

Articles

Illicit Drugs and Insurgency in Afghanistan

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Abstract

It is argued that the relationship between illicit drugs and the insurgency in Afghanistan cannot be captured by the simplistic concept of “narco-terrorism”. Rather, it has to be seen in terms of linkages of various types and degrees between two distinct phenomena. Drug trafficking may generate criminal violence in both peacetime and conflict settings. In the latter case, the illicit drug business becomes a “conflict resource”, while also serving shadow economic functions (such as serving as a social-economic coping strategy to peasants in some areas) and generating organized criminal violence and street delinquency. Organized crime groups play the main role in the illicit drug business, especially at the higher, internationalized levels of the drug chain. Drug profits are in fact lowest in the drug producing areas themselves. In the case of Afghanistan, only 4.3 per cent (or US \$ 2,9 billion) of the US \$ 60 billion average annual volume of the global market for Afghan opiates remain in the country. Of the proceeds that stay in Afghanistan, the author estimates that no more than between US \$ 100-150 million probably went to the Taliban in 2011. The US/NATO war on the Taliban has not significantly reduced Afghanistan’s opium economy. The prospects for achieving significant results in counter-narcotics after the US/NATO withdrawal in 2014 are dim unless major armed conflict comes to an end – a goal likely to be achieved only if Afghanistan is decentralized and regionalized and the Taliban is given a regional role in Pashtu parts of the country whereby tougher counter-narcotics provisions should be a negotiable demand/condition for any configuration of talks with the insurgents on the political settlement.

Introduction

At the peak of the U.S. and NATO military intervention and security presence in Afghanistan, in line with the discourse of the “global war on terrorism”, the Taliban-led Islamist insurgency was routinely and fully identified with (a) terrorism and (b) illicit drugs. However, degrading the Afghan insurgency to “narco-terrorism” has become increasingly problematic as, by the end of 2014, much of direct Western security involvement in Afghanistan is about to be wrapped up, leaving behind malfunctioning governance, mounting insurgency, deteriorating security and ever spreading corruption.

As the Barack Obama administration, under growing financial pressures, came to realize the lack of political and counterinsurgency progress in Afghanistan, it started to push more actively for the end of the U.S. military presence in its current form, to be completed in 2014. Even as the U.S.-Afghan treaty signed in May 2012 confirms that some U.S. forces and several military bases will stay in Afghanistan after 2014, it is clear that the United States and NATO are determined to lay down a significant share of responsibility for security that they had assumed in

the aftermath of the 2001 intervention into Afghanistan. Military withdrawal amidst unabated violence has to be accompanied by moves towards some form of political settlement. The political process, in turn – whether it aims at a genuine peace settlement or is more of a face-saving political cover-up of the U.S./NATO hasty retreat – requires direct involvement from the very same insurgents who have so long been blacklisted as “narco-terrorists”.

Apart from the political requirements of the moment, degrading the Afghan Taliban to “narco-terrorists” appears problematic, both in substantive terms and from the point of formal logic. First, the concept of “narco-terrorism” extends the notion of “terrorism” to apply to all militancy and all means of armed struggle, including those that have little to do with terrorism (e. g., direct combat-style confrontation between insurgents and government forces). Second, “narco-terrorism” implies a merger of drugs and terrorism, whereas the relationship is more accurately described in terms of *linkages* of various types and degrees between two distinct phenomena. Militant groups with explicit socio-political, religious, ideological agendas include groups that combine guerrilla attacks against military targets with terrorist means in their tactical arsenal. Any such group may also use revenues from taxing illicit crop cultivation, production and trade as one of its several sources of funding.[1] These linkages are the strongest and most typical in armed conflicts in the world’s major drug-producing areas (such as Afghanistan) and in many “gray areas” along the main trafficking routes, such as the Balkan and the Northern routes of trafficking of the Afghan opiates (to Europe and Russia, respectively).

For the Taliban, terrorism has become one of several violent tactics, along with guerrilla-style attacks against U.S., NATO and the Afghan government security and military targets. Drug revenues, in turn, comprise just part of the insurgency’s diversified financial system. Consequently, attempts to exclusively tie a specific violent tactic to one select source of funding and then to make this link absolute as some fixed and inseparable phenomenon are problematic.

The quick resurgence and the exponential growth of the opium economy in post-Taliban Afghanistan continues to pose a major challenge at the regional and international level. Afghan opiates directly threaten human security in many countries, starting from Afghanistan itself and its immediate neighbors (especially Iran) to more distant end-markets such as Russia that has emerged as the world’s largest consumer market for Afghan heroin.[2] As the end of the U.S./NATO large-scale security presence and counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan is approaching, the complex links between drugs and militancy in Afghanistan, as well as the general ways to reduce violence and the opium economy in Afghanistan, need to be re-examined.

I. Background: Illicit Drugs, Conflict and Terrorism

The illicit drug business may be linked to armed violence in two main ways. First, the drug business may itself generate criminal violence, in both peacetime and conflict settings. Illicit narcotics business feeds street violence, especially in overpopulated urban areas. Larger traffickers have armed guards or hire armed groups to protect them, sometimes amounting to private mini-armies. These criminal armies attack police and other security forces, engage in violent turf wars among themselves and resort to violence against civilians. The most intense forms of such criminal violence are:

- escalation of trafficking-related cross-border violence, especially along the borders between major source countries and transit states (the Afghan-Tajik, Afghan-Iranian, Myanmar-Thai or Colombian-Venezuelan borders);
- major campaigns of organized criminal and anti-crime violence that involve combat-style fighting across the country (such as trafficking-related violence in Mexico). This trafficking-related violence may be comparable to – or may even outmatch in scale and intensity – “classic” armed conflicts over issues such as political control of territory or government.

Second, in areas of armed conflicts over government or territory, the illicit drug business, in addition to serving its main shadow economic functions, generating organized criminal violence and street delinquency, also becomes a major “conflict resource”. Most commonly, it serves as a direct source of funding for non-state combatants who are generally more constrained than state actors in their access to the formal economy and who tend to rely on shadow economic activity for funding.

Armed non-state actors in conflict with the state (such as the Taliban in Afghanistan throughout the 2000s, the Mong Thai Army in Myanmar until the mid-1990s or FARC in Colombia) are distinct – and should be distinguished – from organized crime, even if they use drug profits for funding and engage in illicit narcotics business. The main distinction is that these secular or religious militant actors also contest a declared political incompatibility over territory or government, whereas criminal groups generally do not. Still, non-state conflict actors are similar to organized crime groups in that they primarily operate within the informal economy. Exceptions include insurgent’s overt or covert engagement in select forms of legal economic activity (e. g., cultivation of legal crops, such as wheat or coffee) or a specific mode of funding available to militant Islamist groups through transfer of religious funds originally collected for legitimate purposes as religious donations.

Involvement of non-state conflict actors in the illicit drug business is most strongly driven – or even predetermined – by a combination of

- a) their main areas of operation and/or origin and
- b) the comparative high profitability of the narcotics business, as compared to most other informal or formal sources of funding.

Indeed, the links between politico-military armed actors and the drug business are most profound in major drug-producing regions (e. g., the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Mong Thai Army in Myanmar or FARC in Colombia) and also in areas beyond stable state control along major trafficking routes. The comparatively high profitability of the drug business may even allow some of these militant groups to achieve financial self-sufficiency (e. g., FARC is the world’s largest supplier of coca paste and cocaine). Furthermore, in marginalized peripheries where most drug crops are grown, cash-generating income alternatives are scarce or absent. In these peripheral areas where militant non-state actors are often based or operate from involvement in narcotics-related activities in initial, down-the-chain forms (protection of cultivation, regulation of local prices, etc.) may become an additional source of population support and form part of a “hearts and minds” strategy for political-militant groups.

At the same time, it should be kept in mind that in areas where the links between drugs and conflict/militant actors are the closest – i. e. in major drug-producing areas – *drug profits are, comparatively speaking, the lowest (!)* as they comprise a relatively small, sometimes miniscule, proportion of the overall income and total value of the global narcotics market. For instance, US \$ 2,6 billion of opium income that stayed in Afghanistan in 2011 (earned primarily by peasants and criminal traffickers) comprises no more than 4,3 per cent of the US \$ 60 billion average annual volume of the global market for the Afghan opiates.[3] The highest profits in the illicit drug business are always made by those actors – almost exclusively professional criminal organizations – who control wholesale and retail/street distribution in consumer countries. However, while guerrilla movements based in drug producing countries are at the low end of the drug business chain and get a limited share of the overall profits, these revenues can still be significant in comparison with the relatively small size of the local/national economy (e. g., in Afghanistan).

Conflict actors engaged in the drug business range from leftist guerrillas to right-wing paramilitaries, from secular nationalists to Islamist militants. These actors may participate in different aspects of the drug business from the more typical informal taxation and protection of cultivation and regulation of the local trade and trafficking to some aspects of international trafficking and may even play a minor role in distribution in the main consumer countries. Conflict actors are also involved in different types of linkages – or stages in relationships – with organized crime groups who play the main role in illicit drug business, especially at the higher and the more internationalized levels of the drug chain. These different types of linkages sometimes overlap or are combined by the same group and may be categorized as follows:

- *Activity appropriation and limited cooperation* with professional crime groups. Most militant/terrorist actors in major drug-producing areas – and many such actors operating along major trafficking routes – have gone through this stage. Types of linkage may range from the most typical and widespread ones such as the arms-for-drugs barter trade to the more unorthodox ones (e. g., the service provided by the Liberation Tigers Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the form of LTTE-affiliated drug couriers on air flights);
- *Unlimited cooperation* (all the way up to forming a *symbiotic relationship* with professional traffickers / organized crime groups). This is stage that the Taliban movement in Afghanistan had reached in the second half of the 1990s – before the very strict and effective Taliban ban on poppy cultivation was enforced in 2000-2001 – and then again by the mid-2000s, as an active insurgent movement in need of funding and in control of territory in drug-producing areas. Other examples include most regional fronts of FARC in Colombia, up to the present day;
- *Merger with organized crime (hybrid-type relationship)*. The best criterion to establish that an insurgent group has reached this stage of integration with the illicit drug business is when one can no longer discern whether its agenda and activity are dominated by political (religious, ideological) or profit-oriented motives and goals. This was the case with the Mong Thai Army – the largest insurgent and trafficking actor in Myanmar until a decisive crack-down by the government in 1996. Other

examples include several more heavily criminalized FARC fronts and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s;

- *Full criminalization and political/ideological degradation* of an originally genuine social-political militant actor. This scenario tends to become more likely for groups engaged in protracted armed confrontations that reach a stalemate or gradually fade away. It is also one of the typical paths of many more radical, splinter groups that become spoilers at the stage of the ongoing – and lasting – peace process. Examples range from the “Abu Sayyaf” group in the Philippines (that originally split from a genuine Islamist/nationalist Moro liberation movement) to several post-IRA splinters and ex-militants of the Peruvian “Sendero Luminoso” who partake in control over distribution of *paco* (inexpensive drug made from cocaine mixed with amphetamines) in the slums of Buenos-Aires.

Against this background, it is worth noting that while the Taliban in Afghanistan displays a relatively advanced stage of integration with drug trafficking, this radical Islamist movement has never reached the most advanced stages and *stopped short of a hybrid-type merger* with trafficking organizations. A number of other insurgent organizations have demonstrated closer integration into the drug business than the Taliban, i. e. a full merger with organized crime (when insurgent groups and the main drug entrepreneurs were identical and inseparable, as in the case of the Mong Thai Army) or even complete criminalization.

Even in the midst of an on-going armed conflict, the illicit drug business is never fully subordinated to the conflict needs or linked to insurgent/terrorist groups only. The drug business is rather apolitical in the sense that it tends to entangle all parties to a conflict, including – and often prioritizing – links to corrupt elements of the state at different levels of government. Pro-government and vigilante militias, select public officials or even some segments of the government, including segments of the security sector, maybe as deeply, if not deeper, involved in illicit drug business than the insurgents.

In conflict areas, the drug business plays a multifunctional role by:

- allowing criminal entrepreneurs to gain economic profit, with all related social-economic implications (such as corruption);
- playing an adaptive role as a social-economic coping and survival strategy and a major source of cash-generating income for the local population, especially in marginalized peripheries;
- serving as a source of funding for armed actors who also use drug revenues to directly finance the war effort, arms and other materiel purchases etc.

The multifunctional nature of the illicit drug business in conflict areas explains why the link between drugs and conflict-related violence (combat, terrorism, communal violence etc.) is not as linear as it may seem. Analysis of drugs and conflict-related violence as two exclusively interrelated factors in a closed self-regulatory system is thus untenable. Armed conflict may, for instance, serve as a catalyst for the expansion of the drug business (as it was the case during the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in 1979–1989). It may, however, also surge under improved security conditions – e. g., in areas under Taliban control in the mid-late 1990s.

In fact, the most critical link between armed conflict and the drug business may not even be the direct role of drug revenues as a source of war funding. Rather, it is the more general role of armed conflict and other conflict-related violence in weakening and undermining basic state capacity and functionality and preventing state access to insurgent-controlled areas where drug crops are concentrated or migrate to.

II. The Case of Afghanistan

Illicit Drugs and the Taliban

Afghanistan remains the theater of a major armed conflict and the largest security problem in the wider region at the intersection of the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia. While the country has also been the primary source of the global poppy cultivation and opiate production since the 1990s, its opiate output has grown exponentially since the toppling of the Taliban government by a U.S.-led intervention in 2001. In 2011, Afghanistan accounted for almost two thirds of the global poppy cultivation and for 82 per cent of global opium production.[4]

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the area under poppy cultivation in the peak year of 2007 (193 000 ha) was more than 25 times larger than the low of 8,000 ha in 2001, when the strict Taliban ban on opium poppy cultivation was in force.[5] Following the historical peak year of 2007, the area under poppy cultivation temporarily decreased in 2008–2009, but even then it remained 35 per cent larger than that in the pre-2001 peak year of 1999. [6] Furthermore, in 2010 poppy cultivation and opium production stabilized and in 2011 started to rise again (reaching 131 000 ha and 5,800 mt, respectively).[7]

When the Taliban *de facto* came to power in Afghanistan in 1996, amidst bitter feuds among competing mujahedin factions, the country was already the well-established hub of the regional shadow economy. Adjusting themselves to the economic realities, the Taliban established a form of rentier state taxing formal and informal trade and collecting a 10 per cent post-harvest tax (*ushr*, or Islamic tith) from all agricultural production, including poppy cultivation.[8] From the start, however, the Taliban repeatedly tried to limit opium cultivation in areas under their control – primarily on religious grounds. In addition, their revenues from taxing the region-wide smuggling of other goods were larger than those from opium cultivation; for example, in 1997 the Taliban collected US \$75 million in revenues from taxing the regional trade in consumer goods, compared to just US \$27 million from taxing poppy cultivation.[9] In other words, the Taliban could economically afford a total religious ban (*haram*) on poppy cultivation that they finally imposed on 27 June 2000.[10] The 2000 ban may have also been intended to avert further international sanctions that could have negatively impacted the Taliban's income from taxation of other smuggled goods. Thus, a combination of market forces, political conditions and a strong religious imperative favored an opium cultivation ban.

As a result of the Taliban ban, in 2001 – the year of the U.S.-led post-9/11 intervention – the opium cultivation in Afghanistan had been reduced by 91 per cent. The main explanation for such an unprecedented result is that by 2000 the Taliban had emerged as a functional *de facto* state able to impose basic (*sharia*) law and order and to ensure that their decisions were implemented down to the local level (even if they interfered with informal markets dynamics or

social-economic needs of the segments of local population). No authority had managed to exercise functional governance in such a large part of the country since at least the 1970s, when a series of internationalized internal conflicts in Afghanistan began, nor has any authority since the 2001 foreign intervention.

In post-Taliban Afghanistan, in addition to disintegration of functional state capacity, the resulting power vacuum and the flawed and largely imported state-building experiment, three other factors contributed to the exponential growth of the opium economy. These factors are the principal drivers of Afghanistan's multifunctional drug economy. First, opium production has served as a socio-economic adaptation strategy for peasants in a country dominated by informal economic activity and torn by decades of armed conflict. Second, the local trade in, and particularly the cross-border trafficking of, opiates offers a lucrative income for local traders, smuggling networks and power-brokers from warlords to corrupt government officials. Third, the illicit drug business has served as one of several sources of funding for the anti-U.S./NATO and anti-government insurgency (dominated by, but not confined to, the Taliban movement).

The annual value of the Taliban insurgency income from drug-related revenues in the 2000s – early 2010s – and the relative share of drug revenues in the Taliban's overall funding – is extremely hard to estimate. This is even harder to do than to estimate the gross and net values of the opium economy in Afghanistan. Some of the earlier estimates provided by the UN (such as the annual US \$ 200–400 million range in opium-related funds of armed groups for 2006–2007) did not differentiate between various warlords and insurgent groups.[11] Later UNODC estimates – for instance, for 2009 – put the Afghan Taliban income from opium at around US \$ 155 million (in the range of US \$ 140-170 million), as compared to US \$2,2 billion income for Afghan traffickers alone.[12]

What most analysts agree upon is that the narcotics-related part of the insurgents' income still primarily comes from 10 per cent post-harvest *ushr* levies on poppy-growing farmers. Depending on the region, to a greater or lesser extent, this income may also integrate protection fees on laboratory processing of opiates, transit fees on drug convoys, and taxation on imports of chemical precursors. This is the basis for the author's estimate of the possible Taliban income from opium in 2011. If, according to the UNODC, the farm-gate value of opium production alone in 2011 was US \$ 1,4 billion (or 9 per cent of Afghanistan's GDP),[13] then the absolute maximum that could in principle be collected as *ushr* at farm-gate would be US \$ 140 million. However, it is known that the cultivation tax has not been universally collected by the Taliban [14] even in areas which they more or less control (e. g., in the south where 78 per cent of the total poppy cultivation took place). Also, significant part of the cultivation takes place in areas beyond the Taliban/insurgency presence (for instance, in the west of the country). In other words, the Taliban in principle would not be able to get more than 60–70 per cent of the maximum possible *ushr* from poppy harvest, or \$84–98 million.

Furthermore, *ushr* from opium harvest is often reportedly divided equally between the local mullah and the Taliban or, in some villages, goes directly to a local mullah and not to the Taliban. [15] In addition to this form of contributing to local social and religious expenses, by protecting opium production, the Taliban insurgency is also able to pose as the protector of general labor

employment: opium stands out among crops because it is very labor intensive (88 percent more labor intensive than wheat).

While at times the Taliban also manage to collect a higher *zakat* tax from the opiate trade, the latter is a far more erratic revenue – due to the highly mobile and elusive nature of trafficking networks that overlap with tribal networks and are not easy to “pin down” and tax. Even the UNODC concedes that anti-government elements like the Afghan Taliban are not usually directly involved in the opium trade.[16] By any account, this additional income is lower than what the insurgents get from taxing poppy cultivation in areas under their more or less stable control.

In sum, as estimated by the author of this article, by combining potential *ushr* payments on the harvest with some income from taxing opium trade, in 2011 the Taliban could probably get US \$ 100–150 million in total annual opium-related funds. This estimate is close to other assessments that the Taliban can raise around US \$ 100–200 million per year by taxing the opiate sector.[17] The US \$ 100–150 million range makes up for just 3,4–5,2 per cent of the estimated net value of the opium economy inside Afghanistan in 2011 (US \$ 2,9 billion). This makes the Taliban a *minority beneficiary*, by the Afghan standards, and a miniscule player compared to the total value of the global market in Afghan opiates (the latest UNODC estimate of which stood at US \$ 60 billion in 2009).[18]

Various analyses also reveal an increasingly diversified financial system with several sources of funding available to the Taliban. These sources include levying regular Islamic taxes on property and licit economic activity, taxing gem smugglers across the Afghan-Pakistani border, donations from sympathizers in the Gulf states and support coming from non-state and state-affiliated actors in Pakistan, etc.[19]

The final reservation repeatedly stressed by the UNODC is that those who profit from the opium business in Afghanistan include “the broad range of profiteers, at home and abroad”, including purely criminal groups and officials at different levels of government.[20] The most solid available empirical studies of the dynamics of the Afghan opiate economy – the field-based analyses by the UK development expert David Mansfield and his international and Afghan colleagues – reveals a widespread perception in southern Afghanistan that corrupt officials, especially in the ranks of the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the recently established local police, are no less, if not more, heavily involved in taxing the opiate trade than “anti-government elements”. The ANP are also generally blamed for illegal “taxes” and intimidation of farmers who travel by road. According to Mansfield, due to the widespread lack of trust in the security forces in the many contested areas, even the seizure of opium by the police is often seen as “theft” rather than law enforcement. Predation by authorities, including the ANP and especially the local police, is routinely reported by communities in conflict areas. They often compare unfavorably the low moral standards of government employees to those of the Taliban.[21]

United States, NATO and Counter-narcotics in Afghanistan

Although Afghan opiates have not directly threatened the United States, from 2001 onwards Washington has been the largest contributor to counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan, allocating about \$2,9 billion in FYs 2001–2009. In 2009 the Obama Administration called for a

major review of U.S. counter-narcotics policy in Afghanistan[22](in March 2009, U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, even called the previously allocated funds “the most wasteful and ineffective program” he had “seen in forty years in and out of the government”).[23] The revised policy formally moved away from the United States’ traditional heavy reliance on forced eradication and prioritized a combination of interdiction (stepped up drug seizures, targeting drug traders, cross-border traffickers and heroin laboratories) and alternative development measures, such as crop substitution.[24]

United States’ counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan have always been strictly subordinated to the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy. According to U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense, Michael G. Vickers, the new counter-narcotics strategy was to focus on “going after those targets where there is a strong nexus between the insurgency and the narcotics trade, to deny resources to the Taliban”. [25] In a country where drug profits are made by a wide range of the government-affiliated, anti-government and unaffiliated/criminal actors, linking counter-narcotics primarily or even exclusively to anti-Taliban counterinsurgency could partly be explained by the need to provide some “national interest” justification for increasing U.S. counter-narcotics support (especially as the United States is not directly threatened by Afghan-sourced opiates).

Some individual NATO member-states (such as the UK whose own domestic opiate markets are dominated by heroin and other opiates of Afghan origin) showed a more genuine interest in counter-narcotics in Afghanistan. However, NATO/ISAF’s direct support to actions against drug laboratories and traffickers was not even allowed until the Budapest NATO defense ministers’ decision in October 2008. Since then the ISAF has prioritized targeting only those trafficker who “provide material support to the insurgents”. [26] It is only since 2009 that the ISAF started to execute select counter-narcotics tasks, mainly confined to assisting the Afghan authorities “through training, intelligence and logistics, and *in-extremis* support”. [27] This restrained position of the European states reflects not only their fear to jeopardize ISAF troop security in Afghanistan by alienating influential local forces through stepped up counter-narcotics, but also more basic dynamics of Europe’s own drug markets and certain objective limitations of the alliance’s own internal transformation. While the EU/NATO member-states are among the main end-markets for Afghan opiates, heroin consumption in Europe has generally stabilized, illicit drug markets are becoming more diversified, and the growing inflows of cocaine from Latin America, especially through West Africa, are now seen as an equal, if not more urgent, challenge. This pattern does not allow European countries, both individually and collectively, to exclusively prioritize Afghanistan as the main “source country”. Nor has the process of NATO transformation and going out-of-area turned the alliance into an effective police force or development agency – the types of organization best suited for counter-narcotics efforts.

In sum, even at the peak of Western security presence in Afghanistan, the U.S. and its coalition partners’ interests and capabilities in the field of counter-narcotics and drug control have had a very limited, if not negligible, impact on Afghanistan’s deeply embedded opium economy. More generally, the U.S./NATO – and the weak Afghan government’s – failure to establish even basic security in the areas torn by drugs and conflict, including through helping build a form of functional and legitimate governance, has made any lasting success of the softer, longer-term development strategies such as crop substitution or generating alternative cash incomes very difficult.

As the withdrawal of the U.S. / NATO forces from Afghanistan progresses, the prospects for a significant and sustainable reduction in Afghanistan's opium does not appear to be an achievable objective. However, a more adequate – and more fundamental – question to ask is whether even optimal, well-balanced and well-funded combination of development- and enforcement-oriented counter-narcotics and drug control strategies can ever succeed in Afghanistan as long as the state is unable to establish even a minimally functional governance and security presence in much of the country.

Conditions for a Reduction of the Opium Economy

Significant reduction of the drug economy, even in conflict-torn areas, is not an impossible task. It has been achieved before. There are, however, two main underlying conditions that need to be in place for any anti-narcotics measures to be effective and for any drug economy to be substantially weakened.

The first is a combination of regional and global market conditions favoring the decline of drug production in a particular region (even if this favorable combination is temporary and should rather be seen as a short-term “window of opportunity”). These conditions include the availability of formal or informal economic alternatives to opium (or coca) as a sustainable cash-based income (ranging from solid remittances, wage labor, high-profit licit export crops to region-wide smuggling and other types of profitable illicit activity). For instance, a significant decline of poppy cultivation in Myanmar between the mid-1990s and 2006 [28] was partly made possible by the parallel spike in regional production of synthetic drugs.[29] Another example is a temporary decline in poppy cultivation in Afghanistan in 2008–2009 that resulted mainly from a positive market correction towards a discernible shift to wheat cultivation amidst a global food crisis (rising wheat prices and growing food insecurity at the micro-level of peasant households).

The second – most important and indispensable – condition is the generally functional state capacity. This also implies state access to, and basically functioning governance in, the main drug-producing and trafficking areas. In this context, the sheer functionality of governance (including access to “problem” areas and the ability to establish relatively non-confrontational relations with the population) is more important than the exact type, origin, political or ideological orientation of a governance system. This capacity has been in place in Myanmar (including increased state access to formerly insurgent-dominated areas as a result of an effective peace process following sustained military pressure), Thailand over the past several decades and China. This capacity is absent in today's Afghanistan.

A combination of these two fundamental conditions is decisive and more important than the exact selection of counter-narcotics and drug control measures or even the scale of foreign counter-narcotics assistance. No sustained decline in a drug-based economy has ever been achieved primarily as a result of foreign aid. In fact, quite the opposite appears to be true, i. e. countries that receive the largest foreign counter-narcotics aid have been chronically unable to significantly limit their drug output (Colombia since the 1990s and Afghanistan since the 2000s). In contrast, in the few cases when the deeply embedded drug economy was significantly reduced, it primarily resulted from actions by functional national authorities.

Peace First

In areas where the drug-based shadow economy is compounded by an ongoing protracted armed conflict coupled with a sustained terrorist campaign, counter-narcotics can only be one of several inter-related priorities, such as the need to find a lasting solution to an armed conflict, state-building, reconstruction, social-economic development, etc. In such settings, integrated ways of addressing drugs and conflict/terrorism should be found. But integrated solution in this case does not mean simultaneous solution. In practice, no state in conflict has ever succeeded in “having it both ways at the same time”: (a) to achieve a sharp decline in illicit drug production/trafficking and (b) to defeat or secure a stable ceasefire and lasting peace with insurgent groups who depend on the drug business as their major source of funding and who use drugs as a “hearts and minds” strategy to keep the support of the rural population.

In areas of drugs and conflict-related violence, the tasks of achieving basic security and fighting drugs cannot be solved at once: one of these tasks has to be to some extent – and temporarily – subordinated to another. The order of subordination is the following: *security first, drug control next*. This was exactly an approach taken by the Myanmar junta that first prioritized interim ceasefire agreements with the multiple insurgencies in drug-producing areas, followed by increased state access and security and then renegotiated settlements introducing much stricter counter-narcotics provisions. That strategy contributed to a decade-long decline in opium production between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s,[30] in combination with some other factors (such as China's threats to cut its support to some of the rebel groups in the Shan state of Myanmar if they continue to grow poppy and the parallel region-wide spike in synthetic drugs production).

In insecure areas affected by conflict and terrorism, tough counter-narcotics measures (such as massive forced/aerial eradication) are inefficient or even counterproductive, while all softer measures are difficult to implement due to insecurity and lack of state access or recognized governance in these areas. All softer measures (voluntary eradication, crop substitution, alternative development) can work only (a) if they are a part of broader strategy of rural development and (b) on condition of a non-confrontational attitude of the population (which has been more or less in place in Bolivia and Thailand). None of these conditions can be met in the midst of an ongoing protracted armed confrontation, especially one that involves a foreign intervention.

In an on-going armed conflict, with no stable or functional governance in place in contested areas, neither tough, nor soft counter-narcotics measures will work. In such settings, neither a law enforcement nor a developmental solution is feasible. The only solution is to end the conflict – or at least to qualitatively degrade the level of armed violence – either by force or through a peace process. This is the main precondition for ensuring minimal functional governance in areas of concern. This, in turn, is the most fundamental condition for any progress in counter-narcotics and drug control.

In the Afghanistan context, the “security first, drugs next” thesis has long been interpreted by Western analysts as “war/counterinsurgency first, drugs next”.[31] For others, including the author of this article, this appears to be an improbable scenario, given the protracted

asymmetrical stalemate between technologically superior foreign forces (supporting a weak and dysfunctional Afghan government) and the determined resistance centered on the Taliban. In Afghanistan, where heavier foreign military footprint had always only stimulated stronger resistance, the insurgency had no chances to be decimated by a foreign-dominated counterinsurgency campaign even at the peak of the U.S. and NATO military presence. In the wake of the speeded-up withdrawal of U.S. forces, the “peace through counter-insurgency” option is not even worth consideration. The situation has long reached the point where continuing armed confrontation between the main protagonists is the main factor that impedes the emergence of a degree of stable functional governance in areas affected by both drugs and conflict.

If “peace (through counterinsurgency) first, drugs next” is not an option, what is an option? In theory, “security first, drug control next” may also mean “peace process first, drug control next”. As applied to Afghanistan, “peace” is, of course, a relative notion that falls short of “end to all armed violence”; rather it implies only an end of a “major armed conflict”. Still, there is no way to achieve an even relative peace without a new political settlement for Afghanistan.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: What Kind of Peace?

The nature of the political settlement that may involve the Taliban is a highly contentious matter that combines intra-Afghan, regional and broad international dimensions and remains an open question. This issue is addressed in more detail in other publications.[32] Still, even the best-intentioned peace plans [33] concede that the Taliban can in principle be integrated into the present, heavily centralized and relatively secularized civil governance system, with a strong presidential role, appear to be based more on wishful thinking than present realities on the ground in Afghanistan.

Throughout the 2000s – early 2010s, the Taliban have evolved not just as an active insurgency, but also as an adjusted alternative system of governance and sharia-based law and order. In significant parts of the south-east, this system became more functional than the foreign/government-affiliated structures. This is also a result of a certain ideological and organizational evolution of the movement since its demise in 2001-2002. Compared to the Taliban years in power (1996–2001), its present ideological goals have become simpler and broader and boil down to two primary objectives – “true Islam” and “get the foreigners out” – that appeal to many Afghans. It would seem that the insurgency’s interests do not extend beyond the Afghan-Pakistani arena. Moreover, it does not appear that the Taliban has an interest in retaking Kabul or regaining control of the central government. They seem to have concentrated on consolidating their presence and control in the Pashtu countryside. While the overall insurgency is broader than the Taliban, as noted by field-based analysts, the Taliban themselves appear as a more consolidated and coherent organization than many would like to believe; it has also managed to avoid serious internal splits. In addition to military commanders, it also includes provincial governors and the political commission.[34]

The movement’s major moral, administrative and law and order resource is its organic link to the network of sharia courts. The Taliban sometimes establish executive committees to execute the courts’ decisions and oversight commissions to guarantee court impartiality and fight corruption.

The insurgents do not only directly impose their order “from above”, but also actively draw upon the preexisting village, tribal and religious authorities. For instance, local village water masters may collect tax payments on land and sometimes also the opium post-harvest *ushr* on behalf of the Taliban. Local mullahs are often the end beneficiaries of the *ushr*; while the Taliban are granted an opportunity to speak to worshipers during Friday prayers. They also effectively punish those who ignore their ban on working for the government or accepting foreign/government assistance.[35]

In sum, while a political settlement requires some form of Taliban involvement, the latter brings with it a pre-existing, alternative shadow governance system that is both (a) unlikely to be radically modified and (b) unacceptable to several key Afghan communities – particularly the Northern Alliance and the Hazaras. This means that the Taliban-style system can only be integrated into the political structure of Afghanistan if the present national constitutional system is radically, not just cosmetically, revised.

An effective political settlement requires a significant revamp of the present national governance model towards its *decentralization* and *regionalization*. These transformations should be adjunct to the withdrawal of the bulk of the foreign forces in their current role, preferably followed by the deployment of some interim international peace support force, ideally under a joint UN/Organization of the Islamic Conference umbrella. This new, regionalized system is to be negotiated among Afghanistan’s “veto players” (the main communities and political/militant forces). In this decentralized system, the main security, administrative and other functions (with the exception of external defense, international representation and the role of an acceptable political arbiter in inter-regional disputes reserved for a compact national government) would be transferred to five or six large regions. These would include a conglomeration of provinces in the south/south-east where the Taliban *de facto* governance should be recognized *de jure*.

The Taliban has a record of both improved basic security and functional governance in areas under their control, especially in areas less contested by foreign/government forces. As an active insurgency movement and a shadow governance system in need of funding, the Taliban have to rely on opium cultivation tax as one of several sources of funding, but they have also demonstrated an ability to collect basic taxes from licit activities and property. Historically, the Taliban movement is one of the very few actors in Afghanistan who have had a rare record of strict counter-narcotics politics – the unprecedented strict enforcement of the 2000 ban on poppy cultivation. There is some evidence that the appeal to religious grounds as the main justification for anti-narcotics – so far, most effectively seized upon by the Islamists, including the Taliban – resonates with many Afghans (e. g., according to the 2011 UNODC review, 52 per cent of farmers who had never grown opium reported that they did not do so because it is forbidden in Islam, making religious ban (*haram*) the dominant reason).[36]

These and other factors make tougher counter-narcotics provisions a welcome negotiable demand/condition for any configuration of talks with the insurgents on the political settlement in Afghanistan. This settlement – with or without direct foreign participation or mediation – can hardly be achieved without the recognition of the Taliban’s *de facto* governance in several regions in the south-east of the country. In conclusion, as long as an active (counter)insurgency

continues, no basic security is likely to be achieved in Afghanistan, and the counter-narcotics and drug control measures are not likely to be measurably effective.

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Notes

[1] For a more detailed critique of the term, see E. Stepanova, “Beyond ‘narco-terrorism’: illicit drug business and terrorist tactics in armed conflicts”; in: *The Politics of Narcotic Drugs: A Survey* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 120–130.

[2] According to the latest estimates available from the UNODC (for 2009), Russia was the largest single country market for Afghan-origin heroin (consuming the same amount of pure heroin – approximately 70 mt – as all countries of West and Central Europe combined) and the largest per capita consumer of heroin in the world. *World Drug Report 2011* (New York: UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011), pp. 72–73.

[3] *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2011* (Vienna: UNODC, Dec. 2011), p. 77; *World Drug Report 2011* (New York: UNODC, 2011), p. 45.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[5] *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008* (Vienna: UNODC, Nov. 2008), p. 7.

[6] *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2009: Summary Findings* (Vienna: UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics, September 2009), p. 1.

[7] *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2011*, pp. 1, 6, 52.

[8] B.R. Rubin, “The political economy of war and peace in Afghanistan”, *World Development*, Vol. 28, No. 10 (Oct. 2000).

[9] Z. F. Naqvi, *Afghanistan–Pakistan Trade Relations* (Islamabad: World Bank, 1999), pp. 15–16. At that time, the more profitable functions such as refinement of opium into heroin mostly took place outside Afghanistan.

[10] *Afghanistan: Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2001* (Islamabad: UN International Drug Control Program (UNDCP), 2001), p. ii.

[11] *Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational Threat of the Afghan Opium* (Vienna: UNODC, 2009), p. 2.

[12] *The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment*. (Vienna: UNODC, July 2011), p. 5, Fig. 3, p. 22.

[13] *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2011*, p. 2.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[15] D. Mansfield, Responding to risk and uncertainty: understanding the nature of change in the rural livelihoods of opium poppy growing households in the 2007/2008 growing season, Report for the British Government’s Afghan Drugs Inter-departmental Unit, July 2008, <http://www.davidmansfield.org/field_work.php>, p. 47; D. Mansfield, *Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Aug. 2011), p. 32, note 26.

[16] *The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment (2011)*, p. 27.

[17] *Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: Detailed Assessment Report on Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism*, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Country Report no. 11/317, 21 July 2011 (Washington D.C.: IMF, 2011), p. 31.

[18] *World Drug Report 2011* (New York: UNODC, 2011), p. 45.

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- [19] See, e. g., C. Whitlock, "Diverse Sources Fund Insurgency In Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, 27 September 2009; C. Collins & A. Ali, *Financing the Taliban: Tracing the Dollar behind the Insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, New America Foundation, April 2010.
- [20] *Addiction, Crime and Insurgency*, pp. 2–3.
- [21] D. Mansfield, Responding to risk and uncertainty, p. 47; D. Mansfield, *Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Aug. 2011), p. 32.
- [22] The policy shift was announced by R. Holbrooke during a G-8 conference on stabilizing Afghanistan, held in Trieste on 27 June 2009. "U.S. reverse Afghan drug policy", *Reuters*, 27 June 2009; C. Blanchard, op. cit., pp. 7–8; Presidential Determination on Major Illicit Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2010, U.S. Presidential Determination no. 2009-30 of 15 September 2009, *Federal Register*, 23 September 2009, pp. 48369–72.
- [23] Quoted in C. Blanchard, Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress RL32686 (Washington DC: U.S. Congress, 21 Apr. 2009), p. i.
- [24] On a range of counter-narcotics measures and the adverse effects of forced eradication in Afghanistan see B.R. Rubin and J. Sherman, Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication (New York: New York University, Center on International Cooperation, Feb. 2008); V. Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan: when counter-narcotics undermine counterterrorism", *Washington Quarterly*, vol 28, no. 4 (autumn 2005), pp. 55–72.
- [25] Michael G. Vickers, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities, quoted in T. Shanker and E. Bumiller, "U.S. shifts Afghan narcotics strategy", *New York Times*, 23 July 2009.
- [26] Afghanistan Report 2009 (Brussels: NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2009), p. 29.
- [27] Ibid.
- [28] South-East Asia Opium Survey 2011: Lao PDR, Myanmar, (Vienna: UNODC, 15 Dec. 2010), p. 9.
- [29] World Drug Report 2011, p. 148.
- [30] For more detail on the Myanmar case, see, e. g., E. Stepanova, Addressing Drugs and Conflicts in Myanmar: Who Will Support Alternative Development? SIPRI Policy Brief (Stockholm, June 2009), <<http://books.sipri.org/files/misc/SIPRIPB0906.pdf>>.
- [31] See, e. g., V. Felbab-Brown, The Obama Administration's New Counter-narcotics Strategy in Afghanistan: Its Promises and Potential Pitfalls, Brookings Policy Brief no. 171, Washington D.C., September 2009.
- [32] See, e. g., E. Stepanova, The Path to a Political Solution in Afghanistan, Program on the New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia) Policy Memo no. 190, Washington D.C., September 2011, <http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pepm_190.pdf>.
- [33] See, for instance, the so-called "Brahimi-Pickering Peace Plan": *Afghanistan: Negotiating Peace*, The Report of the Century Foundation International Task Force on Afghanistan and its Regional and International Dimensions, New York, 2011.
- [34] Presentation by Thomas Ruttig, co-director of the Afghan Analysts Network (<<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org>>, a transnational network of field-based researchers in Afghanistan), made at the Round Table on "Afghanistan at a crossroad?" at the Royal Institute on International Affairs (Egmont Institute), Brussels, on 29 November 2011.
- [35] D. Mansfield, *Managing Concurrent and Repeated Risks*, p. 32.
- [36] *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2011*, p. 62.
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