

“Role of Illicit Drugs In Changing Security Landscape of Eurasia”

(Devendra Dutt, Secretary INSA and former Member, Central Board of Excise & Customs, Government of India)

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First of all, I must thank the India Central Asia Foundation (ICAF) for having invited me to make this presentation on behalf of the Institute for Narcotics Studies and Analysis. I deem it a great privilege to address a number of experts taking part in this international conference on changing security landscape of Eurasia. While the eminent experts attending the conference are going to throw light on the various aspects of a large number of existing or potential threats to security, INSA, which I represent, is of a firm view that any discussions or debate on the subject of security would remain incomplete without taking note of how the illicit narcotics production and trade affect security. For making a holistic assessment of the reasons why the security landscape in Eurasia is undergoing change, we must have a look at the various adverse consequences of the illicit narcotics trade on sovereign nations, institutions, communities and individuals.

For decades now, the cross border drug trafficking, terrorism and insurgency have been inter-linked and have shared each other’s expertise and organizational capabilities to serve their respective purposes. Insurgent and terrorist organizations, operating nearly in all parts of the world, find drug trade to be an easy way to generate huge amounts of funds to finance their subversive activities.

A number of reports published by the UN and other governmental and nongovernmental organizations continue to warn us against the dangers drug trade poses to security of many states worldwide. We are also aware how, over a period of time, the drug lords and their cartels in some of the States in Latin America and the Caribbean became more and more daring, powerful and violent, undermining the sovereign authority of the State. Close relationship is also reported to have existed between insurgency and drug trade in Myanmar. The insurgent groups such as the Burmese Communist Party (BCP), Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the Shan United Army (SUA) controlled the opium cultivation in Myanmar for years. Other parts of the world, too, have witnessed similar problems arising out of ever-growing drug trade, albeit not in the same measure.

It is in this background that we need to examine the drug situation in Eurasia. Which of the narcotic drugs are major causes of worry in this part of the world? Where are these drugs being produced? What routes do the trafficking organizations take to ferry drugs from the production sites to final destinations? Where are the markets for these drugs? Which countries are the worst affected due to ever rising rates of incidence and prevalence of abuse of these drugs? These are only a few of the basic questions we must seek an answer to.

It is common knowledge that opium and its derivatives are the main drugs of concern in and around Central Asia. More than 90 per cent of the illicit opium produced worldwide originates in Afghanistan. The area under illicit opium cultivation in Afghanistan in 2008 was estimated to be 157,000 hectares. However, as per Afghan Opium Survey 2009, report of which was released by the UNODC on 2nd September, 2009, the opium cultivation in Afghanistan had fallen to 123,000 hectares in 2009, i.e., down by 22 percent and the total opium yield was estimated to be 6900 tons, i.e., down by 10 percent. Given that the annual *UNODC* calculated demand of opium for meeting world heroin addiction is only 5000 tons, and another 1000 tons is required to meet the demand of opium addicts, the marginal reduction in cultivation of opium will not help. Similar *UNODC reports* further indicate that there is an *improbable* stockpile of nearly 12000 tons under the control of farmers, warlords, criminal traders and insurgent groups operating in and out of Afghanistan. Only about 10 per cent of it is estimated to be with Afghan farmers and the rest is suspected to be under the control of criminals and insurgent groups.

Perhaps, these reports have to be taken with a little bit more than the proverbial pinch of salt. Such exaggerated reports seem to be based on mere hearsay. They do raise an alarm and succeed in persuading donors into funding more. If 12,000 tons is indeed the amount that is stockpiled, where is it kept? And why should they grow about 6000 tons annually if they have two years' stocks. Also, if this alarming assessment be true, it also follows that the NATO troops, and the UNODC, are not paying any attention to this problem having serious security implications. If 12,000 tons can be safely stashed away in Afghanistan and away from the eyes of the NATO and Afghan troops it does not speak well of NATO's capabilities. Don't these estimates sound like meaningless predictions by prophets of doom that deflect attention from the main problem, which just keeps increasing? Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Central Asian states and Russia continue to be hammered by a relentless onslaught of abuse of narcotics. Official reports from Iran indicate that there are about 1.2 million drug addicts in the country. The unofficial figure, however, exceeds 6 million. Tajikistan has seen its addict population increase by 1000% over the past decade. Russia is fighting an increase of about 2000% since the Soviet Union broke up. Thus, if the UNODC figures of stock piles are so dependable it would mean that a large part of the production (2 years of it) is merely being stored and not going to the consumers. If this is indeed the case, the Central Asian countries and Russia would not be racked by increasing supply and demand. These extraordinarily high percentages of increasing addiction would not have galloped to such heights if the supply was indeed restricted.

It is also felt that a large number of international, regional and national regulatory mechanisms, coupled with all the law enforcement efforts, have failed to reduce, leave aside prevent, production of large quantities of opium

and its derivatives in Afghanistan. Well entrenched criminal organizations continue to unabatedly run the entire gamut of drug trade from cultivation to refining and transportation/ distribution to consumption centres across the world. Substantially, large quantities of chemical precursors, required for processing opium into its semi synthetic derivatives, manage to reach a large number of clandestine heroin producing laboratories in and around Afghanistan. This, despite elaborate precursor control mechanisms to regulate their production, consumption and trade! It is believed that Afghanistan accounts for more than 90 per cent of the world's opium poppy cultivation. On an average, nearly 375 tons of Afghan heroin reaches the global drug markets through the Balkans and Central Asia to major heroin markets in the Russian Federation and Europe. It is now more than a hundred years that the international drug control began in Shanghai. Based upon the 'lessons learnt', the control mechanisms have been continually modified and upgraded from time to time. However, considering the current global drug situation, both on supply and demand side, one wonders whether these controls have at all been successful and, if so, to what extent and at what cost! One also wonders whether new approaches need to be explored to make a dent. A recent school of thought prefers enhanced bilateral and multilateral cooperation among states to address their common security concerns, as against the present trial and error methods adopted by the international organizations.

Drug Routes:

Let us now see what routes the traffickers take to smuggle Afghan opiates to the outside world. These opiates are smuggled out of Afghanistan through the porous borders with neighboring countries Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. Traffickers take the highways and also secondary roads to transport their consignments of contraband drugs to different destinations. As per reports, there are 14 official and nearly 500 unofficial border crossings between Afghanistan and its neighbors. As most of the cultivation of illicit poppy is reported to be in southern and western provinces of Afghanistan, there is also a considerable movement of opiates within the country, i.e., from south to north and east. I wish to enumerate a few of the important routes that the traffickers use to smuggle drugs produced in Afghanistan.

To The Islamic Republic of Iran:

Nearly forty per cent of Afghan heroin is smuggled into Iran to meet that country's local demand as well as to use its territory as a transit point for shipments (of drugs) destined to Turkey and/or Europe. Most of the shipments move from the three Afghan provinces of Hirat, Farah and Nimroz and enter Iran through its eastern borders. There are three official border crossings along the 950 Kms long border, but a much larger number, probably over a hundred unofficial crossings are also available for undetected smuggling of drugs into Iran. Some quantities of opiates are also smuggled into Iran from Pakistan through Baluchistan - Iran border.

To Pakistan:

Afghan drugs are mainly smuggled into the Federally Administered Tribal Area of Pakistan by road. The area enjoys a very high degree of independence and the Government of Pakistan has only a very little control. Of late, the insurgent groups having affiliations with the Taliban and Al Qaida are wielding considerable influence over the area making it easier to run the illegal drug trade out of FATA.

To Central Asia:

Three of the Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have common borders with the northern Afghanistan. Large quantities of drugs are smuggled through these countries, mainly through Tajikistan, for local consumption and also for destinations like Kazakhstan and Russia. As indicated, there is a manifold increase in the consumption of heroin in Russia and the main supplies are of Afghan origin.

Turkmenistan is a friendly border for smuggling. It is largely plain and also barren and deserted, opposite Herat, Badghis, Faryab and Jowzjan provinces of Afghanistan. The main routes are restricted because of inhospitable terrain and no roads, but whatever roads and routes are there in Afghanistan end up at Merv or Karki in Turkmenistan. Both places have rail connections and are also used as exit points for smuggling precursors to Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan is situated adjacent to only the Balkh province of Afghanistan. There is a very good motorable road across the border to Termez in Uzbekistan. There are a couple of reliable horse tracks too. Smuggling through the road is most common and extremely easy because of corruption.

Tajikistan, among the Central Asian States, has the longest land border with Afghanistan. It is plain only across the opium growing area of Kunduz. The rest of the bordering areas, particularly across Takhar and Badakshan are extremely mountainous and make detection of drugs extremely difficult. Panj river between Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan is also used for smuggling of drugs to Central Asia. The river is generally used at night to ferry drug shipments to avoid detection. Badakshan has a small 90 Kms. long border with Chinese Turkistan, i.e., Sinkiang and this too has recently seen heroin smuggling.

To Caucasus:

Afghan drugs also find their way to the three Caucasus countries, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia and beyond to Ukraine and Bulgaria. The route adopted is generally via Iran or Turkmenistan from where the drugs are moved to Azerbaijan or Georgia. In addition to the land routes from Iran, drugs are also smuggled through the Caspian Sea route into Caucasus. The Caucasus route, which was not so common before 2006, is now being increasingly used by traffickers. According to the Turkish Police, as informed at the meetings of the Paris Pact Initiative, a ton of heroin was seized by them in joint operations with Ukrainian and Azeri counter narcotics forces.

Opiates from Afghanistan will continue to cause major drug related problems, not only in countries in Central and West Asia, but in all those parts of the world where markets for opiates exist. The Islamic Republic of Iran records the world's highest rate of abuse for opiates. Unless effectively checked, larger amounts of sale proceeds of drugs are likely to be used for buying arms, ammunition, explosives and other materials for use by the insurgent groups that threaten the stability and security of nations across the world.

Formation of new independent states, that were once part of the former USSR, has brought with it a host of new problems. Poverty, unemployment, ethnic rivalries, economic challenges and corruption pose serious threats to the security in the region that includes Central Asia and the Caucasus. Terrorists, insurgents and extremists, looking for funds to buy weapons, will find it profitable to traffic in drugs. Consequently, there is always a possibility, for a nexus to develop between drug trafficking and insurgency. Such a nexus already exists between the Taliban, Al Qaida and drug trafficking. During the four years period between 2005 and 2008, the Taliban, reportedly, made nearly \$ 450-600 million from taxing opium cultivation and trade. \$200-400 million of drug funds per year accrued to the warlords and insurgents during 2006-2007. These estimates included incomes from four different sources: i) levies on opium farmers; ii) protection fees on lab processing; iii) transit fee on drug convoys; and

iv) taxation on imports of precursors. In its report entitled 'Addiction, Crime and Insurgency - The transnational Threat of Afghan Opium', published in October 2009, the UNODC highlights funding of a number of central Asian insurgent groups through drug money. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Party of Turkestan, the East Turkistan Liberation Organization and other extremist groups are said to be profiting from drug trade. The Executive Director warns *"if quick preventive measures are not put into place, a big chunk of Eurasia could be lost – together with its massive energy reserves."*

Another matter I would like to draw your attention to is the State sponsored narcotics trafficking. Again, this is not a new phenomenon. Some of the governments of drug producing countries have been soft towards traffickers. It is alleged that certain communist countries in past have facilitated drug trafficking. However, one has to be careful while drawing any conclusions in this regard. While mere involvement of a few corrupt officials in the government cannot be treated as an evidence to hold the State guilty of sponsoring drug trafficking, repeated and large scale involvement of officials at senior levels of law enforcement, policy making and judiciary can hardly be overlooked. Why is it that, on an average, a little more than 1 per cent of opium production only is seized in Afghanistan? Obviously, this cannot be dismissed as a case of corruption, when over 90 percent of the opium or opiates produced in the country manage to leave its borders clandestinely. The problem is much deeper. In such situations, there is a strong reason to believe existence of active connivance of the State. President Karzai's step-brother Ahmed Wali Karzai is reported to be zealously protecting drug production and traffickers. With the patronage of U.S. and Afghan governments to such elements, how can one expect the opium production to decrease?

There have been a number of instances in India where the drug traffickers were found to have smuggled drugs and weapons together. On an in-depth interrogation of the persons arrested, it was revealed that the army personnel and border guards encouraged drug traffickers to also carry weapons in consignments of contraband drugs. Such instances, too, point toward active involvement of governmental forces, which is beyond the realm of corruption by a few. Rather, it establishes involvement of the concerned State.

And then, there is yet another kind of state sponsored drug trafficking. It was reported that in early 1980's, a number of DEA officials working in Afghanistan, who tried to interdict cases of heroin trafficking, were replaced by CIA officials. It was alleged that the US Government at that point of time allowed or overlooked large scale trafficking in drugs in the region. Various sources also allege that the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has been involved in several drug trafficking operations. The CIA is accused of working with groups which it knew were involved in drug trafficking, so that these groups would provide them with useful intelligence and material support. While such an unethical practice may be in the so-called "vital national interest" of the

United States of America, this does not augur well for the ongoing international efforts of finding long term solution to the problem of drugs. If these allegations are true, there is a need to put a stop to such practices followed by a State. In other words, all types of state sponsored drug trafficking must stop.

International community, grappling with a host of problems, including terrorism and insurgency, needs to unambiguously recognize production of illicit drugs and trade as one of the serious threats to global security and address it accordingly. While it is trying do its best to tackle both supply and demand sides of the problem, considering the fact that the policies so far adopted and implemented have not produced the desired results, there may still be need to think out of box and take bold decisions.

Devendra Dutt
Secretary, INSA

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