

Narco-traffic As A Threat To International Security



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Afghanistan epitomizes the profound implications that drug trafficking has for national, regional and international security. There are other examples from South Asia too. In the northeast of India, some insurgent groups extort money from drug trafficking organisations to fund their activities. There are similar reports about the LTTE in Sri Lanka. These illustrate the clear ramifications that drug trafficking has for domestic and regional security.

There are three clear facets to the drug issue. The first relates to the trafficking of chemicals described as precursors, which are essential for the manufacture of drugs such as heroin and cocaine. The second is about the vast profits that the drug trade generates and the laundering of these profits. The third and perhaps the most relevant in the context of the present subject is the use of drug generated profits for the funding of terrorist activity. I propose to address all three aspects in my presentation.

Opium and cocoa producing countries are few and far between, but there are many countries that produce chemicals to refine these drugs. The heroin and cocaine producers of the underworld require these chemicals, known as precursors, e.g. Acetic Anhydride (AA) and Potassium Permanganate, to produce their noxious

wares. To match the demand with adequate supplies criminal gangs with trans-national capabilities are necessary.

In the northeast of India where I worked in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we would hear about large opium harvests expected in adjacent Myanmar (Burma). As confirmation, we would come across surreptitious orders for AA from India, which is a large producer of this chemical. These would be placed complete with detailed packing instructions. During that time there were many seizures, which eventually forced the criminals in Myanmar to get their supplies of AA from China. Narcotics were a significant reason for sustaining the insurgency in that region.

Picture 1 shows 35 litre jerry cans of Indian Acetic Anhydride smuggled across in wooden crates. In Myanmar they would be tied to the bottom of boats that cross the Yu and Chindwin Rivers and taken to Kalemyo and Mandalay for dispersal to refineries.

I saw similar cross-border business-like efficiency amongst the traffickers operating the drug routes to India through Pakistan from 1996 to 2003. Here too, Acetic Anhydride would be booked many months ahead of the opium harvest in Afghanistan; The same modus operandi, but 2500km away. During this period, the organisations I worked with were responsible for large seizures of opium, heroin and precursor chemicals. The narcotics traffickers had easier access in the countries involved and were far more cooperative than any enforcement organisations.

The drug trade reacts to global changes faster than law enforcement agencies and is using globalised technological, financial

and electronic resources to expand its reach over many countries. To cite an example where the traffickers are ahead of enforcement agencies, there are reports of



Foto 1 - um galão de 35 litros de Anidrido Acético indiano trazido por contrabando em caixotes

liquid heroin being seized from Central Asia. Their ruthless enterprise depends essentially on subversion of politicians and officials. Without official corruption, continued criminal successes, despite amending laws, would not be possible. It is a universally accepted axiom that less than 10% of all contraband is seized, and that too by the most alert enforcement agencies that have the advantage of the latest technologies and well trained men and women. It is not weaknesses in the laws but their ineffective implementation that is the problem.

Picture 2 shows heroin packets thrown over the Indo-Pakistan Border fencing in India's Punjab. They were supposed to have been picked up by an early morning border patrol, but customs got there first. This was rather a crude way of smuggling heroin, but the traffickers would not have attempted it

had they not been confident of the complicity of officials on both sides of the border.

Narcotics laws and rules of several countries, including those of Afghanistan, are all very practical and have been influenced by the various UN Conventions (1961: the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs; 1971: the Convention on



Foto 2 – Pacotes de heroína jogados sobre a grade da fronteira indo-paquistã do Punjab da Índia

Psychotropic Substances; 1988: the UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances). These Conventions have served as excellent guiding principles. Some provisions of these Conventions require changes, and these will be considered by the next UN General Assembly Special Session on Narcotics in 2009.

It is the close knit relationship between criminal gangs and governments which is preventing any resolution in Afghanistan. Every year the Taliban get richer and stronger. They can finance terror all over the world. Opium cultivation in Afghanistan is more lethal because most of it is exported. Every year production goes up, and despite a billion dollars being spent on enforcement not a dent is made.

The drug mafia's depredations are not restricted to the economy. It just as naturally enters politics, and penetrates into the government. This criminalisation of political life is very marked in Afghanistan but can also be observed, for example, in all the 12 countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In several CIS countries banks and companies were involved in laundering criminal proceeds,

including money from the illicit drug trade. In 1999, in Moscow investigators found that a "Sherkhan Bank", established by Afghans, had laundered millions of dollars out of Russia.

Afghanistan's narcotics laws are just as good as in any other country, but as yet there is no let up in

trafficking, despite enforcement organisations having more money than they can handle. The fault lies in corruption and collusion.

During my visits to the posts on the Afghanistan–Iran border in Herat and Nimroz province, I was surprised to find that apart from a sort of an attendance register and some kind of wireless logbook, there was no other documentation in most of the border posts. There was no evidence of any supervision exercised by senior officers except rare visits. Most of the posts were manned by illiterate soldiers. Even in Herat the Commander of a border post was illiterate. Nearly all the soldiers were young. The old experienced, and literate, soldiers had been pensioned off under an ill-advised scheme. They were thought to have been perhaps tainted by their association with the

Najibullah Government, during whose tenure cultivation averaged 10,000ha. Their replacements owed their employment to bribery. They now make money to pay off debts and feed their officers. Thus, destabilisation begins from the lowest rung. It is just as easy to buy off higher echelons with the huge assets that the narcotics traffickers continue to accumulate. A system which is so fundamentally flawed can hardly be expected to be effective against well organised and entrenched drug cartels.

The Afghan narcotics scene is dominated by corrupt officials, warlords, drug lords, and above all by the Taliban. In late 2006, while a soldier in the government got the small amount of US\$40, a Taliban soldier got US\$300 to begin with. On top of this, all his expenses were taken care of. The Taliban had a very simple system. They would ask the local drug lord to pay for the entire upkeep of 10 soldiers, including their arms. In return, their business would be protected. The poor farmer, the lowest in the drug chain and paradoxically the most honest, is the one who pays the most. Using the UN-estimated farm gate price of about US\$86 per kg, the opium farmer is left with only US\$40 per kg after paying bribes and protection money. Thus the criminal juggernaut rolls on, feeding on greed, exploiting the vulnerabilities of a compromised enforcement apparatus and working in tandem with terror outfits in a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Living conditions at the border posts on the 920km Iran-Afghan border are horrible. The border is a series of deserts. Only in the north of Herat province, where the thin sluggish Hirai Rud (river) marks the border, is there some precipitation that nurtures woeful patches of vegetation amidst sand

dunes. It is either extremely hot or extremely cold, and always dusty. There is no water and the generators do not work. The poorly paid soldiers are not trained or committed enough to take risks or to be honest, and rarely spend nights at their posts. At most of the posts, the kitchen had never been used. No wonder the Iranians, who have posts opposite them seize more than 3 times as much narcotics as the Afghans. And spend only 15% of the amount.

Picture 3 is of the comparatively ‘fertile’ village of Buniyad in North Herat. The scrub of Hirai Rud is at the back and Iran is beyond that. Villages such as these are ever-ready to help smuggle narcotics- for a price. The Toyota entering the village is an indication of the prosperity that the drug trade has brought to these deserted frontier villages.



Foto 3 –A povoação comparativamente “fêtil” de Buniian no Herat do norte

The example that their officers set is far from inspirational for the men in drug law enforcement. Those with influence get themselves posted out within days, and many of them have garish palaces in Kabul’s posh suburbs of Wazir Khan and Sherpur.

During the war to remove the Najibullah Government, the US supported the

Mujahedeen and then the Taliban. It was during these years that the area under opium cultivation continued to expand reaching 193,000ha in 2007. Quite a large number of the ex-Mujahedeen and ex-Taliban who were being supported by the US then are now in powerful positions in the forces. It is impossible to expect them to eradicate the opium crop when they themselves had allowed it to flourish and profit from it. The much-publicised eradication programme targets only the helpless and the poor and cannot eradicate more than 15,000ha at most annually.

There is another strange system that is followed in Afghanistan. The governors, and even officials such as local police chiefs, run private militias. Most of these militias are anti-Taliban but also protect opium cultivation on payment. That is why the Taliban fights them. The Governor of Nimroz has his own militia, as do many others. Like others, he is open to bribery. He takes payment for providing 1,000 troops from an Indian road-building organisation but until recently provided them with just 300. Only after six of these road builders were killed by the Taliban did the security improve. The Governor's militia exclusively guards some of the most used routes to Iran, for example the one at Kerta post in northern Nimroz.

Photo 4 is of the Kerta border post in Nimroz Province. The uniformed gentleman and the two in black are part of the Governor's private militia. Such militias are part of the drug problem.

Is it possible for anyone to sustain such a huge militia without massive financial support? In a land that has no industry or even agriculture, the possession of this

amount of money is improbable, unless it is from narcotics. From the house of Muhammad Akhundzada, the then Governor of Helmand, nine tons of opium were seized in 2005 by the DEA, which is often at loggerheads with their own diplomats and intelligence agencies. As he had been a favourite of the United States and the United Kingdom, nothing happened to him. He is an MP in the Afghan Parliament, and in late 2006 started a large militia of his own, ostensibly to fight drug trafficking.



Foto 4 -Posto fronteiro de Kerta na Província de Nimroz

These are acts of omission and commission that have compounded the Afghan problem. If there was no corruption and collusion on such a wide scale, the problem would not have become so intractable. Drug money buys arms and explosives to fan insurgency not only in Afghanistan, but elsewhere in the region. India, as well as Pakistan, suffers periodically from attacks paid for from the limitless coffers of the Taliban and their cohorts.

There are 110 routes, along which narcotics are smuggled out of Afghanistan. About 15% of them are to Central Asia, another 20% to Pakistan, 10% to China, and the rest are to Iran. In that unfortunate country the addicts alone have doubled in the past decade to reach 2.5 million. They have financed the construction of twenty-eight forts on Afghanistan's side of their border,

in the hope that they too would be effective. There is no chance of that.

Photo 5 is of an Iranian fort, taken from the Afghan fort of Thane Haji Jan in Northern Nimroz. Officers in the Iranian fort had made several seizures in 2006, whereas no seizures occurred at on the Afghan side.



Foto 5 - Um forte iraniano, desde o forte afegão de Thane Haji Jan no norte de Nimroz

At Kurki post in Nimroz, everyday various commodities are briskly smuggled into Afghanistan and a few smuggled out. The Customs and Border Police officials posted there are not bothered. Long tankers carrying petrol and arms from Iran openly cross the border to fill up smaller Afghan tankers right under their noses and in broad day light. What they take back is anyone's guess. Humans are one item. Narcotics are probably the main contraband to make this journey. Narcotics are low in volume and high in value, representing the easiest way to pay for the constant stream of tankers and trucks. Such a huge illegal market cannot function without the nearby Iranians' complicity too. This shows that, even in a country like Iran which has stringent laws, there are pockets where the power of money power reigns supreme and the staunchest disciplinarians are powerless.

Photo 6 is of Kurki Border Post on the Iran border, which all those tankers and trucks in

the back of the photo have crossed.

Iran seized 231,352kg of opium against 90,990 by Afghanistan the source country. And Iran, Pakistan, China, Turkey, Tajikistan and Russian accounted for 69% of all heroin seized in 2005. Afghanistan seized a mere 10%, or 9,079kg.

UNODC keeps saying, as an indicator of success, that 13 provinces are now opium free. However, over all of Kandahar and Helmand –which produce 65% of opium – not only make up for this presumed loss, but also increase their production by at least 30% every year. Opium from as far as Badakshan is brought to Baramcha in Nimroz for quality refining by expert Baluch 'pharmacists'. This proves that it is safer to move the cultivation to Kandahar and Helmand, where there is minimal interference from the law.



Foto 6 - Posto fronteiro de Kurki

Baramcha in the South Eastern tip of Nimroz is very close to Helmand. Here, the heroin producing facilities are numerous and brazenly visible; yet law has not reached them. Most consignments of opium to Baramcha reach it safely, suggesting some kind of official safe passage. Baramcha and most of Nimroz is a Baluch area. The contiguous territories in Iran and Pakistan are also Baluch. Tribal affiliations

“Something new and significant is going on in the world drugs market. In last year's World Drug Report we made the argument that drug control is working and the world drug problem is being contained. This 2007 Report provides further robust evidence of this trend. For almost every kind of illicit drug - cocaine, heroin, cannabis and amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) - there are signs of overall stability, whether we speak of cultivation, production or consumption. Hopefully, within the next few years evidence to support this claim will become statistically and logically incontrovertible.”

World Drug Report, 2007

This optimistic passage is from the introduction to the World Drug Report of 2007, written by the Executive Director of UNODC. With 8200 tons of opium being produced in Afghanistan last year, a 34% increase over the previous year, we can only say that there is “robust evidence” to the contrary.