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# WAR AND THE GLOBAL OPIUM SUPPLY

— K. I. DOUGLAS —

Throughout this century, intra-country warfare has been a major cause of the rise in the global supply of illicit drugs. And yet, while civil war is now recognized as a catalyst for instability in the post-Cold War era, its potential to exacerbate the international narcotics problem is still largely unrecognized. This article examines how armed conflict in two countries has expanded the opium supply tapped by international trafficking syndicates and America's drug abusers.

Few countries better attest to the effects of civil war on the international drug problem than Afghanistan and Myanmar, where necessities wrought by conflict have been met by an explosive and sustained rise in opium production. Today, the two countries produce nearly 80 percent of the heroin illicitly consumed in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Whereas opium production in Afghanistan satisfies the economic needs of the farming community, in Myanmar it quenches the ethnic minorities' thirst for political autonomy. In this light, Afghanistan and Myanmar illustrate the two main channels—economic and political—through which post-Cold War conflicts will continue to complicate U.S. counter-narcotics efforts.

## Afghanistan: Opium Poppy as a Cash Crop

Since 1979, when Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan, the area in that country under poppy cultivation has expanded by 1,200 percent and the volume of opium has increased by 1,500 percent.<sup>2</sup> According to the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), poppy is now cultivated on about 70,000 hectares in Afghanistan, with an annual yield of more than 3,000 metric tons of opium.<sup>3</sup> It is no coincidence that the country has been embroiled in arguably the most destructive war the world has seen during the past two decades.

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Many observers assume that the *mujahedeen* are primarily responsible for the rise in Afghanistan's opium production. This assumption is only partly accurate, for it ignores the central role played by peasant farmers as well as the practical obstacles that hinder the use of opium in Afghanistan as a reliable or even necessary source of military financing. There is no question that the warring *mujahedeen* factions have exploited the illicit drug trade by trafficking opium into and through neighboring countries such as Turkey. It is believed that in several provinces, *mujahedeen* leaders have long coordinated drug-for-arms shipments with their sponsors across the Pakistani border. However, rather than the *mujahedeen*, it is more likely the civilian population which has fueled the rise in Afghanistan's opium production. As will become clear, the war's effects on rural income opened up a need that could best be met by the high returns from poppy cultivation.

For their part, the *mujahedeen* have been unwilling and unable to use earnings from the opium trade to finance their military forces because of two factors: 1) ample military support from neighboring states and 2) tribal rivalry within the major *mujahedeen* factions.

### *Creating a Need: The War and its Effects on the Farming Community*

The physical vulnerability of agriculture to war-induced destruction is the main reason that illicit drug production took root in Afghanistan and the reason that it is likely to do so in other countries of the post-Cold War world.

Afghanistan's economy has always been heavily dependent on agriculture, although only about 12 percent—eight million hectares—of the land is arable.<sup>4</sup> During the war, the agricultural heartland, located mainly on low-lying plains and valleys, absorbed much of the physical toll inflicted by the warring sides. The high exposure of agriculture to aerial bombing is one reason that in other countries—Lebanon, for example—traditional income sources relied on by the farmers have also dried up, forcing a switch to drug-related crops.

Some figures may help to clarify the extent of devastation. Prior to the conflict, 85 percent of the Afghan population lived in the countryside.<sup>5</sup> By 1989, no less than 9 percent of the Afghan population had been killed; another third had fled the country; 11 percent became internal refugees, many heading to the urban centers.<sup>6</sup> Between 53 percent and 67 percent of all villages had been bombed; 24 percent to 36 percent of the country's irrigation systems were destroyed; and the number of livestock had fallen by 70 percent.<sup>7</sup> By 1987, 30 percent of the country's irrigation system had been destroyed, primarily through intentional bombing or mining.<sup>8</sup> Fertilizer use had declined by 90 percent.<sup>9</sup> By 1989, the agricultural community had declined from 85 percent to 23 percent.<sup>10</sup>

In the decade between 1978 and 1988, the volume of wheat—which accounted for about 80 percent of the average Afghan's caloric intake—declined by 30 percent.<sup>11</sup> In the same period, the area devoted to the country's top commodity earner, cotton, shrank by nearly half.<sup>12</sup> Virtually the entire crop of sugar beets was eliminated.<sup>13</sup> Given the overwhelming importance of agriculture in Afghanistan's economy, the precipitous decline in production of major

food and cash crops had a ripple effect throughout the economy. The virtual elimination of the country's main cash crops, combined with a smaller agricultural work force, had a considerable influence on the allocative decisions of farmers who faced newfound difficulty in producing enough food for themselves. Only after meeting their own subsistence needs could they worry about cash crops. Thus, it was doubly important that remaining inputs devoted to cash crops be used to maximum effect. Many farmers saw opium as the only cash crop worthy of precious inputs such as fertilizer.

From a purely economic perspective, they were making a completely rational decision. A U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) report in 1992 found that the total cash value in dollar terms for all opium resin produced in Nangarhar that year was \$7.5 million, against an estimated market value of \$2.75 million for all other crops combined.<sup>14</sup> According to the UNDCP field surveys of 1994 and 1995, in many of the major opium producing provinces the cash yield from opium was more than double that from other crops.<sup>15</sup> The income differentials explain the main driving force for the 1,500 percent rise in opium production.

One characteristic that distinguishes opium poppy from perishable produce is its ability to endure long travel times. Even when roads are destroyed to the extent they were during the war, investment in poppy production is not jeopardized by longer travel times to market. It is estimated that nearly 60 percent of Afghanistan's highway network requires reconstruction.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, opium's high cash value/volume ratio can in part offset its high labor requirements; the labor invested in opium production can be made up by less travel time per unit of profit.

One other incentive that explains the growth of poppy cultivation during the war was the lowered risk posed by the law enforcement authorities. During any conflict, domestic law enforcement needs can be overshadowed by the more pressing requirements of the military. Thus, civilians unlikely to be confused with combatants face a markedly reduced risk of criminal detection and prosecution. For the majority of law-abiding farmers, the breakdown in official intervention in Afghanistan meant the collapse of state-run agricultural marketing channels. For those willing to engage in illegal activities, however, the conflict opened a window of opportunity. As the government shifted human and financial resources to the war, the risk to farmers of illicitly cultivating poppy became virtually negligible. During the war, illicit drug trade had the enviable traits of lowered risk and relatively high profit.

#### *Military Assistance and its Countervailing Influence on the Opium Trade*

While income requirements explain why the farming community expanded its output of opium poppy, consistent military aid explains why the warring factions were not hard-pressed for opium earnings. U.S. military assistance to

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Afghanistan was almost negligible until 1979, when Soviet troops invaded.<sup>17</sup> In August 1981, U.S. military assistance to the *mujahedeen* totaled approximately \$100 million and was expanded each year thereafter, to about \$120 million to \$130 million in 1984 and \$280 million in 1985.<sup>18</sup> American aid totaled about \$600 million in 1989.<sup>19</sup> After the departure of Soviet troops that year, this support contracted; by 1993-94, unconfirmed reports estimate it amounted to a mere \$6 million.<sup>20</sup>

The reduction in Soviet and American assistance might have forced the *mujahedeen* to expand their involvement in the opium trade were it not for

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neighboring powers who picked up the financial slack. Throughout the anti-Soviet resistance, regional sponsors including Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan supported the rebels to varying degrees. After the departure of Soviet troops in 1989, Iran continued to sponsor the Hazaras and for a while the Tajiks; Uzbekistan and Turkey the Uzbeks; and Saudi Arabia and Pakistan the Pashtuns.<sup>21</sup> The Kabul government led by Burhanuddin Rabbani has accused Pakistan of supporting the latest entrant into the conflict, the Taliban.<sup>22</sup> The reduction in Soviet and American aid has taken place in the face of steady and in some cases increased support from Afghanistan's neighbors, which has preempted the need for the *mujahedeen* to expand their involvement in the opium trade.

The *mujahedeen* also have other sources of income which have cushioned the effects of reduced U.S. and Soviet assistance. For example, the major factions heavily tax the smuggling industry, which has thrived as a result of the 1950 trade agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> This agreement allows Afghanistan to import goods duty-free through Karachi, to the cities of Jalalabad and Spin Baldok. After reaching these destinations, smugglers are allegedly transporting the goods back into Pakistan—to Peshawar, Chaman and Quetta—where they are sold at a markup. The *mujahedeen* factions impose a tax on the trucks that transport the smuggled goods across the areas they control. Pakistan's Central Board of Revenue has been quoted as estimating that trading volume reached \$360 million in the year ended June 30, 1995.<sup>24</sup>

### *Tribal Conflict as an Obstacle to Opium-Financing*

Tribal rivalry within the major ethnic factions has all but ruled out systematic cultivation of poppy along ethnic lines. The major ethnic groups in Afghanistan are the Pashtuns (50 percent of the population), Tajiks (26 percent), Uzbeks (8 percent), Hazaras (7 percent), and Aimaqs (6 percent).<sup>25</sup> Within each of the five major opium-producing provinces, a heterogenous mix of tribes

lay claim to the tracts of land where opium poppy is grown. In order to fully grasp the *mujahedeen* leaders' difficulty in converting opium production into a reliable source of revenue, it is necessary to recognize the primacy of *tribal* relations in Afghanistan; focusing solely on the broad *ethnic* composition of the country will lead to bloated conclusions about the feasibility of carving out ethnically-pure territory for opium production.

While the Pashtuns control several of the major drug-producing provinces, they are also notorious for endemic tribal rivalry, particularly between the dominant Durrani tribe and others. Loyalties to *quam* (a clan or subtribe) far outweigh allegiance to broader categories of ethnicity. The *mujahedeen* leaders could not overcome this tremendous obstacle, and as a result, failed to use opium as a source of military financing.

One important lesson provided by Afghanistan is that geography, climatic conditions and soil quality are important factors in determining whether civil warfare leads to expanded drug production. Had the agricultural community been better shielded from the war, its farmers would probably not have shifted output to opium poppy. Had the climate been unaccommodating and irrigated land inaccessible, Afghans would have had little choice but to ride out the storm of extreme poverty. The primacy of geography in determining the nature and extent of war-induced drug production is reinforced by the experience of Myanmar. But, whereas in Afghanistan the physical exposure of the agriculture to the war was a key variable, in Myanmar, the secluded nature of the jungle allows the embattled hilltribes to produce opium along ethnic lines, poignantly giving the rebels a taste of the autonomy they so desperately seek.

#### Myanmar: Opium as a Source of Military Financing

Armed conflict in Myanmar, like that in Afghanistan, has fueled the production of opium by creating needs no other commodity can satisfy. However, whereas the driving force for production in Afghanistan has been poverty, that in Myanmar has been the search for political autonomy. In Myanmar, not only has opium become the main source of financing for the rebel movement, but the collapse of that movement has forced the rebels to retreat headlong into the drug trade, the one place where they are left on their own by a ruthless central government.

Geography is once again an important influence. In Afghanistan, geography was relevant in that it left the agricultural community vulnerable to the war, but in Myanmar it is significant because of the protection it provides to the hilltribe community and its militias. In Myanmar, most hilltribes have been shielded from the cataclysmal devastation witnessed in Afghanistan. More importantly, successive governments—beginning with the colonial government of Great Britain in the late 1800s—have failed to penetrate the jungle in which the hilltribe communities live, often granting certain concessions to local rulers because of the practical difficulty of enforcing central authority.

Other contrasts with Afghanistan further explain why the rebel forces in Myanmar have accessed the opium trade on a systematic basis while their

counterparts in Afghanistan have not. First, whereas the *mujahedeen* enjoyed a relatively consistent flow of military assistance from interested sponsors abroad, the rebels in Myanmar never recovered from the cut-off of Chinese assistance in the early 1980s. Second, there is a much higher degree of ethnic unity within each of the groups involved in the Myanmar insurgency, and tribal unity has facilitated the conversion of opium production into a systematic revenue-generating industry based on ethno-military lines. As a result, whereas the relationship between war and drugs in Afghanistan is unidirectional, with armed conflict spurring drug production, the relationship in Myanmar is two-way: not only has the civil war triggered drug production, but drug-related earnings have been systematically channeled back into the conflict.

### *The Life and Death of the Rebel Movement*

In December 1995, the drug warlord Khun Sa—responsible for the bulk of opium trafficked out of Myanmar—surrendered to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the ruling junta in Yangon. To the unsuspecting eye, Khun Sa's surrender, following a series of ceasefires between SLORC and the other hilltribe militias, appears to have vastly improved the prospects for a drug-free peace in Myanmar. However, one small detail cannot be overlooked: since 1989, when the first of the 15 rebel ceasefires agreements was declared, the output of opium from Myanmar has doubled.<sup>26</sup> The surrender of Khun Sa, leader of the Mong Tai Army, signals the end of Myanmar's insurgency movement, but if the past is any indication, what will follow is more illicit drug production, not less. Myanmar is a case study on what happens when drugs finance a lost military cause.

It is necessary first to understand how the war changed opium from a traditional crop grown for religious purposes and small-scale consumption into a source of military financing. Ethnic minorities in the region have fought for autonomy since the late 1950s. From the 1960s until its recent demise, the most powerful rebel group was an alliance of hilltribes fighting under the slightly misleading banner of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). While the CPB was led by political leaders with ethnic and ideological ties close to China, the rank-and-file fought together because they were united by the common search for the political autonomy promised them in the constitution of Burma, established in 1948. China provided the CPB alliance with the bulk of its military and financial strength. Nearly 70 percent of the CPB annual budget was covered by taxes on the informal trade that China intentionally channeled through rebel-controlled border crossings.<sup>27</sup>

The close patron-client relationship between China and the communist alliance changed for the worse in 1979, when Vietnam invaded Cambodia. Intent on providing help to the Khmer Rouge, who were coalescing on the border with Thailand, China promised Bangkok that it would cut off support to other communist forces then active throughout the region. This reversal grew out of Deng's 1979 decision to give up support to revolutionary forces in Southeast Asia; for the CPB, it led to a dramatic cut-off of assistance beginning in 1980. Left with no other sponsor, the rebel alliance, which then controlled 80

percent of the country's poppy fields, expanded its output of opium and instituted a policy of collecting a 20-percent tax on the poppy harvested in its base areas, a 10-percent sales tax on the opium sold in the local markets, and a 5-percent tax on quantities leaving CPB-controlled areas.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the civil war in Myanmar initially led to increased drug production because of the income opium provided for the cash-strapped rebels. Well-armed caravans transported opium to refineries in Thailand and Laos and returned with cash or advanced weaponry. Throughout the early days of the uprising, Kuomintang remnants living in the border areas between China and Myanmar extorted opium from hilltribe villagers and transported it to the Thai border, returning with ever more arms and cash.<sup>29</sup>

In 1988, however, the rebels confronted an adversary far stronger than any before. That year, SLORC seized power. In the face of a ruthless military regime supported by none other than China, and in the wake of a mutiny that left the alliance with no unifying leadership, the rebel movement quickly began to crumble. In September 1989, the Wa hilltribe, which comprised 80 percent of the alliance's military strength, accepted SLORC's terms to a ceasefire.<sup>30</sup> Other rebel groups that had long relied on the communists for weapons also collapsed. In January 1991, the Fourth Brigade of the Kachin Independence Army surrendered. In March 1991, the Pa-O rebels did the same, and in April of the same year, the Palaungs surrendered.

One by one, SLORC neutralized 15 of 16 major rebel groups. Most recently, the opium warlord Khun Sa, whose Mong Tai Army includes 15,000 of the best-armed soldiers in the country, acquiesced. Granted, Khun Sa was never a rebel leader; unlike the other major rebel groups, the Mong Tai Army was distinguished more by its wholehearted involvement in the drug trade than by any ethnic commonality. But, his surrender does hold considerable symbolic importance. With the Mong Tai Army out of commission, only the Karen National Union continues its insurgency; but it too suffered a major defeat in 1991, when SLORC captured its stronghold at Manerplaw. As a military threat, therefore, the Karen National Union is irrelevant.

### *The Twisted Legacy of War and Drugs: Opium Production as a Proxy for Political Autonomy*

If the rebels have relied on opium to finance their insurgency, why has output risen with each ceasefire agreement? After all, reduced military confrontation with the government would reduce the financing needs that have been met by earnings from the opium trade. The answer lies in the fact that opium in the Myanmar conflict has acquired significance beyond the mere economic.

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The rebels' expanded involvement in the opium trade is as much a sign of their desperation as of SLORC's newfound dominance. SLORC has not only militarily subordinated the rebels in a way that prior regimes could only dream of, but it has also succeeded in undermining their long-term political credibility by leaving them shackled to the opium trade. Having lost their campaign for political freedom, the ethnic minorities have little choice but to swallow their pride and accept the sole concession granted them: if nothing else, opium production allows them to save for a better day. The "independence" which the rebels now find in the opium trade explains why the output of opium in Myanmar has doubled since 1989. For its part, SLORC is wallowing in self-confidence: by allowing the rebels to cultivate poppy, it not only implicates

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the rebels on the international stage but can also portray itself as a reformed johnny-come-lately to the war on drugs.

The present state of affairs has a ring of *dejà vu* to it, for what is taking place is a throwback to Myanmar's nineteenth century history, when the hilltribes grudgingly promised their political servitude in exchange for some control over their lives. Following victories in the Anglo-Burmese wars, the British colonial powers decided to exclude the hilltribes from a countrywide ban on opium because of the difficulty in enforcing

colonial rule in the dense and virtually inaccessible areas where opium poppy was cultivated. Today, SLORC's decision to leave the hilltribes free to produce drugs is merely a reflection of the insuperable obstacles posed by geography.

Left to their own devices, and with little hope for victory in the near term, the hilltribes will most likely continue to grow poppy. The Wa, the Kachins and Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army in particular have each carved out an exclusive geographical and sectoral niche in the opium trade. In contrast to Afghanistan, poppy cultivation and opium production take place in "ethnically pure" territories owned and dominated by individual hilltribe communities. Insofar as Khun Sa's recent surrender is more akin to a retirement from the insurgency, he can now devote himself full-time to the opium trade. SLORC's open refusal to extradite him to the United States, where he is wanted on federal drug trafficking charges, suggests that he has struck a deal.<sup>31</sup>

For those concerned about the growth of the global drug supply, the challenges ahead may turn out to be more problematic in Myanmar than in Afghanistan. When drug production satisfies needs beyond the purely economic, the task of uprooting it from the zone of conflict is complicated by the absence of politically satisfactory alternatives for those involved: we can offer the farmer economic assistance, but we have no political independence to give. Far from being a harbinger of a drug-free Myanmar, Khun Sa's surrender marks not only the complete collapse of the rebel movement but the sad transformation of its major players into drug traffickers by default. Whereas development



assistance could conceivably slow the growth of drug production in Afghanistan, nothing short of increased political support and greater political autonomy will convince the hilltribes in Myanmar to give up their involvement in the opium trade. Given the present state of relations between SLORC and the hilltribes, neither of these two prerequisites is likely to be fulfilled in the near future.

### Conclusion: Looking to the Future

On March 1, 1996, the Clinton administration publicly singled out five countries, including Colombia, for their failure to cooperate satisfactorily on counter-narcotics efforts. The unprecedented decision to "decertify" Colombia led critics of the annual decertification exercise to argue that, due to the seemingly insatiable demand for drugs in the United States, the administration's decertification smacked of hypocrisy.

The fact is, the critics are confusing two distinct, albeit related, phenomena. As important as the U.S. demand for drugs is, the global *supply* of illicit drugs has been and always will be a significant influence affecting the availability and consumption of drugs. Supply and demand have an equal say on the scope and nature of the illicit drug trade within and especially beyond the United States. This must not be overlooked as American drug policy dialogue belatedly focuses on the demand side of the U.S. drug problem.

In both Afghanistan and Myanmar, the following trends converged: armed conflict gave rise to acute and unmet needs, heightened ethnic sensitivity translated into a defining military influence, while simultaneously, illicit opium production maintained its secular rise into a major income-generating industry. By illustrating the interplay between these trends, Afghanistan and Myanmar provide a useful basis for adjustments to development of drug policy in the United States and other countries threatened by the rising world supply of illicit drugs.

The experiences of Afghanistan and Myanmar are important because the economic and political needs that gave rise to illicit drug production in the two countries are likely to emerge elsewhere in response to intra-country warfare. The countries of Central Asia, for example, have all the markings of a conflict-driven rise in drug production: political instability, a preexisting tradition of drug crop cultivation, heightened ethnic sensitivity, and what is more, a favorable terrain and climate.

Should drug control ascend the U.S. priority agenda—the extent of drug abuse within American borders suggests that it must—American policymakers will want to consider how best to achieve a balanced approach which places equal importance on reducing international supply and U.S. demand.

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It is crucial that the two planks be pursued in tandem. By reducing its demand for drugs, the United States would reduce a major stimulus for international trafficking networks. In other countries, where illicit demand has yet to become endemic, policymakers should not become complacent about supply. The demand for drugs does not just happen—it is often nudged along by a helping hand from the supply side. In some parts of the world, the growing availability of drugs threatens to nurture a demand that will in time be self-sustaining. To dismiss the importance of source-country interventions under such circumstances would be dangerously shortsighted.

To reiterate, supply is important. U.S. policymakers must carefully consider the threat of rising drug production in war-torn countries. In time, it will be clear that crime, and particularly lucrative criminal activities such as drug trafficking, will be a highly attractive employment sector in the post-Cold War era. American leadership in NATO and U.N. peacekeeping missions will afford the United States a bird's-eye view into the regions most likely to experience a war-induced rise in drug production. Of course, it will be essential that the American defense and intelligence community process such firsthand information with a clear sense of how such information should be used. In the past, it may have been expedient for drugs and/or drug money to lubricate transactions involving arms or political influence, but today there can be no doubt that turning a blind eye to the illicit drug trade—even to satisfy valid foreign policy aims—will ultimately and unequivocally harm the national interests of the United States.

### Notes

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