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# U.S. buys Russian choppers for Afghan military

## Pentagon purchase of 'exorbitantly priced' aircraft sparks controversy

By Craig Whitlock  
 The Washington Post

updated 1:29 a.m. PT, Sat., June 19, 2010

WASHINGTON - The U.S. government is snapping up Russian-made helicopters to form the core of Afghanistan's fledgling air force, a strategy that is drawing flak from members of Congress who want to force the Afghans to fly American choppers instead.

In a turnabout from the Cold War, when the CIA gave Stinger missiles to Afghan rebels to shoot down Soviet helicopters, the Pentagon has spent \$648 million to buy or refurbish 31 Russian Mi-17 transport helicopters for the Afghan National Army Air Corps. The Defense Department is seeking to buy 10 more of the Mi-17s next year, and had planned to buy dozens more over the next decade.

The spectacle of using U.S. taxpayer dollars to buy Russian military products is proving a difficult sell in Congress. Some legislators say that the Pentagon never considered alternatives to the Mi-17, an aircraft it purchased for use in Iraq and Pakistan, and that a lack of competition has enabled Russian defense contractors to gouge on prices.

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"The Mi-17 program either has uncoordinated oversight or simply none at all," said Sen. Richard C. Shelby (R-Ala.), who along with Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.) has pushed the Pentagon to reconsider its purchase plans. "The results have led to massive waste, cost overruns, schedule delays, safety concerns and major delivery problems."



Dar Yasin / AP file

An engineer works on a Russian-built Mi-17 helicopter at an air force base in Kabul, Afghanistan, on April 6.

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**'It works well'**

U.S. and Afghan military officials who favor the Mi-17, which was designed for use in Afghanistan, acknowledge that it might seem odd for the Pentagon to invest in Russian military products. But they said that changing helicopter models would throw a wrench into the effort to train Afghan pilots, none of whom can fly U.S.-built choppers.

"If people come and fly in Afghanistan with the Mi-17, they will understand why that aircraft is so important to the future for Afghanistan," said Brig. Gen. Michael R. Boera, the U.S. Air Force general in charge of rebuilding the Afghan air corps. "We've got to get beyond the fact that it's Russian. . . . It works well in Afghanistan."

U.S. military officials have estimated that the Afghan air force won't be able to operate independently until 2016, five years after President Obama has said he intends to start withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan. But Boera said that date could slip by at least two years if Congress forces the Afghans to fly U.S. choppers. "Is that what we really want to do?" he asked.

The U.S. military has been trying to resurrect the decimated Afghan National Army Air Corps since 2005, when it consisted of a few dozen furloughed pilots and a handful of decrepit Mi-17s.

Because Afghan airmen had historically trained on Russian choppers, the Pentagon decided to make the Mi-17s the backbone of Afghanistan's fleet. The Soviet Union specifically designed the Mi-17 for use in Afghanistan. U.S. officials say it is well-suited for navigating the altitudes of the Hindu Kush mountains, as well as Afghanistan's desert terrain.

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U.S. forces depend on them to deploy troops to isolated areas, provide them with supplies and airlift them out when they are wounded. Until recently, Afghan pilots have steered clear of combat but have used their Mi-17s to transport high-ranking Afghan officials, including President Hamid Karzai. U.S. officials hope the Afghan air corps eventually will be able to defend its own skies and serve the fast-growing Afghan National Army.

Afghans are also training on Mi-35 Russian-made attack helicopters and Italian-designed C-27s, a fixed-wing aircraft used to transport troops and supplies. The air corps has 48 aircraft and 3,300 personnel.

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With few reliable roads, helicopters are a primary mode of transport in Afghanistan.

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Boera said plans are to expand to 146 aircraft and 8,000 personnel by 2016. Pentagon officials said they had originally projected that Mi-17s would compose half the fleet, but they are considering scaling back.

About 450 U.S. service personnel are in Afghanistan to train and advise the Afghan airmen. Training the air corps has been a painstakingly slow process, much more so than U.S. efforts to train Afghanistan's national army and police.

Afghan pilot recruits, many of whom are illiterate in their native tongue, are required to learn English — the official language of the cockpit — before they can earn their wings. U.S. officials say it usually takes two to five years to train an entire flight crew.

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So far, only one Afghan pilot has graduated from flight school in the United States, although dozens are in the pipeline. That has forced the air corps to rely on pilots who learned to fly Mi-17s during the days of Soviet and Taliban rule.

Gen. Mohammed Dawran, chief of the Afghan air corps, said most of those pilots are in their 40s and set in their ways. Requiring them to start fresh on U.S. copters would be an uphill battle.

"They learned the previous system and different ideas," he said in an interview. Most of the veterans also don't know how to fly at night or in poor visibility, when a pilot must rely on an aircraft's instrument panel to navigate.

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