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Afghanistan produces 92 percent of the world's opium. The drug trade channels millions of dollars to the Taliban each year.

Afghanistan: Is counternarcotics undermining counterinsurgency?

by INYOUNG HWANG

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WASHINGTON – U.S. efforts to end the drug trade in Afghanistan have set off a debate on whether cutting off a vital Taliban money source will ultimately derail the American military's counterinsurgency mission.

In February, President Barack Obama announced he would send 17,000 troops to Afghanistan, mostly to the south. The additional troops would add nearly 50 percent to the 36,000 U.S. troops who were already there. When revealing his new strategy for Afghanistan during a speech in March, Obama emphasized the need to make sweeping strategic changes in the Afghanistan war and boost U.S. presence and support in the country.

"That's how we can help the Afghan government serve its people and develop an economy that isn't dominated by illicit drugs," Obama said, "and that's why I'm ordering a substantial increase in our civilians on the ground."

The Obama administration has ramped up counterinsurgency operations – some involving military action and counterterrorist undertakings but also building the Afghan government, economy and infrastructure.

"There's a huge drug industry going from Afghanistan through Iran and into the West, and it has significant implications for Afghanistan's stability and counterterrorism," said Matthew Levitt, a director at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy who has done research on the connection between counternarcotics and counterterrorism.

But some experts take on a different view. Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the counternarcotics movement acts like a "torpedo" against the counterinsurgency mission.

"U.S. and NATO forces have to hold their noses and keep their eyes on the mission," Carpenter said.

Afghan economy and reliance on drug trade

Afghanistan produces 92 percent of the world's opium, according to UN statistics. Poppies are most common in the southern provinces, such as Helmand and Kandahar, and the drug trade channels millions of dollars to the Taliban each year. The Islamist group taxes poppy farmers and uses the money to fund equipment and training.

The Taliban outlawed poppy cultivation in 2000, but UN statistics show opium production in Afghanistan surged from 3,276 tons in 2000 to 8,200 tons in 2007.

As the drug trade strengthened the Taliban, U.S. officials sought to fight it. But they ran into obstacles because of the widespread corruption in the country and the argument that counternarcotics operations would distract military attention from the higher counterinsurgency mission.

The biggest risk in U.S. efforts to end the opium trade is alienating Afghan peasants who often turn to the Taliban to protect their poppy farms. "We're driving them into the arms of the Taliban and Al Qaeda and sacrificing the broader mission," Carpenter said.

A landlocked country, stricken by decades of conflict, Afghanistan has a GDP per capita of \$800, according to CIA figures, placing it in the bottom rung of poor countries. The country's GDP in 2008 was \$23 billion, excluding opium production. But opium is a key product and export for the country's economy, and some claim fighting the drug trade only targets Afghan farmers by depriving them of their livelihood.

Carpenter said it's not coincidental that the Taliban and Al Qaeda have their greatest influence in Helmand and Kandahar because residents who depend on the drug trade "bitterly resent the Afghan government, NATO forces and U.S. presence" for trying to curb poppy cultivation.

"One-third of the Afghan population is involved in some way with the drug trade," he said.

However, Susan Pittman, a spokeswoman for the State Department's office of Immigration, Narcotics and Law Enforcement, downplays the problem, pointing to a different figure. Only 10 percent of Afghanistan's agricultural land is used for poppy farming, she said.

The question of how involved the military should be in disrupting the drug trade is a divisive one. Some experts and officials argue peace needs to be achieved first. For a counternarcotics policy to succeed, a functional state needs to exist first. But other experts point to how intertwined the insurgency movements and the drug trade are. The Afghan government can never gain legitimacy with a rampant, corrupt opium trade in the country.

"The military is certainly there to win the war, but there are many things that have to be done to win the war, and not all of that is traditional force-on-force fighting," Levitt said.

Clash over U.S. military involvement

Since Iraq has reached a degree of stability, Obama has diverted the military's focus to Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the U.S. had relied more on coalition troops than in Iraq, but the U.S. forces stationed there have become strained in recent years.

The Pentagon was at first opposed to committing significant military attention to the drug problem. The fight against terrorism was the main mission, and the war in Iraq took priority over the war in Afghanistan.

But U.S. policy has recently shifted course, in part because of the alarmingly swift rise of the Taliban and a push from foreign nations. Halting both the opium trade and the escalation in insurgent violence in Afghanistan are important goals for the Obama administration.

"The U.S. and NATO were very reluctant to get involved, because they felt it might undermine the overall mission," Carpenter said. "But there's been a lot of domestic and international pressure to get involved, from countries where Afghanistan is the main source of heroin."

The Drug Enforcement Administration and the State Department now organize agricultural development, eradication and training programs with local Afghan officials, and the U.S. military provides added security and assistance to these projects.

DEA spokesman Rusty Payne described U.S. involvement in counternarcotics as a "joint effort" between the DEA, Afghan government and U.S. military. In addition to training Afghan "poppy police," the DEA identifies and investigates "high-value" drug trafficking organizations, and the military is particularly closely involved with tracking high-value targets involved in the opium trade.

Alternatives to poppy production

Counternarcotics operations are not just eradication, enforcement of a ban and hunting drug lords but also involve communication, education and agricultural subsidies. U.S. efforts to provide alternative aid programs in Afghanistan, such as

irrigation development, wheat cultivation and infrastructure improvements like fixing roads, may deter farmers from poppy farming.

The State Department's Pittman said in Nangarhar, where opium production decreased dramatically in 2008, part of the reason farmers were rewarded with micro-hydropower plants was for not planting poppy.

Experts say the means to a successful counternarcotics mission may not be far off from the ultimate goal of counterinsurgency. The essential components to end the drug trade are to generate economic growth and to build a political institution that instills confidence among Afghans in their government.

"The most important thing we're trying to do is help Afghanistan govern themselves," Payne said.



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