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Graveyard of Empires: Fixing Afghanistan's Drug Problem

Introduction

The situation seems dire when U.S. officials look at Afghanistan because they face such monumental problems. The government is corrupt because drug money pays the workers while terrorists attack U.S. forces and bomb civilians on election days. During elections, parties try to illegitimately influence the system so their side wins. America is becoming more and more unpopular because bombings that strike the Taliban consistently cause collateral damage against civilians. The American government has not set a premature departure date for 2013. All of these problems prevent the most necessary aspect of the war from coming to fruition: nation-building. Nothing else matters if the Afghan citizens do not have an economic base from which to better themselves and their country. However, Afghanistan's current economy relies heavily on poppy seed production and heroin trading. Therefore, if America wishes to help the country, it needs to fix the opium trade, which actually offers a way to help the country develop in the long term.

Current Counter-Narcotics Strategy

The opium trade is considered one of the greatest threats to Afghan stability, and counter-narcotics strategies have become essential to the overall strategy for defeating the Taliban because their illegal taxes on poppy seed farmers fund the terrorists. The heroin that comes from the poppy seeds also creates social and health problems.

There are many basic problems concerning the opium trade. Increased cultivation in the country means that heroin prices will be lower and the purity of the drugs will increase. With a higher purity, it cannot only be injected but also smoked, snorted, and ingested, which increases

the potential number of uses.¹ Opium and heroin brought about \$3.1 billion dollars in 2006 into Afghanistan, which was 1/3 of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), both legal and illegal. The Taliban siphons anywhere between 10-50% of these revenues annually.² This funding is substantial in the Taliban's jihad against the United States and the government of Afghanistan (GOA). They use their funds to strengthen their holdings in southern Afghanistan, build up a better guerilla army to take on the Afghan forces and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and destabilize the country so they can take over the state.³ Finally, the opium trade threatens the security of surrounding countries because the drugs go through them to get to America and Europe. Russia is concerned that opium going through Central Asia funds Islamic militants on their borders.⁴ This is the basic problem facing the U.S. security forces and the fledgling Afghan state.

Under President George W. Bush, the U.S. followed "Five Pillars of Counter-narcotics:" public information, alternative development, eradication, interdiction, and an increase in law enforcement and justice reform. Public information ideally encourages Afghan civilians to choose to stop producing poppy seeds through disseminated information.⁵ The media or local leaders could do this. The second is alternative development where the U.S. and GOA would try to help the Afghanis produce different crops besides poppy seeds. Annually the U.S. puts \$120-150 million into short-term cash-for-works projects and other programs to detract from the illegal trades. Legal agriculture has doubled, which has increased farmer's wages. Cash-for-works projects have built over 1000 km of rural roads and helped the irrigation systems for about 3% of the country. In addition, \$3.1 million has been given to over 100,000 farmers to be trained

¹ Schweich, Thomas A., *U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy for Afghanistan*. August 2007. Pg. 13.

² Ibid. Pg. 14.

³ Ibid. Pg. 16.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. Pg. 17.

in more efficient agricultural practices.⁶ These are only the first two pillars of Bush's counter-narcotics stratagem.

The third pillar has had a lot of emphasis under Bush; eradication was seen as the way to just wipe out poppy seed fields. Theoretically, purging the source of the problem would eliminate the problem. Authorities eradicated 15,300 hectares (Ha)⁷ in 2006 and 19,000 Ha in 2007.⁸ One basic problem with this technique⁸ is that it leads to tension between the government and the people. The former is destroying the latter's only way to feed themselves and their family. Interdiction, to cut off an enemy supply line, is the fourth pillar of this strategy. The focus of this tactic is to basically attack the trafficking rings to break them apart; it attacks the sellers of the drugs in hopes of breaking down the system and preventing money from falling into the hands of the Taliban.⁹ Finally, the fifth pillar is trying to increase law enforcement and instituting justice reforms. This would be to build up the justice infrastructure, which was nearly nonexistent during this period.¹⁰ The Five Pillar strategy was the comprehensive approach used under Bush to try and fight the narcotics trade.

There are serious problems with each aspect of this plan. The north is more successfully eliminating the poppy seed trade, but the south is still having trouble. Government Led Eradication (GLE) has been successful in Balkh and Bamyan, which are actually becoming poppy free. However, the south, especially Helmand Province, is seeing massive resistance to eradication initiatives.¹¹ There is also more security in the north, which is thought to provide the room to engage in counter-narcotics. The pillar strategy and the GLE have issues. The Taliban

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ A hectare is about 10,000 square meters.

⁸ Ibid. Pg. 18.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. Pg. 25.

counters the public information, and the U.S. utilizes it incorrectly. America tried at first to use the media rather than local leaders, which meant the people did not consider the information trustworthy.¹² The Taliban also used public information by misleadingly telling the farmers the counter-narcotics strategy was anti-poor and would eventually bring down Afghanistan.¹³ Alternative development is good in theory, but economic incentives have never successfully turned people away from a drug trade.

There is a distinct lack of political will to follow through with the eradication process, and corruption within the government allows the illicit drug trade to flourish.¹⁴ Interdiction has intercepted less than 2% of the drugs because the borders are unsecure; People freely pass through certain parts. Furthermore, the mountainous terrain is difficult to track and hunt down the traffickers that are engaging in the trade.¹⁵ Interdiction and eradication also do not account for the fact that poppy seeds can be stored for years without rotting. This is why the trade still continued when the Taliban outlawed it in 2001; the people just stored the seeds and sold them when the Taliban was overthrown. The law enforcement and justice reforms are impractical because Afghanistan does not have the judicial infrastructure to deal with high-level criminals because of the lack of laws and institutions.¹⁶

President Obama did not turn directly away from Bush's strategy, but he did guide it into a different direction with an emphasis on security and interdiction. Eradication and interdiction were never going to bankrupt the Taliban the way they were designed, and without security the people could never develop new ways to make money. Opium trade was the socio-economic-political base for Afghanistan for the past 25-30 years, and it would be difficult to imagine just

¹² Ibid. Pg. 27.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. Pg. 26.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. Pg. 27.

uprooting this overnight.¹⁷ The Taliban receive roughly \$70-100 million dollars annually from this through taxing the farmers at different levels of the market.¹⁸ It is important to note that in the last year farmers produced only 6,900 metric tons of opium, which is a decline from the previous years. However, this is not because of U.S. or Afghan policy, but because of overproduction by the farmers. As with any product, when supply increases prices decrease, which is what happened with the opium.¹⁹ These are the problems Obama had to work with when he was deciding the new policy.

The new policy would focus on security and interdiction. The complete lack of security in some areas allows the Taliban to move in and “protect” the local civilians for support.²⁰ When the government is unable to provide the security necessary, the people turn to the alternative. Therefore, Obama decided that establishing a security base was essential before moving forward in nation-building and counter-narcotics. The concept is to eliminate the Taliban and other Islamist terrorist groups so that the people can begin to develop the land and build what they need. For example, it is difficult to construct a well when surrounded by bombings and firefights. The interdiction that Obama seeks to establish would have to be incredibly selective so that the military did not overreach itself, but there would still be issues. Turf wars would inevitably arise with this solution, like they have in Mexico over the cocaine trade.²¹ In addition, interdiction depends on arresting criminals and stopping the trade, and as previously mentioned Afghanistan

¹⁷ Felbab-Brown, Vanda. *The obama administration's new counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan: its promises and potential pitfalls*. Policy Brief 171. September 2009. Pg. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. Pg. 3.

²⁰ Glaze, John A. *Opium and Afghanistan: reassessing u.s. counternarcotics strategy*. Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College. October 2007. Pg. 10.

²¹ Felbab-Brown, Vanda. *The obama administration's new counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan: its promises and potential pitfalls*. Policy Brief 171. September 2009. Pg. 6.

does not have rule of law or proper institutions to administer justice.²² Obama's current strategy also employs rural development with alternative crops like Bush's. The plan is to build more infrastructure, irrigation systems, give out more microcredit, and of course the new crops. Wheat is often given as an idea, but recently its prices were only higher than poppy seeds because of the overproduction of poppy. Also, wheat is not labor intensive and will not employ enough people. Experts have suggested various fruits, vegetables, and saffron as alternatives.²³ This is the basic outline of Obama's strategy for the region, but it does not offer effective solutions.

Even though Obama is focusing on development, security, and interdiction, eradication is still being employed. This has dangerous consequences when it actually works. In Nangahar, Gul Agha Shirzai, the governor of the province, was successful in the suppression of the poppy seed trade, and this strategy had many negative side effects. He did this by eradicating the fields and telling the people NATO would bomb any farmers cultivating poppy seeds. Although the illicit trade ended, the people became impoverished; incomes fell by 90%; they went into massive debt; and crimes increased.²⁴ The citizens in Nangahar either fled into the Helmand province to engage in poppy seed farming or they went into Pakistan where they joined the Taliban. Khogiani, Achin, and Shinwar became places that NGOs and GOA could not enter because they were radically anti-government and became safe havens for the Taliban.²⁵ The tribal leaders that supported the elimination of opium became discredited after 2005, and only a few years later, poppy seed production resumed in the province.

Solutions to the Problem

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. Pg 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

This solution comes from the International Council on Security and Development (ICSD). They created a thorough plan for addressing the poppy seed problem, which is to allow the farmers to grow poppy seeds for legal opiate production, like morphine. However, they have certain flaws in their conception, which will be discussed later. Their model starts with the village. Afghanistan is a tribal society where the village and local community are essential in life. The local people are ruled by a shura, which is similar to the Western concept of a city council. These are respected leaders within the community. This communal system is vital to the success of the model.

The ICSB starts the Poppy for Medicine idea with getting a license from an agency within the central government. To do this, the farmer would need to meet very strict criteria. They would have the unavailability of other alternative development projects, commitment of local leadership to compulsory economic diversification, strong local social cohesion, and access to a road network to transport materials, agricultural land and climate suitable for optimal medicinal poppy cultivation, access to arable land, and farming expertise.²⁶ The main argument here is that eventually the farmer would get off of poppy seeds and venture into new economic areas. This is a common theme in their report. Poppy for Medicine's idea is to have the people farm the poppy seeds and transport them to a local factory to be produced into morphine and codeine products because processed morphine sells for more than the raw seeds.

The strict oversight would begin with the shura in the community; the local government and communal atmosphere would help ensure that illegal activity was not happening. Also, the central government would establish an agency to help oversee the project with international cooperation. The goal of the international oversight is to help the farmers diversify their crops or

²⁶ Poppy for Medicine. *Licensing poppy cultivation for the production of essential medicines: an integrated counter-narcotics, development, and counter-insurgency model for Afghanistan*. The International Council on Security and Development. June 2007. Pg. 24.

economic sources.²⁷ Diversification will occur by channeling the revenues from the legal sale of poppy seeds to force them to find alternative means of support.²⁸ The authorities would punish workers that still pursued a career in drug trafficking; both the shura and central authorities would deal with this problem. The central government would track the entire harvest from cultivation to production in order to limit the illicit drug trade as much as possible, including testing the product at different phases.²⁹

There are many alleged benefits from this system, including economic and political benefits. The economic benefit is incredibly clear. With the illicit drug trade farmers would make about \$450 USD annually, while with the legal trade of morphine they could make \$917. Poppy farmers could more than double their salaries with morphine production and legally trading opium.³⁰ The government would facilitate international trade by having the state, either directly or through a company, purchase the morphine or sell it abroad. Poppy for Medicine suggests that the Afghan government purchase morphine at \$3,100 USD per kilo from the factories and then sell it abroad for \$4,300 USD per kilo. Afghanistan would not sell immediately to places like the United States and Western Europe because there is not a great enough demand.³¹ However, the target customers would be places like Latin America that do not have sufficient access to pain management drugs. Latin America consumes less than 1% of the world's morphine because of certain restrictions and high costs. In 2005, those with pain needs, mostly cancer and HIV/AIDS patients, need 7.1 metric tons of pain killers. Yet, only 600 kg were used, meaning only 9% of

²⁷ Ibid. Pg. 29.

²⁸ Ibid. Pg. 32.

²⁹ Ibid. Pgs. 36-37.

³⁰ Ibid. Pg. 45.

³¹ Peters, Gretchen. (2009). *Seeds of terror: how heroin is bankrolling the taliban and al Qaeda*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books. Pg. 227.

patients were serviced with the adequate medicine.³² Afghanistan's target market would be lower income countries; the lower cost would allow poorer countries to actually purchase necessary medication while providing increased income for rural Afghans.

There are definite benefits to the Poppy for Medicine proposal. With the eradication process advocated by so many people, the civilians are alienated and turn against the government. This is counterproductive to the US strategy to combat terrorism. Loyalty would be essential to the Poppy for Medicine project because the central government would have such a vital role to play in the whole process.³³ Afghans' lives would soon be connected to the governing body rather than to drug traffickers. By putting the project's control in the hands of the local government and leaders, corruption would be much less likely because the tribal leaders can control the group.³⁴ The local leaders who are respected would oversee the whole procedure. The last benefit is that farmers would be out from under the thumb of drug traffickers and warlords. They could support themselves and their families without having to rely on unethical people.

Poppy for Medicine has a good base from which to consider their ideas, but there is an important flaw in their proposed solution. They are right that the village and local community need to govern over the poppy seed farmers and factories because the communal nature of Afghan culture will help prevent the illicit drug trade. They were also correct in saying that one of the main problems with Afghanistan now is that the people do not consider the government legitimate; by making it appear as if the central authority is helping with the process, the

³² Poppy for Medicine. *Licensing poppy cultivation for the production of essential medicines: an integrated counter-narcotics, development, and counter-insurgency model for Afghanistan*. The International Council on Security and Development. June 2007. Pg. 89.

³³ Ibid. Pg. 64.

³⁴ Ibid. Pg. 68.

government would establish legitimacy.³⁵ In addition, it is important that they target emerging countries and that the state would do the selling to help promote costs. Otherwise, poppy seeds and morphine could be worth no more than wheat, which does not have the ability to sustain farmers financially.³⁶

The main problem with Poppy for Medicine's analyses is that they want to try to diversify Afghanistan's economy too quickly. Afghanistan could easily become for opiate-based medication what Saudi Arabia is for oil. Farmers can yield poppy seeds all over the country, and peoples will want morphine and codeine products for years to come. Currently in the United States, 1 in 30 Americans use an opiate based medicine every week.³⁷ That is only in the US. As previously mentioned with Latin America, there are millions of people throughout the world that are in need of pain management drugs. With increasing access to healthcare across the globe, soon many more people will utilize morphine and codeine to deal with painful diseases like cancer and HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, Afghanistan could easily become like Turkey, a country that turned its poppy seed production into a long-term employment and an economic solution. During the early 1970's, President Richard Nixon did not like that American soldiers in Vietnam were doing heroin, which he said came from Turkey. Originally he wanted the Turkish prime minister to eradicate the fields, but instead the leaders compromised and created the system to turn poppy seeds into medicine. Every year the Turkish government gives 100,000 farmers licenses and 600,000 people earn their living by farming poppy seeds.³⁸ These workers produce

³⁵ Starr, S. Frederick. (Ed.). (2006). *Sovereignty and legitimacy in afghan nation building*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

³⁶ Peters, Gretchen. (2009). *Seeds of terror: how heroin is bankrolling the taliban and al Qaeda*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books. Pg. 228.

³⁷ Daniloff, Caleb. (2008, October 08). America's on opioids: bu study finds one in 30 adults takes opiates for pain. *BU Today*, Retrieved from <http://www.bu.edu/today/node/7536>.

³⁸ Kammiga, Jorrit. *The political history of turkey's opium licensing system for the production of medicines: lessons for Afghanistan*. Security and Development Policy Group. http://www.poppyformedicine.net/documents/Political_History_Poppy_Licensing_Turkey_May_2006. Pg. 4.

over 75 tons of morphine every year that bring in \$60 million USD annually.³⁹ Poppy seed and morphine trade should not be seen as a short-term solution, but instead as a long term economic resource for the country of Afghanistan that would bring in revenue to help modernize the country.

The main problem with trying to implement this idea is the security of the farmers and their farms from the Taliban and other terrorists, which is something Poppy for Medicine never addresses. It is entirely possible the first year America works with the Afghan people to make morphine the Taliban could come through and burn all the fields and blow up the factories. The people would then be unwilling to work in this fashion and go back to working with the Taliban's drug traffickers. If the U.S. is unwilling or unable to bear the burden of fighting the insurgents and protecting the factories and farms, the other option would be to turn to the UN. Historically, the United Nations has had success in peacekeeping missions, most notably in Bosnia. America could ask the UN to deploy peacekeeping troops in Afghanistan to guard the factories and farms for several years until the Afghan military is able to take over operations, which as previously stated is one of the goals of nation-building in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The United States engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom after 9-11 both to punish the Taliban for protecting al-Qaeda and to liberate the Afghan people. To establish Afghanistan as a liberal, capitalistic, representative government America needs to change its current policy initiatives. In the book *The Pentagon's New Map*, Thomas Barnett argues that for a country to reach that stage, three things must happen. A country needs to establish the rule of law, create economic freedom, and allow political freedom. A country can start with any one of the three, which will eventually lead to the other two. Using this analysis, one can see how legitimizing the

³⁹ Ibid.

opiate trade in Afghanistan could lead the country to become a stable country. Political freedom is nigh impossible because the people do not see the government as legitimate, and there continues to be corruption within the election process. Establishing rule of law is also difficult because the Taliban attack from within Pakistan, which constantly disrupts people's daily lives, and narcotics traffickers cannot be prosecuted appropriately. That means economic freedom should be the starting point for Afghanistan. This can happen by allowing Afghan farmers to grow poppy seeds to make morphine and sell it in markets around the world.

Morphine sales would increase revenues for the people and the economy and would allow for economic diversification when the people start establishing a healthcare system, restaurants, and other services. It would bring in tax revenues to a desperately depleted government that could use the boost in its resources and legitimacy. Furthermore, with local villages selling the morphine to pharmaceutical companies around the world, the Taliban would be prevented from acquiring much of their financial resources, allowing the ISAF and Afghan military to establish security and the rule of law. With an economic basis, Afghanistan could transition into a liberal, capitalistic representative government with eventual changes to the political stability. In addition, as Louise Richardson argued, terrorism needs a disaffected individual, complicit society, and legitimizing ideology. Although morphine sales could do nothing about the legitimizing ideology, an economically viable country could help prevent the disaffected individual because she/he could be a productive member of society. With legal jobs, the Taliban would lose its support and the complicit society with it. Terrorism could be directly lessened by allowing the country to flourish economically with the poppy seed and morphine trade, and Afghanistan could develop into a stable and secure society.