

## THE REAL “LONG WAR”: THE ILLICIT DRUG TRADE AND THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY

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In common with the military establishments in most of the world’s other countries, the U.S. military faces two challenges. The first of these is to decide strategic priorities in the aftermath of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the likely de-emphasis on preparation for large-scale counterinsurgency missions. The second connected challenge is the balance to be struck between traditional military functions and the “newer” non-traditional ones. Of course, the deterrence and prevention of war will remain the top priority for the U.S. military as for most others, and so the maintenance of the capacity to “fight and win” so far as resources will allow, remains a non-negotiable requirement. Nonetheless, within that setting, there yet remains a whole set of second-order decisions about investment in forces and capabilities that may be good for traditional warfighting tasks but not for nontraditional ones, or vice versa. Although the inherent flexibility of military forces will often allow an effortless switch from one mission priority to another, there are nonetheless real and substantial dilemmas and choices in creating sufficiently balanced forces.

One way of helping to resolve these issues of choice is to address the relative seriousness of the threats to the United States that need to be dealt with. This is usually done by assessing, first of all, the likelihood of the threat, and then its relative seriousness to U.S. peace, security, and prosperity, should it materialize. Finally, judgments need to be made about the cost-effectiveness of the

contribution that the military can make to the countering of the threat.

Against these criteria, the threat of the illicit trade in drugs must rank high, and almost certainly higher than is generally perceived, because it easily can be shown that this is, first of all, a clear and present danger in that the threat is already here, rather than a threat that might or might not materialize in the future. It currently constitutes a threat at the individual level (in terms of death, injury, and human misery to be measured in terms of hundreds of thousands every year), at the national level because it undermines the fabric of states and societies, and at the level of the international system because it destabilizes essential regions, especially when the illicit trade in drugs becomes aligned with other forms of threat such as international terrorism (as in the case of al-Qaeda in the Northern Maghreb).

Because of these political, economic, and social linkages, appropriate responses have to be holistic too, and this returns us to the question of the contribution that the military can make to the campaign against the illicit drug trade and its relative cost-effectiveness when compared to other nonmilitary responses to the problem. While the military services can do little about the demand side of the issue (which many experts consider key to effective control and management of the trade), they can usefully contribute to responses to the manufacture and transportation of illegal drugs ashore, in the air,

and especially afloat, since the illicit drug trade is distinctly transnational in character. Moreover, in many cases, the warfighting characteristics of the military (the availability of speedy interceptors, precision fires, surveillance systems, campaign planning skills, and so forth) can be employed in this function without detriment to those higher functions.

If this is accepted as the case, then U.S. Army planners, like their naval and air service counterparts, need to seriously address the issue of how best to integrate the requirements of these tasks with their more familiar ones. This may be an intellectual as well as a material issue. First, dealing with the drug problem requires acceptance of the need to integrate the military effort with the nonmilitary. Second, if the counterdrug effort is the war that many claim, it is one that is likely to last for very many years and to be resolved, or at least managed, by attrition rather than decisive victories of the sort to which armies have usually aspired.

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