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COUNTERNARCOTICS OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN; THE COIN OF THE REALM

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“The bottom is starting to fall out of the Afghan opium market.” So says the 2009 Afghanistan Opium Survey by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Issued in September 2009, this report is a clarion for those who point to progress in this troubled part of the world. Though counternarcotics operations in Afghanistan are an effort of the International Community (IC), a large part of the success is due to the efforts of a small group of professionals known as the Counternarcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA) who lead the effort to thwart insurgent operations.

Originally conceived in 2004, the CNPA has evolved over the past few years to meet an ever-changing threat environment that is the norm in Afghanistan. With the help of international partners, military and civilian agencies have assisted the CNPA, and ultimately the people of Afghanistan, to isolate the opium cultivation in the restive southern part of the country.

However, the evolution and the success have not been without problems. A recent report by the Department of Justice International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP) reported that the CNPA suffers from a “fragmented and dysfunctional development” resulting from the international community’s “lack of unified planning and common strategy,” coupled with the agency’s (CNPA) internal lack of experience in organizational development. These are harsh words for a program which has shown steady and demonstrable progress over the past 5 years.

Many would be content to focus on the few “bad” apples, which can be associated with any law enforcement agency, but that would be a “snapshot” of what this agency does, and as with all snapshots, one has a 50-50 chance of getting either a good picture or a bad one. However, with the narcotics trade and the efforts to thwart it, a movie would give us a more accurate picture. Like all movies, there is a beginning and an end, along with many subplots in between. Many of the difficulties experienced by the CPNA can be attributed to the subplots.

The narcotics industry today—calling it what it is—is a commercial enterprise, which is both important to the strength of the insurgency and at the same time keeps the government weak by fueling instability and corruption. Consequently, the United

States will never attain its goals of a stable Afghanistan that supports the rule of law until this problem is controlled.

Historical Perspectives.

Today, Afghanistan provides over 90 percent of the world's opium. Since the provider of choice for opiate use in the United States is predominately Mexico and Columbia, Afghanistan's product almost exclusively supports a European and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) appetite. Prior to the Soviet invasion, opium production was minimal, but increased and remained at a steady state throughout the communist regime. The sharpest decrease occurred during the 1 year of Taliban domination. Contrary to many beliefs, this may not have been an altruistic decision on the part of the Taliban but an effort to drive up the price of opium in an effort to increase the profit. This perspective is up for debate, and it may well oversimplify the issue. Additionally, many organizations reached out to the Taliban to reduce opium production, an effort which would have served Taliban's public image abroad. However, this image was tarnished by the Taliban's relentless refusal to turn over Osama Bin Ladin, the closure of girl schools, and the destruction of the two historical Buddha statues in Bamyan.

After the Coalition invasion and the overthrow of the Taliban, opium production began to increase and continued to rise until very recently. In 2004, of the 34 Afghan provinces, only 3 provinces were rated as "poppy-free" by the UNODC. Through the dedicated efforts of the international community, a true coalition effort, the number of "poppy-free" provinces increased to 8 in 2005, 13 in 2007, 18 in 2008, and 20 in 2009. As a result of the increased number of poppy-free provinces, there has been a corresponding decrease in overall opium production of 123,000 hectares in 2009, compared to the high of 193,000 hectares in 2007. However, this success is not without risk. As the farm gate price of opium decreases, this could potentially result in increased worldwide demand. Therefore, we must make sure that opium production does not experience a relapse as it did from 2005 to 2006, and we need to immediately consolidate the progress which has been made. This requires alternative livelihood options and rural development since consolidation of these gains cannot rely only on a single crop such as wheat. The IC should rebalance the distorted distribution of aid money which is poured into areas with a high insecurity/low sustainability ratio, and instead focus on areas where consolidation is effective. Today, prices are going down due to the market forces of *oversupply* versus demand. However, when instability increases, farmers do not focus on "market" forces any longer and instead will stockpile the opium since this is the most secure "currency" that they have and that they know can help them to provide for their families in case their fruit orchards, or any other alternative crop, fail. Narco-traffickers, on the other hand, think stockpiling since instability fosters inflationary price speculation, hence what one does not sell today at lower prices, one can sell tomorrow at much higher prices.

In January 2006, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) developed the Afghan National Drug Control Strategy, which established four priorities “to provide a focus for coordinating a range of different strategies, programmes, and activities.” These priorities are: (1) Disrupt the drug traffickers and eliminate the basis for trade; (2) Strengthen and diversify legal rural livelihoods; (3) Reduce the demand for illegal drugs coupled with treatment of drug users; and (4) Strengthen institutions in the provinces.

To support these four priorities, GIROA established a strategy of eight pillars in which to “implement projects against the four priorities.” These pillars are the foundation of the strategy: International and Regional Cooperation; Alternative Livelihoods; Demand Reduction; Law Enforcement; Criminal Justice; Eradication; Public Awareness; and Institution Building.

Initial efforts to control the illicit narcotics trade in the Post-Taliban era focused almost exclusively on a strategy of poppy eradication, and the Counternarcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA) developed along these operational lines. But, as with our own domestic eradication efforts, they fall short without a comprehensive strategy, which should focus on the disruption of the business model of the drug trafficking industry.

The Future.

Today, due to the successes of the counter-opium efforts, we are starting to see a new phenomenon arise from the ashes of the opium trade. Methamphetamine production may be on the rise.

Like heroin, most of the ingredients for methamphetamines can be found legally and can use the same type of network and business model. What makes “Meth” tricky is that it can be produced near the location of the customer without a large lab complex. This makes the Meth industry more dangerous since it is harder to detect and interdict because transportation from producer to consumer is reduced.

The CNPA is transforming to meet this challenge. Already what was the Poppy Eradication Force (PEF) is now retooling itself into an Interdiction Force, which will team with coalition forces and attack the illicit opium business in the south. Helmand Province, the last strong holdout in the opium trade, is also one of the provinces where Meth is increasing. And like the opium trade, methamphetamine production can fund and support instability in Afghanistan through insurgency just as it bonds the gangs of Central and North America. Deployment of this interdiction force to Helmand will help the IC to treat insurgency for what it is: criminal activity.

Gone are the days of the CNPA treating this as a war. There is no ideologically legitimate enemy here who warrants a professional respect. Here, the combatants are criminals who wish to destabilize a country and terrorize the populace. Narcotics trafficking supports these insurgents financially and must be a focal point of the Coalition’s insurgent efforts. To meet this threat, the CNPA plans to develop an intelligence capability, which will permeate throughout the Afghanistan National Police

and take a step toward an intelligence-based professional police force and intelligence-led policing.

The task is not easy. After all, it took over 30 years of conflict for Afghanistan to deteriorate to the point where it was when the IC began operations in 2002. Building a force out of the ashes of the Taliban and Soviet era is tough enough. To build a transparent force guided by a comprehensive Drug Control Strategy, which adds to the stability of this nation, takes hard work and time. But the Afghans and coalition partners will get through this together.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.