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War, Drugs, and Peace: Afghanistan and Myanmar

By Austin Bodetti
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As shaky coalition governments in Afghanistan and Myanmar work to establish peace in two countries that have weathered some of Asia’s longest civil wars, journalists have focused on the military and political dynamics influencing potential negotiations but often overlook the insurgencies’ economic implications. The illegal drug trade, to which Afghanistan and Myanmar contribute most of the world’s opium, has become a lifeline for resistance movements and terrorist organizations from Southeast Asia to the Greater Middle East.

Drug cartels that double as revolutionary movements may prove reluctant to reconcile with governments that would deprive them of their profits from the black market, hindering future peace treaties. *The Diplomat* contacted several former special agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the United States’ top counternarcotics security agency, for their thoughts on drugs and conflict.

“The drug trade prolongs conflict and fuels instability in countries with thriving illicit markets,” observed Jeffrey Higgins, a former supervisory special agent. “There’s a correlation between overall lawlessness and illegal drug markets in societies like Afghanistan and Myanmar.”

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From Afghanistan, the Taliban and related groups—including U.S.-labeled terrorist organizations such as the Haqqani Network and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan—have controlled the so-called Golden Crescent, the illegal drug trade in South Asia, since the early 2000s. In Myanmar, minority-led nationalist and secessionist resistance movements, termed “ethnic armed groups,” profit from the Golden Triangle, Southeast Asia’s opium-producing counterpart to Afghanistan. These underground economies allow insurgents in both countries to bribe officials and buy weapons, financing their decades-long rebellions and preventing peace for years to come.

A former ranking DEA official who requested anonymity explained how pragmatism and self-interest often entangle insurgencies in the illegal drug trade: “First, insurgents will reject drugs for ideological reasons — as when the Taliban considered the use of opium *haram*. Later, they will offer protection to unaffiliated drug lords, reasoning that the profits contribute to the greater good. Finally, they’ll get involved directly. Money corrupts.”

He compared the Taliban, which denies involvement in the illegal drug trade despite dominating it, to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC), which started in the 1960s as a revolutionary movement defending labor rights and Colombian peasants only to evolve into one of South America’s largest drug cartels. Though FARC signed a peace treaty with the Colombian government last year, some of its commanders refused to demobilize or disarm, perhaps from having acquired too much wealth from the illegal drug trade. FARC’s model could thus impart lessons to the Afghan and Myanmar governments as they seek peace treaties of their own.

As happened to some FARC commanders, the illegal drug trade can turn insurgents away from their ideologies in the name of profit. Higgins, the former special agent, helped arrest and indict Hajji Bagcho, an Afghan drug lord linked to the Taliban. The Afghan government arrested a senior Taliban commander participating in the illegal drug trade last year, and the previous Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, amassed a personal fortune through opium.

Olive Yang, a female Myanmar warlord who died earlier this year, built a her own opium-fueled financial empire. “Drug production is so lucrative that some of the top people from these armed groups get rich, yet most of their soldiers from down the line are living in poverty and fighting government troops,” said Sai Thant Zin Phyo, a resident of Shan State, which contains several of Myanmar’s opium-trafficking ethnic armed groups. “It seems that it’s hard for some leaders of these ethnic armed groups to sign a total peace deal with the government because of the privilege and wealth that they and their families enjoy.” Any peace treaty would likely force Afghan and Myanmar warlords to abandon growing and selling opium.

The illegal drug trade is sabotaging peace for Afghanistan and Myanmar in the short term by allowing insurgencies to continue and in the long term by encouraging warlords to continue the fight. “Insurgents and warlords increasingly rely on drug money to finance their ongoing struggle for power and territory,” Mike Vigil, the DEA’s former chief of international operations, told *The Diplomat*. “Drug profits allow them to purchase weapons and pay their insurgent armies. It also permits them to corrupt officials who can deflect efforts against them.” Some officials in

Afghanistan and Myanmar have forayed into the illegal drug trade themselves, threatening their already-faltering role in the rule of law and the War on Drugs.

The three former special agents interviewed by *The Diplomat* offered varied suggestions for how the DEA, a law enforcement agency that, though American, has operated in both countries, could assist conflict resolution and peacebuilding abroad to build on local initiatives.

“To fully dismantle drug trafficking organizations, the governments of Afghanistan and Myanmar should target the highest levels of organizations and all those who facilitate them,” argued Higgins. “If they are unable to prosecute the most powerful violators, they should work with other countries to extradite these criminals for prosecution in more stable judicial systems” (like when the Afghan government sent Bagcho to the United States). Higgins added that, for the DEA to succeed, it would need cooperation from countries such as Afghanistan and Myanmar, which could further combat corruption, increase funding for their own law enforcement agencies, and strengthen penalties against drug lords and other crime bosses.

The former ranking DEA official noted: “The DEA is not directly involved in negotiating or participating in a peace agreement. That’s not in our charter.” As an American security agency, the DEA enforces the rule of law, not the law of war. “The DEA could, however, assist in identifying players who participate in the drug trade, which could factor into the peace treaty,” the former official continued. “Government agencies such as the Defense and State Departments have to make the decisions.”

Vigil, the former chief of international operations, took a holistic view of how to prosecute the War on Drugs in Afghanistan and Myanmar:

It will require large-scale economic development to wean farmers from cultivating opium poppies. This needs to be done in tandem with infrastructure development as well. Donor nations will have to step up to provide critical assistance in both areas for it to work. In order to bring insurgent forces to a peace accord, we need to develop a strong coalition of appropriate nations to bring pressure to bear on them. The DEA should work closely with other U.S. agencies to work with both countries in preventing drug money from getting into the hands of the insurgents. We have to follow the money and have the legal foundation to seize and forfeit the massive drug profits.

Differences between Afghanistan and Myanmar may hinder any repeatable strategy. While the U.S. plays only an advisory role in Myanmar, it has often led counternarcotics missions in Afghanistan as part of its wider commitment to counterterrorism. The Taliban represents a millenarian social movement, yet the ethnic armed groups often have grounded sociopolitical grievances. The illegal drug trade also only forms part of civil wars built on ethnic conflict and religious intolerance. The former DEA official pointed to one consistent theme, though: “There has to be a commitment that, through the peace process, the drug trade will stop — whether that will happen before or after the negotiations.”