

The Atlantic Council of Canada
2009 Undergraduate Student Essay Contest

NATO's Mission in Afghanistan:
Afghanistan's Opium Poppy Overflow

August 21 2009

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Foreword

NATO is not a world policeman, but it has proven, [a] successful track record as a catalyst for generating effective multinational forces (NATO Handbook). NATO has been embedded with many roles since its establishment in 1949. For member countries, it has the responsibility of providing greater security, increased stability and better mechanisms for handling crises. Besides its responsibilities to 28 independent members, it also stands ready to back the efforts of the international community to prevent crises and conflict, or when they occur, to prevent their spread and assist those involved by political means rather than the use of military force (NATO Handbook).

Introduction

The war in Afghanistan is in its eighth year. NATO and US coalition forces can win with tactical military battles against the Taliban but are not being successful in maintaining a strategic economic and political environment needed to overcome insurgents (Fireman). However, it has become evident that to make a decision and follow through with the process in the midst of multi-faceted corruption is extremely difficult.

Afghanistan's ongoing economic, security and political issues can be traced to the production and selling of illicit opium to such rebels as the Taliban. These fields are cropped by poor farmers that grow the opium due to the lack of any other alternative to supply income for their families. This small financial gain for each farmer fuels the corruption that prevails in the country. The Taliban buy the opium, – the raw material for heroin – sell it on the black market for greater funds, and then use this financial income to purchase weapons and artillery against peace-keeping missions. NATO's predicament stands in the examination and procedures of legalizing such a process, not-legalizing it, or promoting and actively supporting an alternative route. In this essay, I examine many proposals and speculate their decision process as to why some solutions have been used, others disregarded, and more even not looked at seriously from 2007 to the present.

2007

In 2007, NATO pinpointed that the source of the illegal opium produced in the country comes from the most southern and south-western provinces in Afghanistan. These provinces flourish and live off an overwhelming and continuously growing amount of opium poppy fields and their farmers. The astounding increase of opium production through the years can be clearly understood through a couple statistics. In 1990, Afghanistan produced 52% of the world's opium supply, after a decade in 2000 that number rose to 70%. Still growing in 2006 to 92% and since 2007 the number has been stable at 95% (Lee). I think it is safe to say that there is surely something growing at a steady rate in Afghanistan, alongside a corruptive political scene.

NATO discussed an explosively new idea with the governments of Berlin, Paris and Rome also in 2007. This proposed new idea was set on the legalization of Afghanistan's opium production. Farmers would be able to sell the raw material to officially licensed buyers for the same price they currently receive from drug barons (NATO to Legalize Afghanistan's Opium). The idea was for this product to then be ethically sold by the pharmaceutical industry for pain medication and other products. However, even though this process was initially supported, it became evident that the risk of legalizing this product would still make no difference on the drug-trafficking scale. This was due to the fact that some statesmen remain in the pay of drug barons, and the legalization of the poppy industry would solely serve their pocket and not the stabilization of its country.

NATO and its allies delayed the release of a \$475 million counternarcotics program for Afghanistan, which was set to destroy the links between drugs and drug-seekers (Lee). Such a counterdrug proposal created resistance for US officials and NATO alike. If the amount of poppy field destruction increased in provinces that grow the most, this approach would link millions of dollars in the development aid for arrests, prosecutions of narco-traders, corrupt officials on turn them to the option of an alternative crop production (Lee). This proposal was however delayed, due to the risk of raids within the farmer community. If NATO disposed of the sole income for farmers, they would surely join the extremists, supplying them with no more drugs but a human force. The positive side to this proposal was that in the long run, new roads, other infrastructure, schools and hospitals would become powerful tools to combat the narco-trade once effectively constructed.

2008

In my opinion, the most potentially successful plan for fighting with corruption within Afghanistan's borders came from two Afghan-American brothers in 2008. Yosuf and Abdul Mir had a factory in Kandahar and planned to give opium farmers incentive to grow another crop, such as cotton instead. Whether it was opium or cotton, if the way was very similar, farmers would have another option as to how to feed their families without guilt on their shoulders. The Mir brothers wanted to start from the very source of the problem, the plants of Afghanistan itself.

For 2 whole years Yosuf and Abdul pleaded US officials for a \$1.5 million grant for this project which would transform their factory into a plant and open 18,000 jobs (Fireman). This project would also guarantee the cotton and wool market for local farmers instead of the unethical opium option. Slowly but effectively this could have been the first major step to removing their country from its corruptive streak. The Mir brothers argued that this would "mesh" well with the \$1 billion-a-year American opium eradication plan (Fireman).

Unfortunately, the final decision against funding the cotton proposal was made still in the same year. Barnett Rubin, and expert on Afghanistan at New York University stated that "it is a remarkable example of the failure to align our tools with strategy", in a testimony to the House Armed Services Committee (Fireman). This decision was mainly made by US officials, however passing by the approval of NATO. The sole reason I find for possibly not funding such a project, would be that Afghan cotton would then be competing with American cotton or its supply. Even though Mir assured that they will not be sending cotton to the USA, Congress put a ban on supporting such a competitive product (Fireman).

2009

In January of 2009, the war in Afghanistan was still not going well for NATO and its allies, and new strategies were being examined. The international index measuring corruption throughout the world places Afghanistan in 176th place out of 180 (Debusmann). The country in 180th place is Somalia. The second statistic measures the producers of illicit raw materials produced within countries. Without question, without surprise, Afghanistan rests in the 1st place as the largest producer of illegal opium (Debusmann). The production and selling of the raw material for heroin to Taliban and Al Qaeda extremists just fuels the strongest and most prominent criminal elements in the country.

At the same time in 2009, two more possible solutions to the opium problem in Afghanistan surfaced. The first might sound familiar and came under the initiative of James Nathan, a political science professor at Auburn University and former State Department official. Nathan argued that the most efficient and quickest way to tackle the stable problem would be for the US or NATO to buy up the entire Afghan opium crop (Nathan). This would not only end the opium production if the plan was executed properly, but would also secure the decline in poppy fields until there would only be a controlled amount.

Nathan's plan was estimated to cost between \$2 and \$2.5 billion per year (Nathan). This sum, as overwhelming as it sounds, is petty money compared to the \$200 billion each US taxpayer has already spent on the conflicts in Afghanistan through the years (Nathan). This plan was delayed, and currently hangs in limbo as government officials debate its possible effectiveness and the worst situations it could produce. I think that since such similar alternatives are surfacing every year, it would be a good idea for NATO to take less of a passive role when these suggestions arise, and seriously debate its pros and cons with US officials.

The next, a more humble solution arose by a European research group called the International Council on Security and Development. Their proposal argued that granting international license to poppy farmers in Afghan villages, allowing them to grow opiate-based medicines like morphine or codeine would be viable way to approach the problem (Debusmann). This program would allow Afghans to produce opium legally, alongside the Turkish, Indian and Australian model of legal drug production. Earlier this year, the US State Department disposed this idea, stating that it was not a very thought-out idea and that creating a workable legal system in such a corruptive environment like Afghanistan is close to impossible at this point. The ban to this solution can be understood at this point of time, as smaller measures need to be taken first before trying to stabilize an entire country.

Back in October of 2008, NATO defence ministers authorized troops in Afghanistan to launch direct attacks on the drug trade (Gul). This tactic was not only the dangerous way to approach a peace-keeping mission, but it also was also not put into action. Since that day, no public reports of this order being implemented arose. Now in February of 2009, NATO and coalition forces have the means, new proposals as how to approach this already eight year project. By hitting convoys, killing drug traffickers, bringing more troops, there is much risk to the safety and security of NATO and all siding countries. A more peaceful, safer and more incognito approach to start from the basics and work upward would be the solution that the Mir brothers suggested back in 2006-2008.

The most updated report that I went through of NATO's activities within the Afghanistan drug-trafficking sphere is as of June 2009. NATO's International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) magazine titled *Mirror*, stated that NATO and Afghan forces have joined to eradicate all poppy fields by encouraging wheat farming, starting in Bala Baluk in the Farah province (Durkin).

This decision to start in a tumultous part of Afghanistan itself is probably the best way to begin to target the individuals, farmers, and those responsible for the growing and trading of the illicit heroin. Interviewed farmers stated that they would stop growing opium if they would have a secure, and still high paying other option. The opium farming industry raises economic, security and economic problems throughout the country (Fireman). NATO and US officials have realized the importance of starting from within

the problem itself, since it will be easier to conquer the conflict if the fight starts right from the very centre.

The biggest issue is providing poor farmers with an alternative crop to grow, safely and as productively as opium. The new strategy includes starting to investigate and already look on site where to buy fields and start plants of wheat, cotton, melon, pomegranate and corn, for example (LeCron). The easiest is to approve of a solution but to make it become an active solution is what NATO should continue to make its priority.

Conclusion

Afghanistan has proven to have the means and the fertile land to produce up to 95% of the world's opium. This also means that if Afghanistan can grow poppies, it should also be able to grow alternative crops, due to the richness of their land. NATO's current fight is with Afghanistan's corruptive economic and political system which includes the production and distribution of illicit drugs. Because this war has been going on for eight years now, it's evident that a multi-faceted approach needs to be taken when minding the goal of constructively helping Afghanistan and its people. There is still great hope that NATO and its allies will be able to bring Afghanistan, such a conflicting country, to a much more stable and secure economy by working with its statesman and slowly manipulating corruptive industries into an ethical direction.

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