

War on Drugs and War on Terror: Case of Afghanistan

Daniela Corti and Ashok Swain

Abstract

The drug trade is a very important component of Afghanistan's economy. In the post 9/11 period, the United States has put a high priority to its war against drugs policy in Afghanistan after linking the drug trade to the financing of the Islamic terrorist groups. The basic strategy of US war on drugs policy in Afghanistan is forcible eradication of opium (poppy) cultivation, which has somewhat failed in controlling the production of illicit drug, rather it has brought further miseries to a large number of poor "poppy" farmers and their families. This article argues for a review of the present US policy of war on drugs in Afghanistan, and calls for working towards providing other sources of livelihood to the Afghan population.

Peace and Conflict Review – Volume 3 Issue 2 (Spring 2009), 41-53

The US policy of War on Drugs in Afghanistan

The traditional security concept has come under serious scrutiny these days for its inability to address the newly emerging challenges. Following the end of the Cold War, there is a greater demand from the research and policy communities for a broader concept of security, not only focused on the military-political dimension. New threats and emerging challenges to state security posed by the current context – increasing internal conflicts, explosion of ethnic rivalries, major economic interconnection – have imposed the necessity to consider security as a multidimensional issue. In this backdrop, drug production and trafficking have started to be considered a serious security problem with social, political, and economic implications at local, national, and transnational level.^[1]

At the societal and national level, drugs revenues can increase corruption and undermine the political stability of the legitimate government, particularly in relatively weak and poor countries in the South. The danger is embodied by the negative spiral of economic and political instability generated in states, which are vulnerable to drugs business. On the other hand, social and political chaos contributes to the thriving of the narcotics industry.^[2] Drugs may not be responsible for the commencement of the conflict; there is, however, a positive correlation with conflict duration, as it could lengthen the life cycle of conflicts.^[3]

Drug related crime also has important consequences at the transnational level. The existing prohibition system has made the narcotics trade one of the most lucrative businesses in the world, second only to the weapons sector. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), US \$ 500 billion – US \$ 1.5 trillion are channeled through the international banking system.^[4] Funds generated by illicit drug economy can be used to fuel ethnic rivalries, separatism and religious extremism.

Drugs also pose a threat to the security of human health. The production and transit regions have experienced a dramatic growth of HIV-AIDS and Hepatitis C. The Central Asian countries are particularly affected by these problems.^[5] In the eyes of traditional security analysts, the illicit drug industry and the mafia pose challenges to state interest and security. The production and trafficking of illicit drugs can represent a threat to the political sovereignty, undermining the legal authorities and the fundamental institutions of the state.^[6]

TABLE 1: Countries who are Major Sources of Illicit Drugs

Type of Illicit Drug	Continent	Countries and their share of Global production
Coca leaf	South America	Colombia 60%
		Peru 29%
		Bolivia 10%
Opium	Asia	Afghanistan 92%
		Burma/Myanmar 5%
Hashish (Resin cannabis) ^[7]	Africa	Morocco 26.9%

Table 1. Source: UNODC Report 2008.

In recent years, terrorism is increasingly being considered as a very serious threat to state and global security. Narcotics trade and terrorism have traditionally been treated as two separate and distinct threats within security discourse.^[8] In the 1990's, however, researchers and scholars have started to focus on the increasing association between organized crime and terrorist organizations. Particularly after the 9/11 attacks, the international community is increasingly considering illicit drug trade and terrorism as two interconnected phenomena. The major concern is the possibility that terrorist organizations can make use of drug trafficking networks to generate funds for their arms and equipments.^[9] According to the US Department of State, fourteen out of thirty-six foreign terrorist organizations are now involved in trafficking narcotics.^[10]

Pragmatically, terror outfits look for financial opportunities to support their operations. This effort has become acute in the post Cold War era, as there has been a significant drop in material and logistic support from the superpowers. Most recently, the global war on terrorism – pursued by the West – has made it more difficult for terrorist groups to finance their activities. They thus seek a source of income in drug trafficking, as in other illicit trades. This transformation has brought serious worries for the analysts and policy makers of the West, and there is an increasing agreement for greater coordination between war on drug and war on terror.[\[11\]](#)

In the global war of terror after 9/11, Afghanistan became the first country to receive serious attention, and with the help of armed intervention by US led international forces, a regime change was brought in. America’s subsequent engagement in Iraq diverted the focus from this country for some time. The increasingly deteriorating security situation and massive opium production in recent years have forced the US and Europe to seriously reengage in Afghanistan. The Obama administration has already declared its military priority to be focused in Afghanistan.

Table 2: Opium Cultivation and Production in Afghanistan

AFGHANISTAN	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Cultivation (hectares)	56.842	58.416	63.674	90.583	82.171	7.606	74.100	80.000	131.000	104.000	165.000	193.000
Potential production (metric tons)	2.248	2.804	2.693	4.565	3.276	185	3.400	3.600	4.200	4.100	6.100	8.200

Table 2. Source: UNODC Report 2008.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), Afghanistan is the world’s main producer of illicit opium, with 193,000 hectares of land under poppy cultivation and an estimated opium production of 8,200 tons in 2007.[\[12\]](#) The latest Afghan Opium Survey of the UNODC estimates that in 2008 there was a decrease to 153,000 hectares of land used for this illicit poppy cultivation, which is a 19 per cent drop from the previous year, and a corresponding opium production potential of 7,700 tons, which is six per cent less. Nonetheless, the influence of this country in the global production remains unchanged: as it continues to account for 93 per cent of the global share.[\[13\]](#) Despite the reductions in potential production, therefore, there is a growing anxiety about the continued and widespread cultivation and subsequent opium smuggling via neighbouring countries to Europe.

Drugs from Afghanistan rarely reach the American market; the main concern of the United States seems to be the existing and potential links between the drug trade and terrorism. The United States strongly underlines the connection between the narcotics trade and the anti-government insurgency spearheaded by the Taliban: the lucrative opium business provide funds to the terror group for arms and sustains their insurgency against Karzai regime and international forces. In a policy response, the US has made counter-narcotics as much a priority as its counter-insurgency policies. The US State Department’s International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) argues that during recent years, poppy fields have thrived in provinces where the Taliban are most active.[\[14\]](#) Thus, Taliban, drug traffickers and poppy farmers are being measured in the same yardstick and the strategy for addressing the issue has been mostly law enforcement in nature. However, drug production in Afghanistan has deep and complex roots, and hoping for quick solutions to this problem is counterproductive and illusory.[\[15\]](#) Thus, it is important to understand the relationship between drug networks and Taliban forces in order to examine the effectiveness of counter-narcotics policy pursued in Afghanistan.

The current US-led strategy against drug production in Afghanistan is somewhat inspired by its *war on drugs* policy, pursued from the 1970’s, which involves attempts to reduce the availability of narcotics from foreign sources with the intended result of reducing domestic levels of drug addiction. The US policy against drug trafficking can truly be seen as a crusade. According to Pierre Arnaud Chouvy,[\[16\]](#) the overall US policy against illegal drugs is not a coherent or practical one, but rather is ruled by a strong and unquestionable ideology grounded in a repressive approach towards some drugs.[\[17\]](#) The main objective of the US counter-narcotics strategy is to achieve a reduction of drug availability through repressive policy. It aims to reduce drug addiction by eradicating the international supply, especially the cultivation in the South. According to Alfred McCoy, the pillars of this approach are: (a) reduction in foreign supply, (2) global prohibition, (3) inelastic global drug market dynamics (this model does not consider drugs as subject to the complexities of market supply/demand dynamics in the same way as other commodities), and (4) existing axiomatic correlation between repression and positive outcome of lower drug supply.[\[18\]](#)

Unfortunately, this policy suffers from severe drawbacks. To begin with, the international heroin trade is elastic and has the ability to suddenly respond to repressive policies in a specific region through delocalizing cultivations. Forced eradications, increasing narcotic seizures, and repressive operations have little effectiveness because of the potentially infinite spatial opportunities of a globalized narco-cultivation network. Crop eradication only shifts opium fields, it does not eliminate them. This strategy can produce unintended effects, such as raising the price of drugs and therefore stimulating illicit production.[\[19\]](#)

The Nixon administration initiated this America’s so-called *war on drugs* policy in the early 1970s.[\[20\]](#) In his speech of 17 June 1971, Nixon declared the abuse of illicit substances as "public enemy number one in the United States." His special target was Turkish production, which he asked for a policy to impose a total ban of opium production with massive eradication programs. This policy had some initial success. However, after some time, the global market responded to this new situation, as the constant demand coupled with a decreasing supply (due to the eradication in Turkey) stimulated the rise of prices and, consequently, the increase opium production in other regions, particularly in other parts of Asia.[\[21\]](#)

The fight against drugs is characterized by a progressive militarization of the issue, as seen by the various interventions, military agreements on no fly zones, strong investments in the armed forces (especially in South America, e.g. Colombia). The drug issue was in fact considered to be a national security issue by the US, in the framework of the *Low Intensity Conflict* theory elaborated by Pentagon in the 1980’s. President Reagan officially added drug trafficking to the list of threats to national security with his secret directive number 221, signed on April 1986.[\[22\]](#) This directive authorized the US military to intervene abroad in order to fight against drug production.

In the pursuit of the eradication of the international supply of illicit drugs, the US has spent billions of dollars and has repeatedly used

its military might in many parts of the world, but the war is far from being won. Opium production is particularly thriving in South West Asia, especially in Afghanistan where worldwide supply is almost totally concentrated; drug trafficking is developing in this region, and is now affecting neighbouring countries as well.

Afghanistan and its History of Drug Production

As its history demonstrates, opium production and its trade have long played a central role in the politics and geopolitics of Afghanistan. It is not a new trend. As part of the Golden Crescent Region, Afghanistan, together with Iran and Pakistan, have positioned themselves as the main source of opium since the early 1970s, as documented by Catherine Lamour and Michel Lamberti (1972) in their famous work *“Les grandes manoeuvres de l’opium”*. Their study paid attention to the border region of Pathanistan^[23] where traditional Pashtun tribes live in the absence of formal state control, governed by their local chiefs. Under the Colonial British administration and then in Pakistan, Pashtuns enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy, and received conspicuous subsidies from state. This particular state of affairs provided a very fertile ground of all sorts of illicit activities. Beyond the smuggling of phones, electrical goods or other household commodities, the local population proved to be highly skilled in trading and producing arms, ammunitions, and of course trafficking lucrative illicit drugs. Pathanistan, for a long period remained as the main source of opium supply to the world: poppy fields producing high quality opium were concentrated on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border. In the 1980s, Pakistan had a 70 per cent share of worldwide opium production^[24].

The Cold War helped the narco-economies to thrive in South-West Asia – and heroin production in particular – at the time of the Soviet-Afghan conflict of 1979. An intense narcotic smuggling network developed thanks to the covert operations of the Pakistani Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) and the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The US intelligence officials closed their eyes to drug trafficking as their main goal was after all to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Americans provided arms and other logistical support to Mujhaideens, describing them as freedom fighters^[25]. While initially narco-trafficking was directly promoted by the US and Pakistani intelligence services for raising funds to purchase the Mujhaideen’s war accessories, once the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan, the absence of the rule of law further intensified it. In the aftermath of Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan experienced a bloody civil war, which completely destroyed central authority and reinforced the tribal leadership in various parts of the country, allowing various warlords and druglords to prosper in a system of civil chaos and anarchy^[26].

With the onset of anarchy in the country in the post-Soviet period, a remarkable increase of opium production was registered in 1990s. Several thousand refugees returned after years of war, taking their lands and beginning to cultivate the only profitable crop: the opium poppy. In fact, by 1991, Afghanistan surpassed Burma in becoming the largest narcotics producer. Not only the opium production but also its refining process to make morphine and heroin^[27] boomed whilst banditry and civil war affected the country. Taking political advantage of the lawlessness, a fundamentalist Islamic movement, the Taliban, captured state power with the help of Pakistani ISI and Saudi financial support.^[28] By 1996, they controlled 80 per cent of the country and brought order to the countryside. After the defeat of several tribal war-lords, the Taliban reopened the country’s drug routes to enable highly profitable smuggling between Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia.

Ideologically, the Taliban were against drug production and consumption; however they recognized the importance of this crop to Afghanistan’s fragile economy. While drug consumption was strictly forbidden, the production and trade of narcotics was considered inadvisable but undertaken due to necessity. The Taliban allowed the cultivation of opium poppies with religious authorization; poppy fields were tolerated, especially in Helmand and Nangarhar provinces where the loyal Pashtun tribes represented the majority and opposed Tagik or Hazar tribal organizations.^[29] The opposition to the Taliban was formed by a heterogeneous coalition centered around the Northern Alliance, created by different ethnicities living in Afghanistan and in other neighbouring countries (Iran, Turkey, India, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). The Taliban, coming from the Pashtun tribes, were instead backed at the international level by few nations: only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates had recognized them as the legitimate government of Afghanistan^[30].

Opium production was allowed by the Taliban regime because this drug was consumed mainly by *Kafir* (faithless) and less so by Muslims. The leader of the Talibans, Mullah Mohammed Omar, presented his position in a rare interview with Bizhan Torabi of Deuth Press Agentur and then published by the French review *Politique Internationale*. He argued that although the fight against drugs is a long-term objective, it is not possible to destroy the opium cultivation quickly since the livelihoods of thousands of farmers dependent upon the revenues it generated. He firmly asserted that the Taliban regime would not have allowed the farmers to cultivate poppy if that opium and heroin were destined to the Afghan market. He reasoned that it was not a duty of the Taliban to be responsible for the drug addictions of non-Muslims, their only duty being to protect the Afghan Muslim youths from developing the same addiction^[31].

The Taliban administration applied the *zakhat* tax on any income, normally equivalent to 2.5 per cent of total income, but inflated to as much as 20 per cent in the case of profits from opium trade.^[32] Opium production was also subjected to the *ochor* system that assigned one third of the profits to impoverished, blind, and disabled persons.^[33]

Except for the extraordinary harvest in 1994, national opium production levels remained unchanged until 1998, with an annual average of 2500 tons. Then, in 1999, a strong increase was registered with 4500 tons. Overall, the land devoted to opium poppy grew from 64,000 to 91,000 hectares under the Taliban regime.^[34] In September 1999, Mullah Omar for both political and economic reasons, issued a religious decree (*fatwa*) calling for the reduction of opium production by one third, followed by a total ban in the next year. Accordingly, opium production decreased from 3300 tons to only 185 tons, 180 of which came from the region controlled by the Northern Alliance (Badakshan province). The areas under Taliban control were able to almost completely eradicate all opium production.^[35]

The cultivation ban imposed by the Taliban in 1999/2000 served a dual purpose for the regime: it demonstrated their willingness to placate western concerns over opium, while it also substantially raised the price of opium in world market, from US\$ 40-60 to US\$ 400-600 per kilogram^[36]. Given the massive amount of stockpiled opium that the Taliban controlled, there was obviously a great economic incentive for this eradication effort. Mullah Omar again imposed a *fatwa* calling for a total ban on opium cultivation, but the events of the following months did not allow examining its real motive. The 9/11 attacks brought serious repercussions for the Taliban in Afghanistan from the international community.

Their refusal to hand over Al Qaeda leaders led to US-led military intervention, which brought the downfall of the regime. Their departure left the question open as to whether their decree on banning opium production in 1999/2000 was a fundamental policy shift or merely an opportunistic political/economic action. Since the late 1990s, the US policy has linked its counternarcotics policy with counterterrorism policy in Afghanistan. However, there is modest proof of a direct involvement by Al Qaida in the international drug

trafficking network. The 9-11 Commission found little evidence to confirm this accusation. Groups known to be involved in the illicit drug economy were rather the Sunni Hizb-i Islami group of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Taliban.^[37] However, according to the World Bank and UNODC, the Taliban derived more income and foreign exchange in the period 1996-2000 from taxing smuggled goods from Dubai to Pakistan than from the drug industry. Even now, the Taliban have several sources of income and they are not economically dependent on the narcotics trade only.^[38] This reality, however, has not stopped the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to argue that “fighting drug trafficking equals fighting terrorism”^[39] The UNODC and other international agencies specialized in drug issues are supporting the US strategy that emphasizes links between the opium economy and insurgency. As a result, it is usually perceived that the main security threat in Afghanistan is the opium production, which is assumed to primarily support and sustain the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

While the Western media has regularly repeated the theory that illicit opium production is the main source of financial support for the Taliban, the Taliban are not currently the only factions involved in drug trafficking. After the fall of the Taliban, the various Mujahideen actors re-established themselves and quickly filled in the power vacuum.^[40] Despite the election of Hamid Karzai as President in 2004 and parliamentary the elections in 2005, Afghan democracy is still very shaky. The central government authority still remains confined to Kabul. President Karzai needs the cooperation and the backing of the Mujahideen/warlord factions to stay in power. Many of Karzai’s political allies are in fact warlords directly involved in the narcotics production and trafficking.^[41] Moreover, since the Bonn agreement in December 2001, drug trafficking has had a marginal relationship with the Taliban and Al Qaeda; the profits of the drug trade, it seems, are associated more so with the people and groups in power.^[42]

Growing Drug Economy in Afghanistan: Its Regional and International Implications

The growing illicit drug market in Afghanistan has dangerous consequences for both regional and international security. The large scale trafficking of drugs destabilizes neighbouring states by encouraging crime, violence, and corruption – especially if those states are already economically and politically unstable. It also increases insecurity in the form of drug addiction (especially of heroin) and the spread of HIV and AIDS in the region.^[43] These effects are not limited solely to the region, however, as illicit drugs from Afghanistan also regularly reach distant markets.

While the Northern American market is provided with Mexican and Colombian heroin, European consumption is supplied in a large part by heroin from South-West Asia, mostly from Afghanistan. Afghan opiates reach the European markets through two main routes. One is the traditional “Balkan Route” (the dominant one in the 1990’s) via Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey. Turkey has become the main staging post from where narcotics take either the direction of the Central European route (Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Czech Republic) or can be smuggled through Albania and the former Yugoslav republics.

The other main trafficking route is known as the “Silk Road” which runs from Afghanistan through post-Soviet Central Asia to Russia.^[44] From there, Afghan heroin can also make its way to Europe.^[45] According to one UNODC estimate in 2004, one quarter of total Afghan opiate exports (500 tons of morphine and heroin, and 1,000 tons of opium) were smuggled through Central Asia; suggesting that the majority of narcotics exports still reach Europe through the traditional route via Turkey. In the recent years, however, the importance of the “Silk Road” has steadily risen.^[46] The trafficking along this route is due to the failing border controls in the Central Asia and Caucasus. Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan are easy targets for drug traffickers. They are young states, still facing various problems associated with nation-building in the post-Soviet transition period, affected by weak democratic institutions, slow economic growth, and galloping inflation. The spread of the illicit drug trade has had serious negative implications for these Central Asian countries. It expands organized crime, exacerbates political and social instability, encourages corruption, and contributes to institutional decay. The significant drug related informal economy undermines the democratic process in Central Asia and causes serious law and order challenges. It is even argued that the drug trade has fomented ethnic rivalries and armed conflict in the region.^[47] Some go so far as to suggest that the drug trade had a role to play in the 2005 revolution in Kyrgyzstan.^[48]

According to the US Department of State, Tajikistan represents a particularly attractive transit route for illegal narcotics. Every year 80-120 tons of Afghan heroin are smuggled through this country.^[49] Several factors could explain why this country has become one of favoured transit routes of Afghan narcotics. The civil war in this country in the early 1990s severely affected its social and the economic situation, and they continue to suffer from rampant corruption, political instability, few economic opportunities and high unemployment rates. Tajikistan is in fact the poorest of the former Soviet Republics. Geographically, it shares more than 1,000 kilometres of porous borders with Afghanistan. The International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) details that significant quantities of drugs are smuggled across the Pyanj River that forms large part of the Afghan-Tajik border, which can be easily crossed at numerous points without inspection due to the lack of adequate border control.^[50]

The US Department of State also identifies Kazakhstan as a major transit country for opiates from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. This is principally due to its geographic location and the openness of its borders. According to the INCSR report, drug related crime has increased tremendously in this country.^[51] The other Central Asian Republic directly involved in this illicit narcotics trade, similarly identified in the INCSR report, is Uzbekistan.^[52]

In response, the neighbouring countries most affected by the regional drug trafficking networks have sought to create a security belt around Afghanistan, in order to fight against the spreading regional opium trafficking. As part of this effort, a regional institution – the Central Asia Regional Information Coordination Center (CARICC) – was created in 2002. The CARICC represents an operative but largely ineffective base for communication, analysis, and exchange of information on transnational crime. To date, it has achieved very limited success in coordinating the counter-narcotics policy among the member countries: Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.^[53]

The Drug Economy and Afghanistan’s Domestic Realities

The US policy aims at eradicating the opium cultivation in Afghanistan as soon as possible, which, it is argued, will have the additional effect of depriving the Taliban of their main source of income. However, the implementation of this policy has not been successful, and will continue to be ineffective if the root causes of the drug economy in Afghanistan are not properly addressed. The US strategy is based on an overly simplistic view, emphasizing forced eradications of poppy fields on the ground (manual or mechanical eradications) or from the air (aerial spraying of chemical products).^[54] The basic premises of the US forced eradication plan are: (a) Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is no longer associated with poverty: currently the poppy fields are concentrated in the richest southern provinces; and (b) Insurgents, motivated by greed or corruption, have turned orchards, wheat and vegetables fields into poppy fields.

Rubin and Sherman (2008) contest these premises and argue instead that political insecurity and social chaos in Afghanistan create conditions for the illicit drug industry and not vice versa.^[55] Opium cultivation is undesirable, but it is inevitable in a situation of dire poverty and insecurity. In the Afghan setting there is no other crop that provides the same benefits. In 2003-04, 131,000 hectares of opium generated 46 million labour days.^[56] Afghan farmers are thus dedicated to poppy cultivation for economic reasons; it provides access not only to incomes but also to land, water, credit, and employment. Following the destruction of the public sector and employment opportunities, private and, in several cases, criminal groups have assigned themselves the task of providing public good.^[57]

The opium industry plays a central role in the Afghan economy as a whole, representing more than half of the country's Gross Domestic Product – of the total GDP of US\$ 7.5 billion, the export earning of opium is US\$ 4 billion.^[58] A significant portion of the local population is employed in this sector. In 2007, 3.3 million people were directly involved in the poppy cultivation, which is nearly 15 per cent of total population of the country.^[59] Moreover, a large section of the population is involved in trafficking, trade, and others activities dependent on narcotics revenue.^[60]

The opium poppy features prominently in the cultural life of Afghan people. Historically, its cultivation was promoted by the traditional credit system (*salaam system*) based on advance payment on a future crop. Moreover large landowners often rent land to sharecroppers and poor farmers through this system. Eradication plans therefore represent a serious threat to the economic stability of households as landowners require the debt payment even if the crop is eradicated. The risk burden is placed on the poor farmers.^[61] After crop eradication, many families, for example in Helmand, have had to sell their children (especially daughters) in order to pay their so-called opium debts.^[62] From the point of view of Afghan farmers, eradicators of poppy cultivation are the main source of their insecurity. Immediate opium eradication certainly poses a greater threat to human security than the existing drug economy.^[63]

After years of war, Afghanistan is desperately trying to transition from a war economy to a peace economy. Measures are needed to manage this transition in a more humane and considerate manner by the international community. The Afghan situation has to be approached within the context of broader development goals, by creating effective democratic institutions, promoting a vibrant civil society, and introducing reliable social protection mechanisms.^[64] A drug control policy based solely on forced eradication is destined to bring adverse consequences. Eradications without a proper development plan deprive poor Afghan people of their source of income and thus fuel the insurgency. This approach also contributes to increases in opium prices and cause migrations of the poppy fields to more remote regions. Opium production – as all other illicit crops, including coca and cannabis – thrives in territories characterized by conflicts, disintegration of the state, ethnic war, religious strife, and lack of economic development projects.^[65] Afghanistan at presents provides that fertile environment.

The counternarcotics strategy carried out in Afghanistan is further complicated and made controversial because of the involvement of several other factors. For instance, there is a lack of unified vision within the international community, reflected in some key differences between the EU and US strategies. Generally, the global prohibition policy is unquestionable and almost holy at the international level, however, the European Union consistently points out the high human costs of forced opium poppy eradications. The US, on the other hand, continues to insist on a sharp decline in the opium-cultivated area as soon as possible.

Historically, only authoritarian regimes like China in the 1950's and Afghanistan of the Taliban in 2000-01 have been able to eliminate illicit crops in a very brief time, and their success came at very high human costs. Similar efforts by Laos and Burma have not been so successful.^[66] In Afghanistan, NATO and UN agencies (UNODC, INCB^[67]) have concentrated their efforts in a war on narcotics without considering the long-term impact on local economies, ignoring the reality that opium production is nothing but a simple choice for survival by Afghan farmers. The opium poppy represents a low-risk and high-value crop in the current Afghan setting.

Winning the counter-narcotics war is not dependent upon the quality of the force and power of military intervention, rather it requires provision for real economic opportunities and basic human security on the ground. Where communities are confident in finding alternative livelihoods, they will be more likely to agree with the eradication programs. The elimination of drug production has to be accompanied by broader development measures. Despite seven years of military and financial assistance by the international community to the Afghan government,^[68] Afghanistan still suffers from growing illicit drug economy and the insurgency. As David Mainsfield^[69] argues, there is a need to reorient the international strategy to deal with the drug problem in Afghanistan. In particular, the counter-narcotic policy has to be accompanied by the provision of "alternative livelihoods" strategy. Efforts should be directed towards wider state building process with clear economic and social goals. The international community should not limit its counter-narcotic strategy to only a specific area where drug production is concentrated; rather, it should assist and promote overall sustainable development programs in different parts of the country. The aim at the outset should not be in measuring the reduction of hectares of illicit crops, but rather in the addressing of root causes of opium cultivation in the country. To this end, human development and livelihood needs must be prioritized.

Concluding Thoughts

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Afghanistan suffers from a very low Human Development Index (HDI). Afghanistan ranks 174th in the list of 178 countries, ahead of only Burkina Faso, Mali, Sierra Leone, and Niger.^[70] The country is one of the poorest in the world as well, with a per capita income of USD\$ 335.^[71] Adult illiteracy (76.5 per cent of the total population), lack of access to clean water (68 per cent of the population), high rates of infant mortality (1000: 135), persistent gender discrimination,^[72] and political corruption are just some of the pressing problem this country faces.^[73] In this environment of dire poverty and social and political chaos, opium production plays a key role in Afghanistan's economic survival. It guarantees the survival of thousands of poor households, granting them access to credit, land, and income. There is no basis to argue against the positive relationship between poverty and opium poppy cultivation.

Forced eradications plans without providing alternative livelihoods opportunities to the people further worsen the precarious Afghan situation. The negative consequences of a repressive policy combined with crop eradications and opium ban affects the poorest part of the Afghan population. In particular, iniquities on eradication process fuel resentment and frustration among poor farmers and strengthen the position of those that can pay bribes and buy high protection. Crop destruction, moreover, does not conciliate with the traditional credit system, increasing the farmers' debt and also decreasing the possibility of their access to credit. The already dire economic condition of the majority of the Afghan people worsens further, hindering the achievement of one of the most important UN Millennium Development Goals: to eliminate extreme poverty and hunger.

Existing policy overwhelmingly linking illicit narcotic trade with terrorism, believes without much foundation that the elimination of

the drug production will lead to the defeat of the Taliban insurgency. Under the pressure of the international community, the present foreign forces in Afghanistan aim to achieve immediate results in terms of reduction of opium production and trafficking. There are serious doubts about the prospects for this mission's success. As argued above, this strategy has focused too much on the Taliban, though they are only one of the many groups involved in this activity. In fact, since the Civil War period in the 1990s, all major warring factions have been involved in the illicit narcotics trade^[74]

Moreover, Afghan tribal warlords and others are directly engaged in this illicit industry because it is a very lucrative business. The drug economy is so profitable partly because it is illegal, enjoying a constant demand and a vacuum of rule and regulation, opportunely filled by criminal organizations. Militant and terroristic groups have increasingly exploited narcotics trade to finance their operations, posing serious threats to regional and global security. To find a just and sustainable solution, the international community needs to find ways, perhaps a serious rethinking of worldwide prohibitionist policy altogether in order to drastically reduce the profit margins of the illicit drug trade.

References:

- Ahmed, Rashid, 2002. *Taliban. Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*. I.B. Tauris Publishers, London-New York.
- Björnehed, Emma, 2004. 'Narco-Terrorism: The Merger of the War on Drugs and the War on Terror'. *Global Crime*, 6 (3&4), 305-324.
- Chouvy, Pierre Arnaud, 2006. 'Afghanistan's Opium Production in Perspective'. *China and Euroasia Forum Quarterly*, 4 (1), 21-24.
- Cornell, Svante E., 2007. 'Narcotics and Armed Conflict: Interaction and Implication'. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 30 (3), 207-227.
- Del Olmo, Rosa, 1993. 'Drogues et conflits de faible intensité en Amérique latine'. In *La planète des drogues. Organisations criminelles, guerres et blanchiment*, ed. A. Labrousse, and A. Wallon. Le Seuil, Paris.
- Dupont, Alain, 1999. 'Transnational Crime, Drugs, and Security in East Asia'. *Asia Survey*, 39 (3), 433-455.
- Fenopetov, Vladimir, 2006. 'The Drug Crime Threat to Countries Located on the "Silk Road"'. *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 4(1), 5-13.
- Jelsma, M., T., Kramer, and C. Rivier, 2006. *Losing Ground: Drug Control and War in Afghanistan*. TNI Briefing Series No.2006/5, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam.
- Graubner, Cornelius, 2007. *Drugs and Conflict: how the mutual impact of illicit drug economies and violent conflict influences sustainable development, peace and stability*. Development-oriented Drug Control Program (DDC), Eschborn.
- Labrousse, Alain, 2003. *Dictionnaire géopolitique des drogues: la drogue dans 134 pays. Productions, trafics, conflits, usages*. De Boeck, Bruxelles.
- , 2004. *Géopolitique des drogues*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris.
- Mansfield, David, 2001. *Briefing Paper: The displacement of Opium Poppy Cultivation: A Shift in the Regional Threat?*. Drugs & International Crime Department - Foreign & Commonwealth Office.
- Mansfield, D., and A. Pain, 2005. *Briefing Paper. Alternative Livelihoods: Substance or Slogan*. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Kabul.
- McCoy, Alfred W., 2000-2001. 'From Free Trade to Prohibition: a Critical History of the Modern Asian Opium Trade'. *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, 28. 307-350.
- Rubin, R. Barnett, and J. Sherman, 2008. *Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication*. Center on International Cooperation, New York University.
- Sanderson, Thomas M., 2004. 'Transnational Terror and Organized Crime: Blurring the Lines'. *SAIS Review* 24 (1), 49-61.
- Swanstrom, Niklas, 2007. 'The Narcotics Trade: A Threat to Security? National and Transnational Implications'. *Global Crime* 8 (1), 1-25.
- Vishal, Chandra, 2006. 'Warlords, Drugs and the "War on Terror" in Afghanistan: Paradoxes'. *Strategic Analysis*, 30 (1), 64-92.
- United States Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2008. *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*. United States Department of State, Washington, D.C.
- International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), 2008. *Annual Report 2007*. United Nations Publications, Vienna.
- United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2007. *UNDP Afghanistan Human Development Report*. United Nations Development Program Afghanistan, Kabul.
- United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2006. *UNDP Afghanistan Annual Report 2006*. United Nations Development Program Afghanistan, Kabul.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and crime (UNODC), 2008. *Annual Opium Poppy Survey*. United Nations on Drugs and Crime and MCN, Vienna
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2006. *World Drug Report 2005*, Vienna.

Footnotes

[1] Swanstrom, 'The Narcotics Trade: A Threat to Security? National and Transnational Implications', 1-6.[2]

Ibid., 3-4, 11. [3] Cornell, 'Narcotics and Armed Conflict: Interaction and Implications', 207-208. [4] Swanstrom, 'The Narcotics Trade: A Threat to Security? National and Transnational Implications', 3-4; US Department of State, International Narcotic Control Strategy Report 2008. [5] Swanstrom, 'The Narcotics Trade: A Threat to Security? National and Transnational Implication', 11-13. [6] Dupont, 'Transnational Crime, Drugs, and Security in East Asia', 435-436. [7] Cannabis as herb (marijuana) is produced all over the world: North America 31%, South America 24%, Africa 22%, Asia 16%, Europe 6% and Oceania 1%. UNODC Report 2008, p. 97 [8] Björnehed, 'Narco-Terrorism: The Merger of the War on Drugs and the War on Terror', 305. [9] Ibid., 305. [10] Sanderson, 'Transnational Terror and Organized Crime: Blurring the Lines', 50. [11] Björnehed, 'Narco-Terrorism: The Merger of the War on Drugs and the War on Terror', 305. [12] INCB, Annual Report 2007, 8. [13] UNODC, 2008 Annual Opium Poppy Survey, 1. [14] United States Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) 2008, 235. [15] Jelsma, Kramer, Rivier, Losing Ground: Drug Control and War in Afghanistan, 3. [16] Pierre Arnaud Chouvy is a geographer and a Research Fellow at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). He is a specialist on geopolitics of drugs, in particular on the history and production of opium in Asia. He is also the author of the web site: www.geopium.org. [17] Aubron, 'L'éradication précipitée du pavot peut avoir un coût humain catastrophique', Liberation, 13 March 2005, 46. [18] McCoy, 'From Free Trade to Prohibition: a Critical History of the Modern Asian Opium Trade', 307-311. [19] Ibid., 312. [20] Chouvy, 'Afghanistan's Opium Production in Perspective', 23. [21] McCoy, 'From Free Trade to Prohibition: a Critical History of the Modern Asian Opium Trade', 330-333. [22] Del Olmo, 'Drogues et conflits de faible intensité en Amérique latine', 303-315. [23] This region, like Baluchistan, was divided between Afghanistan and Pakistan by the Durand Line (1878) at the time of English colonialism. [24] Del Olmo, 'Drogues et conflits de faible intensité en Amérique latine', 303-315. [25] Chandra, 'Warlords, Drugs and the "War on Terror" in Afghanistan: Paradoxes', 77. [26] Ibid., 68. [27] Heroin is synthesized from the raw opium. The procedures are relatively uncomplicated and cheap. The German pharmaceutical company Bayer produces it for the first time in 1989. Heroin is a strong painkiller and sedative used for medical and recreational purposes: it has euphoric and analgesic effect. In case of overdose, heroin is lethal. [28] Taliban usually do not bring out press releases nor grant interview to journalists. In the line of Red Khmer regime of Cambodia, they represent one of the most secret politic movements in the world. [29] Labrousse, Géopolitique des drogues, 95, 97-98. [30] Mansfield, Briefing Paper: The displacement of Opium Poppy Cultivation: A Shift in the Regional Threat?, 10. [31] Labrousse, Géopolitique des drogues, 99-100. [32] Rashid, Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia, 118. [33] Labrousse, Géopolitique des drogues, 98. [34] Ibid., 29. [35] Labrousse, Dictionnaire géopolitique des drogues: la drogue dans 134 pays. Productions, trafics, conflits, usages, 25-26. [36] Rubin and Sherman, Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication, 27. [37] Graubner, Drugs and Conflict: how the mutual impact of illicit drug economies and violent conflict influences sustainable development, peace and stability, 11-12. [38] Rubin & Sherman, Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication, 11. [39] Chouvy, 'Afghanistan's Opium Production in Perspective', 21. [40] Chandra, 'Warlords, Drugs and the "War on Terror" in Afghanistan: Paradoxes', 66. [41] Ibid., 73. [42] Even the possible involvement of president Karzai's brother in drug trafficking was recently reported in the New York Times, James Risen 'Reports Link Karzai's Brother to Afghanistan Heroin Trade', 4 October 2008. [43] Chouvy, 'Afghanistan's Opium Production in Perspective', 23. [44] Approximately 40 percent of the narcotics smuggled through the Northern Route (via Central Asia) reach Russia; 30 percent goes to Europe. [45] Graubner, Drugs and Conflict: how the mutual impact of illicit drug economies and violent conflict influences sustainable development, peace and stability, 4. [46] UNODC, World Drug Report 2005, 49. [47] Fenopetov, 'The Drug Crime Threat to Countries Located on the "Silk Road"', 6-9. [48] Graubner, Drugs and Conflict: how the mutual impact of illicit drug economies and violent conflict influences sustainable development, peace and stability, 13. [49] US Department State, International Narcotics Strategy Report (INCSR) 2008. [50] Ibid. [51] Ibid. [52] Ibid. [53] Ibid. [54] The Afghan government has rejected herbicides aerial spraying, a strategy adopted by out by DynCorp in Colombia. However, the US Congress instead considers it as an appropriate and efficient strategy. [55] Rubin and Sherman, Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication. -11 See also Appendix C: Open Letter to UNODC: Is Opium Poppy Cultivation Related to Poverty? With Reply from UNODC, 50-56. [56] David Mansfield and Adam Pain, Briefing Paper. Alternative Livelihoods: Substance or Slogan?, 3. [57] Rubin and Sherman, Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication, 33. [58] UNODC, Afghan Opium Survey 2008, 1. [59] Ibid. [60] Rubin and Sherman, Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication, 13. [61] Ibid., 28-29. [62] Ibid., 12. [63] Ibid., 20. [64] Mansfield and Pain, Briefing Paper. Alternative Livelihoods: Substance or Slogan?, 9. [65] Rubin and Sherman, Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication, 20. [66] Aubron, 'L'éradication précipitée du pavot peut avoir un coût humain catastrophique', Liberation, 13 March 2005, 46. [67] The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) is the independent and quasi-judicial control organ monitoring the implementation of the United Nations drug control conventions. It was established in 1968 in accordance with the [Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961](#). [68] At present there are about 47,000 troops under NATO command in Afghanistan, along with a 14,000-strong separate US force. Only the American assistance to Afghanistan for the fiscal years 2001-2006 is over US\$ 10.3 billion. During the Paris Conference in Support of Afghanistan (12 June 2008), a commitment of \$21.4 billion has been given for the development of Afghanistan. [69] David Mainsfield is an alternative livelihoods specialist with several years of experience conducting research into the role of illicit crops in rural setting. [70] UNDP, UNDP Afghanistan Human Development Report 2007, 19. [71] UNDP, UNDP Afghanistan Annual Report 2006, 3. [72] Afghan women continue to face enormous obstacles to receive adequate instruction, to hold gainful employment and access to health care. [73] UNDP, UNDP Afghanistan Human Development Report 2007, 19-20. [74] Cornell, 'Narcotics and Armed Conflict: Interaction and Implications', 218.

Daniela Corti has a Master's degree in International Relations from Bologna University, Italy. For her Master's studies, she focused on geopolitics of drugs, terrorism and illicit traffics. In the Autumn 2008, Corti worked as a research assistant at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Sweden.

Ashok Swain is a Professor of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, and he also serves as the Director of the Uppsala Center for Sustainable Development. Swain's research area includes new security challenges, and he has written extensively on environmental issues, development conflicts and terrorism.

A Publication of:

