime networks) and even acquire military training as part of volunteer battalions on either side.⁶ Indeed, the endemic corruption in the country, coupled with easy access to small arms, has facilitated post-2014 Ukraine's devolution into what Marcin Mamon refers to in his report for *The Intercept* as "an important stop-off point for the 'brothers of the Islamic State'".⁷ The arrest of Abu Omar al-Shishani, ISIS' so-called 'minister of war' and a close aide of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,

near his home in the Kiev region in late 2019 by the Ukrainian intelligence services once again shone a light upon ISIS' illicit activities in the country following the start of the war in the Donbass in 2014.⁸ In such circumstances, it may be argued that the current state of war between Russia and Ukraine provides new opportunities for ISIS to consolidate its presence in Ukraine in pursuit of its global objectives, including in India — especially via arms smuggling to conduct large-scale terror attacks.

ISIS' statements following the February 2022 US military operation which saw the death of al-Qurashi point towards the group's collective desire to exploit the Russo-Ukrainian War to expand its global influence. Just a few days after the operation, the group's spokesman, Abu Omar al-Muhajir, called upon ISIS sympathisers to take advantage of "the crusaders fighting each other" in Ukraine to re-commence large-scale terror attacks in Europe and across the world — implying the outfit's desire to enrich itself from the conflict and its presence in the country to achieve its transnational objectives.⁹ In these conditions, the potential challenge posed by ISIS' global smuggling of weapons from Ukraine for their use in terrorist attacks worldwide gains greater challenge. This, when combined with ISIS propaganda's renewed focus on India as a theatre of operations evidenced by its exploitation of the hijab controversy in March¹⁰ and its calls for the assassination of PM Modi and terrorist attacks in India¹¹ underscores the implications of developments in Ukraine for India's national security with regard to the threats posed by ISIS.

The national security challenge posed to India by ISIS's facilitated access to weapons available on illicit markets in Ukraine is exacerbated by the organisation's longstanding emphasis on criminal activity as an aspect of its wider operations. Indeed, ISIS' historic focus on acquiring revenue and weapons through criminal and semi-criminal activities such as arms trafficking and drug smuggling has led to its categorisation as a hybrid criminal-terrorist outfit. Pointing towards the group's close ties with "different organised crime groups in the Balkans, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East Region" aside from its dependence on "illegal oil trading, human and human organs trafficking and arms trading", Iranian academic Mahdokht Zakeri argues that today, "ISIS is no longer solely an ideological-terrorist group", but "also a de-territorialised, international non-state actor which acts as an hybrid criminal terrorist organisation".¹²

Viewed through this prism as a transnational criminal-terrorist entity, ISIS can be projected to use its global footprint to exploit instability in one country to carry out attacks elsewhere, such as in India — a possible destination for these trafficked weapons. Colin P Clarke, a Senior Fellow at the Soufan Centre, concurs, underlining that “terrorist groups will engage in nearly any activity that generates a profit and have demonstrated an ability to adapt to losses in one area by aggressively expanding into new markets”, thus demonstrating “the blurred lines between criminality and terrorism”.¹³ Both sets of arguments demonstrate that not only does ISIS’ potential trafficking of illicit arms from Ukraine to India pose a tangible threat to India’s internal security, but also point towards the novel global security challenges posed by ISIS’ actions as a criminal-terrorist entity.

Threat 2: Domestic Organised Crime Networks

In a similar vein, the Russia-Ukraine War and the ensuing influx of weapons into global arms markets provides organised crime networks, including those in India, with facilitated access to foreign weaponry. The rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) attack on the Punjab Police Intelligence Headquarters by local organised criminal outfits in May 2022 not only points towards the increased access to military-grade weaponry by such groups in India, but in a global arms market, increasingly saturated by smuggled weapons from Ukraine, signals a worsening of the current situation in coming years.

Concerns surrounding such forms of arms trafficking link back to Interpol Secretary-General Jurgen Stock’s aforementioned remarks surrounding criminal exploitation of the black/grey weapons markets in wartime Ukraine. As the war drags on, these apprehensions have been echoed more vocally among Western states and government bodies, with the British delegation to the OSCE arguing in July 2022 that “as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine continues, global drivers of serious organised crime strengthen”.¹⁴ In a similar vein, a Europol statement the same month warned that “the proliferation of firearms and explosives in Ukraine could lead to an increase in firearms and munitions trafficked into the EU via established smuggling routes or online platforms”.¹⁵

Both statements and, particularly, the views expressed by Europol, underscore significant, similar security challenges for India. With weapons smuggling channels to domestic criminal networks

in India remaining a pertinent policing challenge and growing reports of illicit dark web-enabled weapons sales across the country, the challenge that Europol predicts as a consequence of the influx of weapons onto Ukraine is likely to affect India as well.¹⁶ Indeed, the rise in the use of foreign-imported guns by members of organised criminal networks in Indian cities in recent years point towards well-established smuggling channels enabling the supply of such weapons to these groups from overseas – especially those from Pakistan facilitating weapons trafficking from Western markets.¹⁷ In such circumstances, the expansion of global black/grey arms markets amid the war in Ukraine may be projected to create new opportunities for domestic organised crime networks in India.

The presence of various channels of arms smuggling into India makes her problem all the more pressing. India has long contended with the security challenges posed by the crime-terror nexus along its porous borders with Pakistan in the northwest, Nepal in the north and with Myanmar in the northeast. As the global illicit arms market becomes increasingly inundated with weapons being smuggled in from Ukraine, these existing smuggling routes will serve to become increasingly critical for domestic organised criminal networks seeking to acquire these new small arms. This view is supported by Mohammed Siyech, who argues that “the supply-demand equation in the criminal-terrorist ecology does not take place in a vacuum but rather co-exists in tandem with other non-state actors”.¹⁸ Siyech’s remarks reiterate the danger posed to India’s national security as a result of arms smuggling from Ukraine, especially when viewed through the prism of organised criminal security threats, which will remain incentivised to benefit from the supply of smuggled weapons into India.

Policy Recommendations

Having established the two primary challenges, posed by illicit arms trafficking from Ukraine, for India’s national security — those posed by transnational jihadist outfits (specifically ISIS) and domestic organised criminal organisations in India, the three broad policy recommendations for the Indian government to pursue are:

- **The Establishment of a Specialised Unit/Task Force and a Liaison Centre.** Special Task Forces (STFs) should be established within both the IB and the NIA, with each task

force analysing the challenges posed by the receipt and use of trafficked weapons by organised crime and terrorist organisations respectively, as per agency mandates. The establishment of a liaison centre between both agencies, responding directly to the NSA's office would also be recommended in order to ensure effective intelligence sharing, prevent potential turf wars, provide oversight and better explore the crime-terror nexus' engagement in arms trafficking into India from Ukraine.

- **An Increased Ground HUMINT Presence in Ukraine.** With the Indian embassy in Kiev having been re-opened with immediate effect from 17 May 2022, it is recommended that diplomatic and embedded intelligence personnel in the country increasingly focus their attention towards the trafficking of weapons from Ukraine to India. This will require greater focus on the activities of local criminal organisations in the region with incentives in trafficking weapons, and their relations (direct or otherwise) with violent non-state actors in India. Establishing a ground intelligence presence via the re-opened embassy would allow Indian authorities to keep a check on the supply of these illicit arms at their source.
- **Tighter Surveillance of Borders and Sea-Ports.** Given that most supply chains for arms trafficking into India are controlled by actors in neighbouring countries (namely Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal), it is key that surveillance be increased in border areas and around sea-ports as these are the points of entry for the illicit weapons in question. This can be conducted using human surveillance/tighter physical control of entry points as well as by the increasingly focussed collection of IMINT along land borders by satellites.

Endnotes

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