

AK-47 : The Lord of War; Can you recognise it?

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THE Customs & Excise Department has an important role in any Border Management Architecture. Examination and inspection of cargo and people of various categories like travellers/tourists/businessmen has become a delicate and complex task. The emergence of terrorist groups and religious fundamentalists and their movement across different geographical jurisdictions has become a cause of global concern.

Requirements of rapid clearance of cargo and passengers has resulted in lax inspections and downgrading of physical verifications, which is being exploited for transport of arms and ammunition and narcotics. The AK 47 gun has become a universal favourite of legitimate armed forces as well as terrorist groups. **This prized weapon can be dismantled for ease of transportation and to avoid detection.** Customs & Excise officers have hardly any training to detect and identify such dismantled arms. The scope of this article is just to give an insight about the ubiquitous AK-47.

The AK-47 Assault Rifle was the basic infantry weapon for both the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War. Though of Russian design, most of the weapons used in that conflict were built in the Peoples' Republic of China. The rifle was designed by Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov, a Russian soldier who had only the equivalent of a high school education. In 1938 he was drafted into the Soviet army. He was trained as a tank driver and in 1941, after being seriously wounded during the battle of Bryansk, Kalashnikov spent six months of his recuperation designing a machine gun with his machinist friend Zhenya Kravchenko. The two men sent their basic design to the Main Artillery Commission in Moscow, and over the next six years continued to work on the prototype. Their design was finalized in 1947.

By 1949 the weapon had become standard issue in the Soviet Army, designated Avtomat Kalashnikova Obrazets 1947. The rifle has remained basically unchanged since then, and is the most popular assault weapon in the world, currently used by more than fifty armies. Since the Vietnam War, the AK-47 has enjoyed something of a "cult" status among gun collectors as well as criminals and drug smugglers. It utilizes a standard 7.62 mm bullet, is extremely sturdy, compact, reliable, and relatively light in weight at 4,876 grams fully loaded. Its magazine holds 30 rounds which, in fully automatic mode, can be fired at the rate of 600 rounds a minute. Its high muzzle velocity of 700 meters per second and the "tumbling" nature of the bullet on impact make the weapon extremely effective, and - coupled with its high rate of fire - means that soldiers do not need as much training in marksmanship as those utilizing more traditional weapons. It has an effective killing range of 1500 meters.

In the early days of the Vietnam War, the AK-47 was considered superior by many American soldiers to their own weapon, the Colt M-16. The original M-16 was difficult to keep clean in humid jungle conditions and it was prone to jamming when fired on full automatic. Consequently many G.I.'s took AK-47's from dead enemy soldiers and used them instead of their M-16's, in spite of the fact that the Kalashnikov's distinctive "popping" sound in combat threatened to draw fire from their own forces.

The Machine

Functionally, the AK-47 used gas vented from the barrel to throw back a piston which rotated a bolt, operating the feed and extraction mechanism and cocking the hammer for the next round. Depending on the model the receiver was either stamped or machined, in either case being strong enough to withstand a robust impact from the deliberately overpowered piston. A combination of the piston's great inertia, a lack of moving parts

and loose design tolerances ensured that, whilst the AK-47 was not especially accurate, it could function even when clogged with unburnt propellant, grit, flecks of rust, mud, water and so forth. The cocking handle was directly attached to the bolt, and thus could be used to ram the cartridge home in cases of extreme fouling. The ability of the rifle to stand up to punishment is well-documented, and it is easy to disassemble and clean. The design had a number of weak spots, however; the safety lever was large and clumsy, the wooden stock and handguard could rot away in swampy conditions, the pistol grip was not particularly comfortable, the sights were poor, and damaged to the exposed gas channel above the barrel could reduce the rifle to a single-shot weapon.

Service History

The AK-47 entered Soviet service in 1951, alongside the SKS, and was officially replaced in 1959 with Kalashnikov's updated AKM, which can be visually identified by having a much straighter stock. The AKM had provision for a bayonet, a surprising omission from the original AK-47 design. AK-pattern rifles continued in Soviet service, through the AK-74 of 1977, up until 2000, when the AN-94 'Abakan', a new design, was adopted. Nonetheless a lack of funds and a large army mean that AK rifles continue to proliferate. Each of the above was issued in a folding stock version for paratroops and commandos; these had an 'S' in their model name.

It took until Vietnam for the AK-47 to become an icon in the west. Both the Viet Cong guerrillas and the regular North Vietnamese army were widely equipped with Chinese- and Russian-made Kalashnikovs, the weapon proving well-suited for fighting in forests and built up areas, situations where short range firepower and imperviousness to mud and rain were paramount. In that conflict American infantrymen were initially equipped with the M14 and later the M16. The heavy, high-powered M14 forced the infantryman to carry only one or two hundred rounds or so, and was more suited for warfare in open terrain, whilst the M16 was beset by teething problems, and accusations that the SS109 round it fired was not powerful enough to reliably penetrate thick foliage without being deflected; whatever the truth of this, the AK-47 seemed to have no problem on this score.

The AK-47 also possessed a less obvious advantage over the M16 in close combat, when the chips were down; a hefty, solid wooden stock. Its major drawback, common with other automatic assault rifles, was a tendency to encourage the troops to expend large amounts of ammunition (soldiers on both sides were gripped with a great temptation to poke their rifles from behind cover and fire blindly). For the poorly-equipped Viet Cong this was a major issue, and the troops were taught to religiously conserve ammunition, a doctrine which negated some of the AK-47s advantages.

Rival rifles during the cold war included the high-powered FN FAL and the H&K G3, both of which benefited from a lingering perception that the AK-47 was closer to a sub-machinegun than a 'real' rifle; furthermore, the AK-47 had unfortunate political connotations. Apart from being the Russian army's standard rifle, the AK-47 became a potent tool of Soviet foreign policy, being supplied en masse to any government, opposition or armed organisation which supported Soviet aims. **The weapon's legendary robustness, its cheapness, and the wide availability of parts and ammunition made it perfect for guerrilla groups and terrorist organisations.** By the 1970s the weapon had become infamous for this reason, and it still retains an air of menace, helped in part by its brutalist styling and prominent magazine (caused by the chunky, tapered design of the cartridge - the smaller-calibre AK-74 had a much straighter box). The magazine assumed ridiculous proportions with the RPK light machinegun, essentially an AK-47 with a heavier barrel, a new stock, a bipod, and 45-round magazines which curved through 90 degrees. Drum magazines and a semi-circular 100-round magazine was developed, although this is rare due to problems with spring tension.

Legacy

Although most of the AK-style rifles that appear on the news and in the media are not actually AK-47s, but derivations and regional copies, 'AK-47' and 'Kalashnikov' are still used as generic terms to refer to AK-pattern rifles, of which there are many. Not only is the AK-47 family extremely popular, it has also formed the basis of many other designs, including the Israeli Galil (which was, in turn, adopted by Sweden as the AK-5), the Yugoslav Zastava and the Finnish Valmet RK series. All of the Eastern Bloc produced AK-47s, sometimes with minor variations, such as the Chinese Type 56's integral folding bayonet, or the Bulgarian model's front pistol grip - one notable exception was Czechoslovakia, which used an original design, the VZ.58, which physically resembled the AK-47 but was a different design. **Modern Kalashnikovs are produced in a variety of calibres by Izmash; the modern equivalent of the AK-47 is the AK-103, chambered for the same cartridge.**

During the Cold War, the USSR supplied arms to anti-Western insurgent terrorists. The AK-47 became a symbol of left-wing revolution; between 30-50 million copies and variations of the AK-47 have been produced globally, making it the most widely used rifle in the world.

Conclusion

India is facing aggravated forms of terrorism in different parts of the country. Illicit arms traffic is the chief source of supply for terrorists as well as Naxalites. The entry/exit points on our international borders is also being used to sneak arms & ammunition. Customs & Excise officers have hardly any exposure or training in detection of these weapons. Our officers still rely on intuition and visual probe in their performance of duty, which is woefully inadequate in these times. We need to sharpen their skills by sophisticated training and exposure.

(The views expressed are strictly personal)