

AFGHANISTAN 2015: THE DAWN OF A REGIONAL OPIUM WAR?

By Jorrit Kamminga and Nazia Hussain

THE SECURITY TRANSITION PLAN¹ in Afghanistan is a high-risk political game. Decreasing the presence of foreign troops is not just a military strategy; it signifies a concomitant reduction in international commitment to Afghanistan after 2014. This development could spell disaster for Afghanistan's counter-narcotics policy, which relies heavily on international donors for military infrastructure and financial resources. Much of the civilian presence in Afghanistan is expected to disappear with the military drawdown, and this could drastically reduce the resources needed to support counter-narcotics efforts. The security transition plan not only jeopardizes international support strategies but could also engender a regional opium war.

Over the past eleven years, the presence of foreign forces in the main poppy growing areas of Afghanistan has made a positive impact in two significant ways: containing the growth of illegal production and trade, and preventing violent struggle from developing among the diverse actors that retain control of this illicit economy. It has not, however, succeeded in creating the conditions to structurally decrease poppy cultivation or destabilize the opium trade. With the withdrawal of international troops and Afghan presidential elections scheduled for 2014, regional opium war seems a likely possibility. Unrestrained by international security forces, actors from across Afghanistan and Pakistan could start fighting a turf war for control of the illegal opium economy.

Cross-border dynamics between Afghanistan and Pakistan are central to understanding and addressing the problem. Both conflict and the drug trade in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan have strong linkages with Pakistan's tribal areas. For populations across the border in Pakistan, state authority often comes second to tribal and clan loyalties. In both countries, the lack of legitimate economic opportunities for impoverished

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populations makes them susceptible to direct or indirect threats of violence by criminal or insurgent groups.

The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is long, politically disputed, and difficult to control. The ethnic ties, economic links, and social interactions between people on either side of the border are important factors to consider when analyzing how drug trade functions in this region. Transnational organized crime and trafficking groups have ethnic, tribal, or extended cross-border family links that make them notable beneficiaries of the drug trade. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, more than 70 percent of Afghan opiates are trafficked via Iran and Pakistan, 40 percent through Pakistan alone.

These complex dynamics call for a coordinated regional approach to prevent the outbreak of an opium war. In 2006, roughly 70 percent of Afghanistan's opium poppy crop was grown in five provinces along the Pakistani border. The challenges and limitations of fighting a regional drug war in only one country are not unlike that of fighting an insurgency within Afghanistan that has clear cross-border linkages with Pakistan.

The role of foreign troops in Afghanistan's counter-narcotics policy has been indirect, consisting mainly of intelligence gathering, technical assistance, and coordination of logistical operations. Although the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has recently expanded its role in this field, the withdrawal of most foreign forces by 2014 will markedly reduce international resources available for Afghanistan. Perhaps more significantly, it will leave a power vacuum in strategically important areas where poppy cultivation and opium production could further increase.

Following transition, the indirect role of foreign military forces in containing the opium industry must be replaced by a reinforced civilian commitment to support counter-narcotics efforts in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The focus should be on alternative livelihoods and broader sustainable rural development within a regional context. This approach should include investment in Pakistan's border regions, particularly Baluchistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa,² an area where illegal poppy cultivation might move should law enforcement pressure increase in Afghanistan.

Many fear that military disengagement will instigate a struggle over the illegal opium economy's power structure, leading to further instability and insecurity. The security transition plan could therefore unwittingly increase transnational crime, poppy cultivation, and drug trafficking in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas. History is witness to opium turf wars erupting after periods of change. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989 is one such example; the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 is another. As NATO troops withdraw, a reinforced civilian-led counter-narcotics effort could be the only way to prevent a regional opium war from erupting after 2014. Preventing that scenario demands bold political decisions and continued support toward the Afghan government. This, however, challenges the current dominant narratives that suggest the West is on its way out. **Y**

– Denise Lim served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.

NOTES

¹ In November 2010, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in charge of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan, agreed to gradually transfer security responsibilities to Afghan security forces in five stages. This transition process will be completed by the end of 2014. By mid-2013, Afghan security forces will be in charge of security for the entire country. NATO countries will announce in the next year how they will gradually drawdown their troops in the next two years. In November 2012, the majority of the U.S. Senate voted for an accelerated drawdown and are advocating for quick troop withdrawal.

² Until 2010, this region was called North West Frontier Province.