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Newport, R.I.**

**THE OPIUM OF AFGHANISTAN:
THE TALIBAN CENTER OF GRAVITY**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract

Control of the opium driven economy of Afghanistan has allowed the Taliban to endure in a protracted conflict against the United States military. Employment of military force against the Taliban has thus far failed to establish a secure government in Afghanistan or remove the Taliban as a relevant threat. This paper points to the Taliban control of the narco-economy of Afghanistan as the adversary's center of gravity. This illicit activity both exploits the corruption resident in the current government and provides an enduring source of sustainment for continued conflict. Initial efforts to curb the opium trade were comprised of strictly law enforcement undertakings. This paper will reframe the issue in terms of operational art and explore a military approach to the problem as a potential path to victory.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2001, the United States, with numerous coalition partners, has attempted to remove the Taliban from effective control of Afghanistan and to marginalize their capabilities to influence the local populace. Despite efforts over the better part of a decade to remove them, the Taliban remain an active, and now numerically resurgent,¹ threat to coalition efforts. Planners and historians may well ask how an underequipped adversary has been able to sustain itself in the face of such a superior force. Theater commanders and their staffs planned to forcibly remove the Taliban from governmental control. Initial endeavors were traditional applications of military power to influence the ruling party of a nation. It was state on state conflict. The Taliban, however, remain a threat even after being deposed in 2001. Though the Taliban are no longer the ruling governmental regime, they continue to influence the situation in Afghanistan. Military analysis affords benefit in what may be now viewed as a nontraditional context. Traditional assessment of critical strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and the subsequent determination of an enemy center of gravity, is still necessary to identify proper courses of action in such a new context. This paper will present one potential construct to the key to ultimate victory in Afghanistan: The center of gravity for the Taliban is control of the narco-economy of Afghanistan.

The United States Government has recognized the issue posed by the opium economy yet it has been couched as a strictly law enforcement issue. The effects of the opium trade, however, are not solely relegated to the arena of law enforcement but have far reaching impact on the achievement of specific military goals. This paper will illustrate the unique cultural and economic factors that should be considered to achieve coalition goals in

¹ Sultan Barakat and Steven Zyck, "Afghanistan's Insurgency and the Viability of a Political Settlement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33, no. 3, <http://proquest.com> (accessed 12 March 2010).

Afghanistan. Additionally, it will contrast initially counterproductive attempts to deal with the problem, while providing a construct which should be considered as a way ahead.

THE TALIBAN HISTORY OF OPIUM

The commander needs to understand the historical connection between the Taliban and the poppy. Such an understanding may not be obvious given the zealous religious rhetoric surrounding the conflict. A 2008 USAID article states that “poppy cultivation is prohibited in Islam.”² This statement may lead some to deduce that all Islamic groups have universally decried the cultivation of poppy on religious grounds. This is not the case. The Taliban have eluded the patently Islamic prohibition of illicit substances³ by enforcing a ban on personal use, but not cultivation.⁴ In fact, Gretchen Peters, a reporter who has covered the regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan for more than a decade, claims the Taliban used opium profits to fund a conflict against the Northern Alliance and eventually “turned Afghanistan into the world’s first fully fledged narco-terror state”.⁵ The Taliban exerted increasing control of the opium trade, a control which in 1997 reached its zenith when an estimated 96 percent of the opium produced in Afghanistan was cultivated under areas in Taliban control.⁶

In 1997 Taliban officials made the first overt anti-opium gesture by partnering with the United Nations in a purported effort to stem the tide of opium and publicly banning opium use and cultivation.⁷ This proclamation seemed to reverse the previous permissive view of cultivation but to little effect. There was no significant decrease in production. A

² United States Agency for International Development, “From Opium to Onions” December, 2008. <http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Article.493.aspx> (accessed 27 March 2010).

³ Qu’ran 5:9

⁴ Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror*, (New York, NY: St. Martins, 2009) 68.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Seth Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2008). 80. <http://www.rand.org/> (accessed 21 February 2009).

⁷ Peter Willems, “UN Team up with the Taliban to End Opium Production,” *Middle East*, April 1998, 11.

total of 2,693 metric tons were produced in 1998 compared to 2,804 in 1997.⁸ Similarly, a total of 4,565 metric tons was produced in 1999, an increase of more than 60 percent.⁹ The Taliban had demonstrated unwillingness or an inability to enforce any meaningful ban on opium. This historical foundation illustrates the immutable link between the Taliban and what has historically been a major source of revenue. Commanders and planners should recognize this link in determining prudent courses of action aimed at degrading the sphere of influence the Taliban exercise.

Center of Gravity

Determination of enemy center of gravity is critical to crafting an operational plan. The doctrinal definition of center of gravity is “the set of characteristics, capabilities and sources of power from which a system derives its moral or physical strength, freedom of action, and will to act.”¹⁰ The planner, to ascertain the center of gravity under this definition, must identify the objectives, relative strengths and weaknesses, and critical capabilities at play. General Stanley McChrystal, Commander International Security Forces and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, has stated the objective: it is “the will of the people of Afghanistan.”¹¹ The objective is to have the people of Afghanistan committed to the establishment of a stable government and to national security. American and coalition forces must be seen as stabilizers and the Taliban as disruptors to that security. The long term strategic goal of the Taliban is to institute a theocracy in Afghanistan. This does not seem to be immediately tenable. Taliban forces, however, continue to aggressively and effectively oppose efforts

⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2009 Summary Findings” 16. (New York, NY: UN, 2009).
http://www.unodc.org/documents/cropmonitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2009_summary.pdf
(accessed 21 February 2010)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Operations, Department of Defense Joint Publication 5*, (Washington, DC: DoD, 2006) IV-8.

¹¹ Gen. Stanley McChrystal, *ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance*, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2009.

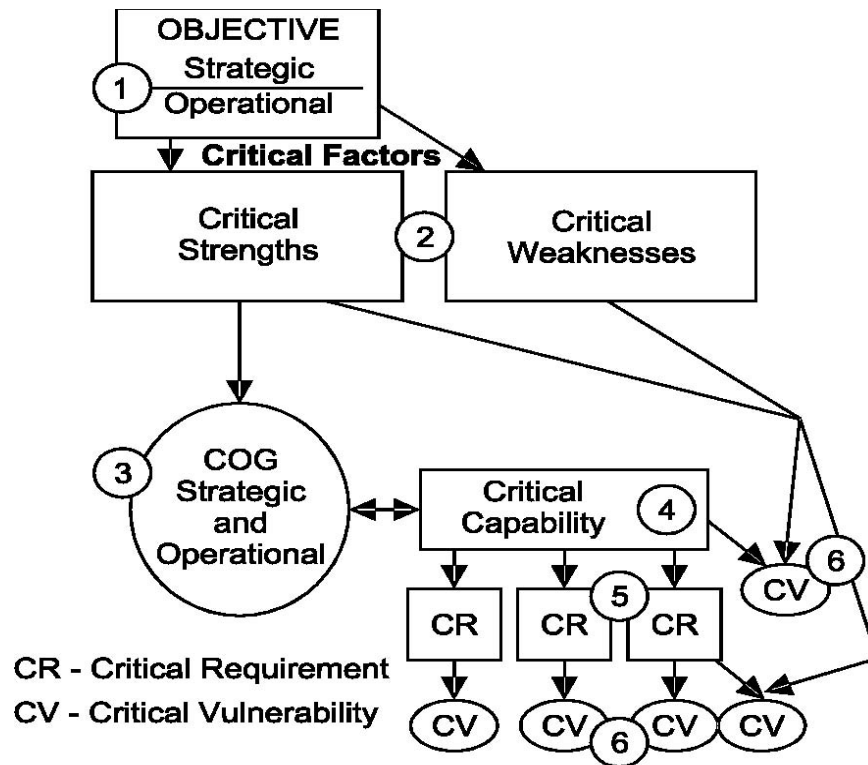


Figure 1. Reprinted from Joint Operational Planning Process Workbook Annex C, Naval War College, 21 January 2008

to provide stability for the country under the current regime. There is no Taliban literature which would capture their efforts in operational art terms, but the operational objective of the Taliban may be understood as a desire to exercise the maximum level of control in Afghanistan and oppose any effort not in line with Taliban ideology.

After establishing a working hypothesis of the objective of the Taliban, the planner must determine what critical factors make Taliban objectives attainable. The Taliban are under-armed and undertrained relative to the military force opposing them and there is no apparent comparatively superior military capability that allows the Taliban to thrive. A thorough study yields very few examples of Taliban forces successfully engaging in a conventional tactical engagement with Coalition forces. In spite of this, the Taliban have

demonstrated tremendous resiliency in enduring such a protracted conflict. A critical strength of the Taliban is the ability to avoid unwanted troop on troop engagement; to continue to operate as an insurgent guerilla force. Lacking comparable military capability, the Taliban have effectively camouflaged and moved among the populace.

In addition to the ability to blend into the social fabric of Afghanistan, another critical factor is the ability to financially endure. The United States spends an estimated \$3.6 billion a month in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.¹² It is difficult to know how much money is required for the Taliban to continue to fight but opium appears to be a major source of financial support even with the Taliban officially out of power. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that 98% of all the opium in Afghanistan is produced in seven provinces; areas where the Taliban are at their strongest and possess permanent settlements.¹³ Control of opium is the critical strength that defines the Taliban center of gravity.

Afghanistan's opium trade is estimated to comprise a total equivalent to 53% of the country's GDP,¹⁴ providing more money than all other parts of the economy combined. Narcotics yield the Taliban \$100 million a year in direct profit, and likely much more when combined with the associated activities of taxes on product, tolls for smugglers and protection schemes directed at opium farmers.¹⁵ Without such a robust funding source, it is unlikely that the Taliban would have the financial resources to continue to fight. Opium

¹² Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2006), 9. (accessed 21 February 2010).

¹³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008 Summary Findings" 3. (New York, NY: UN, 2008).

¹⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Opium Amounts to Half of Afghanistan's GDP in 2007, Reports UNODC," <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/opium-amounts-to-half-of-afghanistans-gdp-in-2007,-reports-unodc.html> (accessed 25 February 2010).

¹⁵ Thomas Duncan, "Opium---The Fuel of Instability: Why the military must be Involved in the Solution and Recommendations for Action," (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army Command and General Staff College, 2007), 10.

provides sustainment for the insurgency and enables the Taliban to endure over the course of such a protracted conflict.

Just as opium has been used to fund the Taliban in the past, it appears that opium will fund the Taliban in the future. While the United States Government will likely continue to spend billions of dollars a year to fund operations in Afghanistan, the Taliban have quietly stockpiled opium. British forces in the town of Musikalia, in Helmund province, uncovered a 45 ton stockpile of opium along with a major weapons cache.¹⁶ This combination of weapons and opium is not coincidental and underscores the connection between insurgency and drugs. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that illicit drug stockpiles may now have reached some 10,000 metric tons, “enough to satisfy two years of world (heroin) addiction, or three years of medical (morphine) prescription.”¹⁷ It is impossible to know with any degree of certainty what percentage of all the stockpiles in the country are exclusively controlled by Taliban forces, but one may logically deduce, given the historical connection between the Taliban and the opium trade, a substantial portion of the profits garnered by illicit drug activity will inevitably fall into Taliban hands. The enormity of estimated stockpiles, and potential financial gain, represent a significant component of long term Taliban sustainment that should be addressed in operational planning.

The enormous influence of the narco-economy goes well beyond the first order gains from opium sale. One of the defining characteristics of a center of gravity is a “source of leverage.”¹⁸ This is tied inexorably with the objective of the military commander. If the objective is, as General McChrystal states, “the will of the people of Afghanistan,” the source

¹⁶ Vivienne Walt, “Is the Taliban Stockpiling opium? And if so Why?” *Time*. 29 October, 2008. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1854660,00.html> (accessed 8 March 2010).

¹⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2009 Summary Findings,” iii.

¹⁸ Joint Publication 5-0. IV-9.

of economic leverage for the Taliban competing for the same objective must be obviated. An ineffective government will serve as a major obstacle to garnering the trust of the people and establishing the stability of the nation of Afghanistan. A corrupt government financially vested in the very illicit trade it purports to combat may not prove an effective agent in combating narcotics. Moreover, it is possible government officials will be beholden to the people who control drug profits.

Corruption at virtually all levels of government in Afghanistan remains a stark reality and Afghanistan has consistently been recognized as a country succumbing to greater degrees of corruption. In 2005, Afghanistan ranked as the 43rd most corrupt government, the eight such government in 2007, and in 2008 ranked as the fifth most corrupt country in the world.¹⁹ While this statistic may be sobering, it is not surprising given the extraordinarily profitable drug trade. Corruption at the local level has led some Afghanistan law enforcement officials to devise a system to categorize the potential profitability of the nation's provinces. The substantial bribes required to gain appointment to these provinces pale in comparison to the profits to be realized once in a position of authority.²⁰ One Eastern Afghanistan border commander was reported to have made \$400,000 a month from narcotic related activity.²¹ These figures would account for huge sums of money in any region, but it is important to note the Afghanistan per capita GDP in 2007 was an estimated \$800 US. Haiti, by way of

¹⁹ United States Agency for International Development, *Assessment of Corruption in Afghanistan*, (Washington DC: Chechi and Company Consulting, 2009) 4. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADO248.pdf (accessed 17 February 2010).

²⁰Anthony Lloyd, "Corruption, Bribes and Trafficking: a Cancer that is Engulfing Afghanistan," *Times Online* Nov 24, 2007. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article2933472.ece> (accessed 25 February 2010)

²¹Ibid.

comparison, had a GDP of \$1,300 and Pakistan \$2500.²² Widespread corruption of local officials pollutes effective governance and allows criminals to thrive.

The elements of narcotic driven corruption are not limited to rural areas. They have permeated all levels of government. Izzatullah Wasifi, the current Afghanistan governmental anti-corruption chief, was arrested and convicted of a drug related offence in Nevada in 1987. Wasifi attempted to sell an estimated \$2 million worth of heroine to an undercover agent.²³ The Afghan Government is rampant with drug driven corruption. The Taliban control of the drug industry enables influence of government officials, and by extension the national rule of law. Ultimately, control of opium allows the Taliban, while not officially in power, to exert a measure of control over the government and, by extension, the populace. In joint doctrinal terms, this control is a critical capability to act as an insurgent guerilla force.

Courses of Action

Critical capabilities afford a way to get at the center of gravity. Any characteristic that enables Taliban objective attainment, irrespective of the relative strength or weakness of that characteristic, is a potential target. Figure 1 illustrates the method to derive points of emphasis for operational planning and has been used in traditional high intensity conflicts. High intensity conflicts lend themselves to identification of more traditional, concrete adversary attributes for large scale military operations against state actors. Low intensity conflicts generally consist of more tactical actions, with elements that are perhaps less definitively military in nature.²⁴ As the current conflict does not fit a state-on-state

²² CIA World Factbook. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2004.html?countryName=Afghanistan&countryCode=af®ionCode=sas> (accessed 23 February 2010).

²³ Matthew Pennington, "Afghan anti-corruption chief is a convicted heroine trafficker," *USA Today*, 9 March 2007. http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-03-09-afghan-corruption_N.htm (accessed 8 March 2010).

²⁴ Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2009), V-7.

paradigm, there may be risk of discounting the same analysis and planning procedures. This should not be. Planners and commanders should understand that the same process is equally applicable across the spectrum of conflict intensity. The tenets remain valid.

The United States Government initially recognized the threat posed by the narco-economy of Afghanistan but it was not identified as a military issue. In 2005, the U.S. developed a five pillared strategy consisting of (1) alternative livelihoods (2) eradication (3) interdiction (4) law enforcement and justice reform and (5) education.²⁵ This strategy provided a broad course of action to an overarching narcotic problem but did not properly identify the nexus of narcotics and insurgency nor did it provide for a military course of action against the opium industry. While elements of this strategy cross over into various lanes of operation of a number of agencies and coalition partners, military forces in theater have a primary role to play in counter-narcotics efforts. The destruction (eradication) of crops and interception (interdiction) of crops are two areas that will be explored. Analysis of these two pillars must be made against the unique socio-economic backdrop of Afghanistan that provides the framework for the conflict.

Efforts directed toward eradication have been not only ineffective, but also counterproductive. In 2009 the Obama administration announced a shift in focus away from the five pillar strategy,²⁶ recognizing the futility of eradication, but the damage had already been done and the repercussions are still being felt. Eradication had been the most controversial of the stated strategic objectives. This is for good reason. Opium is, and has been for quite some time, an intrinsic component of the economy of Afghanistan. It dwarfs

²⁵ Government Accountability Office, *Afghanistan Drug Control* (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 2006), 2-3.

²⁶ Rachel Donadio, "U.S. Plans New Course for Antidrug Efforts in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 28 June 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/28/world/asia/28holbrooke.html>, (accessed 22 February 2010).

all other elements of agriculture in profitability. This, combined with limited alternatives for sustenance, is a powerful enticement for cultivation. Simply put, many people grow it and will continue to grow it in order to survive. These are the same people whose will General McChrystal has identified as the objective for military forces operating in Afghanistan.

The United Nations estimates that a total of 10,000 hectares of opium were eradicated between 2007 and 2009, a mere 4% of the total amount planted.²⁷ Helmund province alone produced a total of more than 200,000 hectares of opium, more than ten times the amount eradicated, in a similar two year period.²⁸ Such a small reduction of opium crop is unlikely to have any substantial effect upon the opium trade as a whole but was perhaps inevitable given the enormous resources that would be required to eradicate a crop that is so widely cultivated across a country the size of Afghanistan.

The now defunct five pillar plan was actually created due to the frustrating ineffectiveness of eradication. According to a report of the Government Accountability Office, in the two year period from 2002-2004 the United States provided approximately \$380 million for counter-narcotic efforts, including eradication, in the country.²⁹ The United States failed to garner any significant return on this initial investment and so the five pillar strategy was adopted. The GAO report highlighted serious infrastructure limitations that precluded successful eradication but did not address the basic pragmatic flaw of the practice of eradication itself. At the root of the theory, eradication presumes that if sufficient pressure is placed on the farmers, the peasants, who seek to grow a crop that provides the most plausible source of revenue for survival, they will turn to other crops. There was a lack of

²⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2009 Summary Findings," iii

²⁸ Ian Livingston and Heather Messera, *Afghanistan Index-Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post 9/11 Afghanistan*, Brookings Institute Report (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2010). (accessed 22 March 2010). 4.

²⁹ Government Accountability Office, *Afghanistan Drug Control*, 8.

forethought given to the other effects of such a policy. Policy makers did not fully realize the people of Afghanistan would identify Americans, specifically American military forces, as the executors of a policy that deprived them of their livelihood. Eradication has not failed to significantly remove opium from the fields of Afghanistan but has fueled the insurgency.

The subsequent and inevitable effect of the prosecution of eradication operations is that it has aligned the farmers of Afghanistan with the Taliban. Taliban warlords and their government cronies oppose eradication and exploit eradication efforts to find common ground with the farmers who feel the adverse effect of the destruction of their crop. This uneasy but perhaps unavoidable alliance between the populace and insurgent groups has led to identification of Afghan and U.S. government personnel as the enemy. John Lee Anderson, in his article entitled “The Taliban’s Opium War: Letter from Afghanistan”³⁰ recounts the interaction of local Afghani farmers with members of governmental eradication personnel and American contractors. Shortly after eradication in a village in the Panjshir province commenced, a local farmer said to some of the Americans, “We’re poor—we’re not with the Taliban or anything. You’ve made a big mistake. Now we will have to grow more against you. I have to feed my children.”³¹ While anecdotal, it is specifically this sentiment, the need to feed one’s children, which creates such a polarizing view in the minds of the people: The Taliban would allow a farmer to grow opium to feed his family, and the American outsiders would let a family starve.

Communities that are historically inhospitable to the Taliban but reliant on cultivation of opium have felt this dilemma. Several of these provinces have experienced robust Taliban mobilization and have become “no go zones” for Afghanistan Government personnel and

³⁰ Jon Lee Anderson “The Taliban’s Opium War: Letter from Afghanistan.” *The New Yorker*, 83, no 19. (July 2009): 60. (accessed 16 March 2010 via proquest).

³¹ Ibid.

non-government organization due to safety constraints.³² In addition to the Taliban rise to prominence in these areas, the intelligence function is also likely to suffer as it relies heavily on the local populace. Eradication not only produced inconsequential results, but drove a wedge between the poor farmer and forces undertaking the practice. Such a policy allowed the Taliban to further leverage the critical strength of opium control.

Eradication has not been the only means by which coalition forces attempt to disrupt the opium trade. The Obama Administration has phased out the aggressive eradication policies that had undermined attempts to capture the will of the people of Afghanistan, but interdiction rightfully remains a part of the current counter-narcotic strategy in the country. This effort both shields the general populace from a wage depriving practice and disrupts Taliban revenue. Interdiction has historically been a function of law enforcement agencies and has had limited direct military involvement. This will be shown to have failed to produce unity of effort.

The U.S efforts for counter-narcotic operations have fallen under the purview of the U.S. State Department.³³ Under the direction of the State Department, a host of various governmental agencies perform the daily duties of, among other things, interdiction. While the Department of Defense has been a supporting entity to agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Agency, the U.S. military has sought to defer aspects of this role to civilian agencies and has eschewed direct involvement. More than this, military and counter-narcotics objectives were frequently viewed in competitive terms in an area of limited resources. A Congressional study revealed that the Drug Enforcement Agency had requested

³² Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Testimony," Senate, *US Counternarcotics Strategy in Afghanistan*, 111th Cong., 1st sess., 2009. <http://drugcaucus.senate.gov/hearingindex.html> (accessed 20 March 2010).

³³ Thomas Schweik, comp. *US Counternarcotics Strategy for Afghanistan*, (Washington DC: Department of State, 2007), <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/90671.pdf> . 21. (Accessed 4 March, 2010).

military airlift support for Afghanistan missions 26 times in 2005 and received support for only three.³⁴

The largest constraint faced by governmental agencies in prosecution of counter-narcotic targets is one of resource availability. Afghanistan's size, coupled with its lack of infrastructure, demands conscious allocation of significant resource dedicated to interdiction. Lieutenant General Hadi Khalid, Afghan Deputy Minister from 2006 to 2008, exclaimed in frustration during an interview, "So now the MOI (Ministry of Interior) Forces have a total of two helicopters to police the entire country!"³⁵ The government of Afghanistan is not currently an institution that can stabilize the country. The belief that it can, in the words of Seth Jones of the Rand Corporation, "is a Western concept and is ahistorical."³⁶ Afghanistan requires significant assistance to achieve stability and security. If a policy of interdiction is to be undertaken, and if such an effort is to be successful, the U.S. military must be included because it is the only agency or department with the sufficient resources to do the job. The Drug Enforcement Agency is expected to have a total of 81 agents in Afghanistan in 2010³⁷ compared to more than 100,000 U.S. and NATO military personnel. No other agency is comparable to the military in terms of manning and resourcing.

Ultimately, the discussion centers not only on the control of the means for counter-narcotic operations, but also on the ends as they relate to military objectives. Eradication has been widely if not universally accepted to be of little positive effect, and is accepted as a

³⁴ Peters, *Seeds of Terror*, 186.

³⁵ Derek Henry Flood, "At the Center of the Storm: An Interview with Afghanistan's Lieutenant General Hadi Khalid-Part Two," *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 28 (September 2009). http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35480&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=26&cHash=b4f1f284f7 (accessed 17 February 2010).

³⁶ Seth Jones, "Testimony," *Stabilization from the Bottom Up*, Commission of Wartime Contracting, Feb 22, 2010. http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/2010/RAND_CT340.pdf (accessed 16 March 2010).

³⁷ Josh Meyer, "U.S. increasing counter-narcotics effort in Afghanistan," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July, 2009. <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jul/20/world/fg-dea-afghan20?pg=2> (accessed 22 Feb 2010).

causal factor for Taliban resurgence. Commanders must utilize other means to disrupt Taliban monies. Interdiction is one several available options. The military need not only be ready to lend resources to other agencies but the efforts of these other governmental agencies must be nested with overarching military objectives. Military forces control the preponderance of personnel and resources in Afghanistan, but cooperative employment with other agencies will achieve unity of effort. Failure to achieve unity of effort will allow opium to continue to fuel the Taliban.

It would be simplistic to argue the inevitable success of a focused effort of interdiction. It is difficult to manage. The factors of space and available force to police such a large area provide no such guarantees. An educated planner must balance these factors as he or she balances them in any planning effort. Interdiction, like any other military mission, has varying degrees of importance based on the immediate objective but should be recognized as a vital component of an operational plan.

Interdiction is difficult to manage but is not untenable. Targeting medium and high level traders not only removes the threat of engendering hostility of the local populace trying to survive, it also produces a more refined and manageable target list. The number of low level dealers and traders is quite large, but the tiers of the opium economic system in Afghanistan are so steep that there are few top level distributors. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that there are no more than two top tier dealers in each province³⁸ and that an estimated 70% of drug trafficking takes place along main roads, to

³⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Monitoring of Drug Flow in Afghanistan," (New York, NY: UNODC, 2007). 10.
http://www.unodc.org/documents/afghanistan/Counter_Narcotics/Drug_flow_final_report_SR.pdf (accessed 16 March, 2010).

include main border crossings.³⁹ These facts illustrate the more optimistic prospects of being able to properly identify areas of focus for interdiction efforts. Coordinated efforts of military forces and the intelligence community directed at capture of stockpiles like the one in Musikalia would ultimately be crippling long term Taliban success. There are large stockpiles, relatively few individuals who control opium at the top levels and the few major roads serve as the primary means of conveyance. Sustained and successful interdiction is a real possibility.

Military forces are a critical requirement for any successful interdiction campaign, regardless of which agency takes the lead for such activity. Civilian agencies, as well as Afghan National Police Forces, simply do not have the resources available to patrol the country. Similarly, no agency has the ability to adequately deal with the volatile nature of interdiction in Afghanistan without the military establishing an appropriate level of security. As stated, the objectives of counter-narcotics are linked to those of the military. A large cache discovered in the contested town of Marjah illustrated these complimentary objectives. The Marines in Marjah found a collection of opium, guns and improvised explosive devices (IED's) which caused a counter-narcotics agent to remark, "If anybody needed proof that there was a nexus between Taliban and drug traffickers, this was it."⁴⁰

Military planners who pessimistically dismiss interdiction as a viable option also dismiss one of the few available options to disrupt the steady stream of cash to the Taliban. Professor James Fearon, of Stanford University, conducted a study in 2004 to answer the

³⁹ Ibid, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Tim McGirk, "Drug Trade Complicates U.S. Task in Marjah," *Time*, Mar 6 2010. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1970017,00.html?xid=rss-topstories> (accessed 19 March 2010).

question “Why do some civil wars last so much longer than others?”⁴¹ While his findings focused on areas other than Afghanistan, the conclusions are applicable.⁴² Of 128 conflicts surveyed, the average duration of conflict was 8.8 years. By comparison, the average conflict wherein groups were able to successfully leverage illicit contraband⁴³ was an astounding 48.2 years.⁴⁴ Control of illicit economies often provides the source of longevity, the strategic source of power, for guerilla and insurgent factions to long endure. Relegation of opium control to strictly law enforcement agencies without tying these efforts to an operational scheme will fail to achieve long term successes in elimination or marginalization of the Taliban. Military objectives will not be achieved without addressing the opium problem.

Opposing Viewpoints

Some would argue that the military should not be heavily involved in law enforcement activity, not only from a charter perspective, but also stemming from the fact that the typical soldier is insufficiently trained in such a unique skill set. The process of planning and prosecuting law enforcement operations may be analogous to military action, but not identical. Skeptics may claim that sufficient differences exist as to require professional law enforcement agencies and their respective agents to be the sole element of interdiction efforts.

⁴¹ James Fearon, “Why do some civil wars last so much longer than others?” *Journal of Peace Research*, 2004, 41, no. 3 pg. 275. (accessed 14 March 2010 via proquest).

⁴² For purposes of the study, the operative definition of state agents fighting non-state groups who sought to either take control of a government, take power in a region, or use violence to change government policy. Such an operating definition includes the conflict in Afghanistan and is not particular to large, conventional civil wars.

⁴³ *Illicit contraband* were those items traded illegally such as opium, coca or diamonds depending upon the geographical region.

⁴⁴ Fearon, *Why do some wars last so much longer than others*, 284.

In addition to the issue of who should carry out the interdiction role, there is the question of its viability. As stated, the size of the country combined with the lack of infrastructure make the space-force dilemma nearly immutable. Some would argue that the diversion of forces from realistic targets to an effort that is unable to make an immediate difference is a poor use of the assets in theater. More than that, interdiction at a time when opium prices have dropped could rejuvenate a cultivation of opium. Opponents of military involvement in counter-narcotics efforts argue commanders should focus on those areas that are traditionally tied to military forces.

While rational people may maintain these perspectives, the counterpoints do not negate the need for military assistance in the interdiction arena. Civilian agencies like the DEA rightfully retain the overall lead in these efforts. Military commanders need to realize the linkage between reduction of the drug effort and long term goals. Such analysis should lead to resources and personnel being given to assist DEA efforts to achieve military goals. Similarly, the interdiction mission needs to be undertaken with a synchronized focus on alternative livelihoods with crops such as wheat to stem the tide of Taliban control over the farmer. In a time when the cost of opium has dropped, commanders and policy makers have a narrow window of opportunity to affect substantial long term gains in this regard.

Conclusion

Initial military operations in Afghanistan treated the Taliban as a non-peer military competitor but failed to realize the true nature of the conflict. Military planning must allow for contemporary application of traditional ideas and processes. The Taliban are committed to protracted conflict with ISAF forces in Afghanistan. Tactical engagements that do not

contribute to long term objectives are short sighted and are of limited value. A more long term approach must be taken.

A more comprehensive study of the environment would have more quickly identified the vital import of the will of the people of Afghanistan, as well as the proper courses of action to secure it. The cessation of eradication after eight years is long overdue.

Eradication forced upon farmers the dilemma of compliance with starvation or defiance with risk of the same. This was a poorly devised strategy that has led to rejuvenation of the Taliban. Present day commanders should consider the broad implications of their decisions. Military planners should be cognizant of the social, cultural and economic consequences of their plans just as previous decision makers should have realized the social and historical evidence against eradication as a viable option. A recent policy shift has addressed the problems with this particular focus but the learning points should be taken in a broader context to prevent similar mistakes in other potential courses of action.

Interdiction remains the biggest part for the military to play in the assault against Taliban control of the opium economy. As a recent Rand Corporation study illustrates,⁴⁵ the United States military is uniquely positioned and resourced to take on non-traditional roles. If long term success is to be achieved, tried and true methodologies must not be discarded, but rather employed in the newly emerging context of small scale conflict. Such a neo-traditional view is required to properly ascertain how to best employ military forces at the operational level. The Taliban will continue to remain a formidable foe as long as they retain control of opiate funding sources and the influence of government officials and the populace it affords.

⁴⁵ Keith Crane et al, *Guidebook for Supporting Economic Development in Stability Operations*, (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2009). 8.

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