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A New Approach to Counter Narcotics Strategy in South Asia

Sean Patrick Dynan

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College Newport, RI in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of National Security and Decision Making. DISTRIBUTION A. Approved for public release: distribution unlimited. The contents of this paper reflect the author's own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy

May 4, 2018

“These frightening figures should give considerable pause for reflection on whether the calculus on the illicit drugs flowing from Afghanistan adds up to a workable and achievable solution. I once again urge the international community to revisit its engagement with Afghanistan, and to acknowledge that fresh assessments and policy revisions may be necessary.”<sup>1</sup>

-Yury Fedotov, Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 16 November 2017

## Introduction

Following the establishment of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) in 2002, the U.S. and its allies sought to defeat terrorists with a drug problem. Sixteen years later those same forces now face a global narcotics network that funds multiple insurgent and terrorist organizations. Afghanistan produces 87% of illicit global opium and, “...is heading into uncharted territory”, according to Fedotov. A record high 2017 opium harvest, 63% greater than 2016’s, reflects the failure of 17 years of counter narcotics policy. <sup>2</sup> The UNODC reports that this will have local, regional and global ramifications. Locally, the United States (US) and North American Treaty Organization – International Security Assistance Force (NATO-ISAF) strategy in Afghanistan suffer setbacks as the massive expansion of the drug trade fuels a resurgent Taliban. This expansion increases corruption within government, and further cements the economy’s dependency on illicit trade. Regionally, drug trafficking is a growing source of instability in an already fragile area. Globally, the drug trade funds numerous criminal enterprises and burgeoning terrorist organizations.

U.S. policy and strategy has treated the Afghanistan narcotics cultivation and trade as a secondary symptom of instability in Afghanistan. The focus has been on counter insurgency and

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<sup>1</sup> "Afghanistan: Statement of UNODC Executive Director on the Launch of the Afghan Opium Survey 2017." 16 November 2017. *MENA Report*. Accessed on 15 January 2018. <https://search-proquest-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/docview/1965718179?accountid=322>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

not counter narcotics; however, as the narcotic industry's growth continues to an equivalent 7% of Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the insurgent and criminal element have merged and military involvement has increased.<sup>3</sup> The latest Afghanistan strategy, presented in August 2017 by President Trump, altered the counter narcotics strategy. On 22 November 2017, General John Nicholson, Commander of US Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and NATO's OPERATION RESOLUTE SUPPORT military mission, stated he has "new authorities under the Trump administration's South Asia policy that allowed him to declare war on Afghan drugs and go after the enemy and all of their support, as well as revenue infrastructure across the country."<sup>4</sup> The opening salvo of the new strategy included the use of US air power to strike 10 of the 500 known opium labs in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Based on previous lessons identified, the use of military strikes alone will have little to no impact on the Afghan opium trade and Taliban funding. Considering the current situation, and the means available, only a significant shift in

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<sup>3</sup> "Opium Production in Afghanistan Increased 87% in 2017 - UN Office on Drugs and Crime." 16 November 2017. *Sputnik*. Accessed on 20 December 2017. <https://search-proquest-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/docview/1964272350?accountid=322>

<sup>4</sup> "United States/Afghanistan: US Launches Airstrikes in First Operation Targeting Afghan Opium." 22 November 2017. *Asia News Monitor*. Accessed on 18 January 2018.

<http://usnwc.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwY2AwNtlz0EUrE5KNU4yNTS2T0kyB1U-KWYpxqplhclqigaV5GhAmgfYqO4cbRwRaBEZaBkEXF4K2xkcjG1ZKgovulPxx0Ki5PjDtgGahLE0s7QsKdUH3SIHmW6GXajAzsBqZmJoAsyqrk6tfQBBGUQuuP9wEGGCrZEuL88qT9TJTcuHboNHOZaTIOYIMggBCqyCxlVlwRGSJoQYmFLzRBiilY1LBUjUt8xLT0jEXRobmKelUJoslJPIrB-y0gtVnDMLALd5JENZGbmKbiBeAr-BamQdKIQAI43DqztFCAGAKUyS3NFGVTdXEOcPXRhLo7Pg7miOB7hYGMxBpa8 LxUCQYFczNg-yQlzcDMwsjSIAWYOVOBbZQkwxRzYDFoCowxSQY5 GZJEVlgzcBIBKoaDQ11jYxkGFhKikpTZRIYweEPAK25seo>

<sup>5</sup> Lamothe, Dan. *The U.S. Begins Bombing Taliban Drug Labs as Trump's Afghanistan Strategy Takes Hold: B-52s, F-22s, Unmanned Aircraft and Marine Corps Rocket Fire were Involved*. Weblog Post, Washington Post - Blogs. 20 November 2017. Washington: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post. Accessed on 15 December 2017.

[http://usnwc.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwV3NTsMwDLZguyAOgADxK5kbI5Y1Ge12QoA2cUJsFAanKU6zgdBaWfYhbrwGr8eT4JQVpHEAiUtOVmTFjr\\_4JzaAFH7Nm7EJzTpFoZIBEcOz4KWpSOgkTlxQg5CK8EdP3nQandtmd1pc6L7GTMVdWsnCdCeZdlHzA9adUMqlle3o8clzc6RcvnU6VGMeggxcqg9q9aR1ftH9YWoL\\_GgvQVklm9v0Wfv3yeyrG\\_RMX8Z\\_sbMMiz1DWlbkV2DOPKtwzaqAV\\_6lj-SmMFikbMT-8BBjfoOTSjEZ50NkbbCoLMZjFvD765vF48HwTrnGukxiP5yVvuBEPRIllme1BvvtVnx65pV89lIXB5ApSbLbf-bU7kOITRLzQagqikKA5KHpJTQqaNAC60To-qGltWQm7D363Zbf6DZhgXhkDEI-ILuQGUyzs0uVlvj\\_wDKA7Jc](http://usnwc.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwV3NTsMwDLZguyAOgADxK5kbI5Y1Ge12QoA2cUJsFAanKU6zgdBaWfYhbrwGr8eT4JQVpHEAiUtOVmTFjr_4JzaAFH7Nm7EJzTpFoZIBEcOz4KWpSOgkTlxQg5CK8EdP3nQandtmd1pc6L7GTMVdWsnCdCeZdlHzA9adUMqlle3o8clzc6RcvnU6VGMeggxcqg9q9aR1ftH9YWoL_GgvQVklm9v0Wfv3yeyrG_RMX8Z_sbMMiz1DWlbkV2DOPKtwzaqAV_6lj-SmMFikbMT-8BBjfoOTSjEZ50NkbbCoLMZjFvD765vF48HwTrnGukxiP5yVvuBEPRIllme1BvvtVnx65pV89lIXB5ApSbLbf-bU7kOITRLzQagqikKA5KHpJTQqaNAC60To-qGltWQm7D363Zbf6DZhgXhkDEI-ILuQGUyzs0uVlvj_wDKA7Jc)

international narcotics policy and a US regional counter narcotics strategy will achieve the Trump administration's policy aims for Afghanistan.

### Trump Administration Regional Strategy

The Department of Defense's December 2017, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan Report* states that "crippling the will of the Taliban to continue fighting, thereby compelling them to negotiate with the Afghan Government is the key to new South Asia Strategy."<sup>6</sup> A significant consideration for the strategy is that the Taliban is currently funded by roughly 200 million USD worth of annual narcotics associated revenue. Political and physical pressure alone will not compel the Taliban to cease illicit activity and seek peace while abundant monetary means are available. The report vaguely infers that the regional strategy attempts to tackle threat finance within its four lines of effort, which include: "building a broad, regional consensus for a stable Afghanistan; emphasizing regional integration and cooperation; stressing cooperation in an Afghan-led peace process; and holding countries accountable for the use of proxies or other asymmetric means to undermine stability and regional confidence."<sup>7</sup> Tension exists between the lines of effort. The US seeks to collaborate with countries who are simultaneously undermining Afghan stability. Nevertheless, reversing the growth of the drug trade is a shared interest between regional actors.

Since 2002, several regional and global counter narcotics initiatives have been enacted. The most significant being the Paris Pact Initiative signed by 56 countries in May 2003. The pact declared that all 56 countries were determined to end Afghan opiate consumption and

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<sup>6</sup> Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan; Report to Congress. *United States Department of Defense*. December 2017. Pg 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

trafficking.<sup>8</sup> The Paris Pact was a catalyst for international cooperation in tackling Afghan drug trafficking. The most significant output from the pact is the Triangular Initiative.

Established in August 2007, the Triangular Initiative created a venue for Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan to coordinate and discuss law enforcement, border security, cross-border cooperation, and general counter narcotics issues.<sup>9</sup> According to the UNODC website, the Triangular Initiative has resulted in a Joint Planning Cell being established in Tehran and eleven joint operations.<sup>10</sup> The successes of the initiatives are commendable, but have not reversed the current trend of increased narcotics proliferation and trafficking. A solution to reducing Taliban revenue is to target the narcotic trade routes and the industries reliance on neighboring nations. Thus, Pakistan and Iran involvement are a critical part of the regional solution. Yet, mistrust between actors makes an integrated regional effort difficult.

US/Pakistan relations have been in a constant state of flux over the last decade. Within the last year alone, Pakistan has gone from the top state beneficiary of US security assistance aid to being almost completely cut off.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Pakistan remains a key actor and influencer of stability in Afghanistan and both a victim and benefactor of the drug trade. In the late 1990's and early 2000's Pakistan had a growing poppy cultivation. Government eradication and livelihood programs shifted poppy cultivation across the border to an increasingly lawless Afghanistan. Pakistan now considers itself poppy free, but 40% of Afghan heroine and cannabis

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> UNODC Website. Islamic Republic of Iran; Triangular Initiative. Accessed on 10 January. <https://www.unodc.org/islamicrepublicofiran/en/triangular-initiative.html>

<sup>11</sup> Bloch, Hannah. U.S. Suspends Most Security Assistance To Pakistan. Weblog post. The Two-Way [BLOG], Washington: NPR. Jan 4, 2018

transits through Pakistan, with half consumed by the population of Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, migrant workers and precursor chemicals originating from Pakistan are a key contributor to the successful harvest of opium and processing of heroine every year. A symbiotic relationship exists between the populations along the Pakistan/Afghanistan border region that supports the insurgency and narcotics production and movement. As the situation currently stands, the interaction between the two states favors the sustainment of the drug trade.

Iran has suffered under the growing drug trade. Over 30 percent of all Afghan heroine and cannabis flows through Iran.<sup>13</sup> The growth of the drug trade in Iran has increased drug use and a rise in HIV cases transmitted via drug use. Civil authority's harsh crackdown on drug users and traffickers has created internal division within the country and garnered international condemnation. In response to European Union (EU) criticism of human rights abuses against drug smugglers and users, Iran's Ambassador to the EU, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, stated that, "Iran is the only country in the world that considers the fight against drugs as a jihad. We have lost 4,000 martyrs, and over 11,000 [have been] injured in combating the drug mafia. Are the Europeans fighting drugs with this moral commitment? Iran is the most morally committed to this fight!"<sup>14</sup>

Europe and Iran's common interest against narcotics manifested into "drug diplomacy." In the early 2000's aid and training occurred between the European Union (EU) and Iran. Support to Iran's counter narcotic's effort ended with the start of sanctions against Iran over nuclear proliferation and issues with human rights abuses. Sanctions imposed on Iran by the

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<sup>12</sup> Kamminga, Jorrit and Nazia Hussain. 2012. "From Disengagement to Regional Opium War? Towards a Counter-Narcotics Surge in Afghanistan and Pakistan." *UNISCI Discussion Papers* (29): 91-1122

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

West, significantly aggravated Iran's ability to stymie the flow of drugs originating from Afghanistan. According to the UNODC, "the sanctions on Iranian banks enhanced the drug economy by fueling the black market and corruption and by undermining the international anti-money laundering system."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, in 2016 Iran law enforcement accounted for 75% of the world's opium drug seizures.<sup>16</sup>

### Impact of Past Policies and Strategies

As international and regional efforts attempt to gain and maintain external pressure on Afghanistan's narcotics industry, NATO actions within Afghanistan have played a significant role in exacerbating the drug problem. The conundrum facing those executing both counter insurgency and counter narcotics strategies in Afghanistan is that actions have competed instead of complemented one another. Policy and strategy for counter narcotics has poorly translated to tactical action. Both GIRoA and ISAF forces have often acted, in pursuit of counter insurgency goals, against counter narcotics efforts. At the least, forces within Afghanistan have demonstrated a negligence in curbing illicit behavior to limit disruption to the livelihood of the local populace. Counter insurgency called for gaining the trust of the Afghan people, while counter narcotics actions attack the key source of Afghanistan's rural economy. Counter insurgency efforts call for a strengthening of government institutions and agencies, while counter narcotics efforts call for the arrest of the heads of government institutions and agencies that are complicit in the drug trade. From the perspective of the tactical commander on the ground, you cannot achieve both aims simultaneously.

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<sup>15</sup> Janne Bjerre Christensen, "Human Rights and Wrongs in Iran's Drug Diplomacy with Europe," *The Middle East Journal* 71, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

From 2001 to 2002, US pursued a hands-off policy concerning Afghanistan's drug trade. At the time of the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime had a zero-tolerance policy concerning the growth and cultivation of poppy, having almost eradicated its growth within the country. As a result, most Afghan forces willing to side with US efforts to unseat the Taliban were warlords and organizations, like the Northern Alliance, that had maintained the illicit economy to fund counter-Taliban activities.<sup>17</sup> Following the establishment of an interim Afghan government, policy changed to match the will of the interim President Hamid Karzai. From 2003 to 2009, the US government became directly involved in supporting GIRoA's counter narcotics efforts; providing training, funding, and equipment for counter narcotics forces and providing nearly 5 billion USD to support crop eradication. The US Departments of State, Agriculture, Justice, Defense, and the Drug Enforcement Agency provided support in the form of funding, expertise, and initiatives. ISAF forces changed the rules of engagement to allow forces to support Afghan counter narcotics operations.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, GIRoA corruption, coupled with lack of alternative options for farmers, resulted in increased poppy cultivation. After five years of effort and billions of dollars of investment, U.S. special representative Richard Holbrooke, stated the U.S. government "wasted hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars" on efforts to combat opium production with no positive results to show for it."<sup>19</sup>

From 2009 to 2017, US Policy shifted to an alternative livelihood approach. Matching the shift from counter terrorism to counter insurgency. The alternative livelihood approach focused on offering farmers options to shift away from growing illicit crops, while continuing

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher J. Coyne, Abigail R. Hall Blanco and Scott Burns, "The War on Drugs in Afghanistan: Another Failed Experiment with Interdiction," *Independent Review* 21, no. 1 (2016), 95.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

many of the initiatives previously established, such as eradication and interdiction by Afghan counter narcotics police. According the UNODC the hectares of Opium poppy cultivation dropped and leveled off from 2009 to 2011, but began to rapidly increase with the end of the US troop surge in Afghanistan in early 2012.<sup>20</sup>

Several factors played into the failure: 1) economic incentives were not sustainable and focused on short term changes rather than long term economic growth and the establishment of a licit supply chain<sup>21</sup>, 2) the strategy of a comprehensive counter narcotics campaign required increased and sustained security which was lost at the end of the troop surge, and 3) increased pressure on the Taliban, created by the troop surge, forced the Taliban to become more heavily invested in the narcotics industry to cover operational costs. The nexus between insurgent Taliban forces and criminal elements has only grown stronger and persists today.

The initial success of a holistic counter narcotics campaign during the surge was followed by spectacular failure when the strategy persisted post-surge. Eradication of poppy crops forced smaller farmers to seek protection resulting in the establishment of larger and more powerful criminal cartels. Money and familial ties to the cartels bred increased government corruption. To demonstrate progress to the international community, GIRoA criminalized the common farmer and his only means of livelihood. These actions increased Taliban influence and control. After seventeen years of mismanaged counter narcotics efforts; violence has increased, significant areas of Afghanistan are no longer under GIRoA control, opium and cannabis crops

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<sup>20</sup> Afghanistan Opium Survey; Cultivation and Production. UNODC.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

are at a record high, and current conditions are unlikely to force a well-funded Taliban to seek peace with GIRoA.

### Options and opportunities

The UN Single Convention on Narcotics Drugs signed in 1961 consolidated all previous international counter narcotics agreements under one treaty, establishing the rules and norms associated with the current international drug control system. As a part of the treaty, “it introduced widely accepted penal obligations for signatory states to criminalize, under their domestic law, unlicensed production and trade...and cultivation of opium poppy, coca, and cannabis.” The treaty and its prohibitive character has, by every measure, failed to achieve its aims of ending the drug trade. The international community should take this opportunity to refine and reassess the interaction between states and their ability to manage interdiction, supply eradication, and demand. US interest in reevaluating the Single Convention includes: the opioid crisis currently ongoing in the United States (resourced from South America) and Europe (resourced from Afghanistan), the unrest along the US/Mexican border because of drug cartels, the legalization of Marijuana in US states, and NATO’s ongoing engagement in Afghanistan. The international community should consider either applying teeth to the treaty that penalizes states for circumventing established norms or shifting to a regulatory vice prohibitive strategy. The current system has been far too ineffective to continue. Struggling nations, like those in South Asia, are too limited on resources and too overwhelmed to arrest and rehabilitate those currently involved in the narcotics industry.

The ratification of the Nuclear Treaty is an opportunity for the region and Iran. The US should encourage the EU to reopen drug diplomacy with Iran. Providing monetary and

equipment support ensures Iran can maintain and increase their impact on the Taliban drug trade and finance system. The U.S. should seek to also support Iranian counter narcotics efforts by coordinating with Iranian banks to stop the laundering of drug money in and out of Afghanistan.

The U.S. should apply pressure to increase coordination via the Triangular Initiative between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Eleven joint operations in eleven years have had minimal impact. The porous Afghan border enables the drug trade. Pakistan migrant worker freely crossing the border provide a significant amount of support to the opium harvest. Drug money flowing across borders via banks and hawalas fund Taliban efforts. The current situation requires a more expansive and integrated program between counter narcotics and border agents from all three countries. The U.S. needs to take the lead and provide pressure to all three nations to coordinate and operate together more often.

US strategy should incorporate counter narcotics as a key line of effort in its South Asia Regional Plan. Counter narcotics has consistently been a secondary line of effort while gradually becoming the most significant impediment to progress in Afghanistan. Placing counter narcotics as a key line of effort seems trivial, but it matters with respect to attention, perceived importance, and resourcing. Raising the importance of the counter narcotics effort provides a signal to regional actors that the U.S. is investing in a different approach and tackling a problem of mutual concern, rather than doubling down on past mistakes.

Striking opium and heroin laboratories inside Taliban controlled territory is a waste of resources and will not net any tangible gains. Targeting efforts should focus on areas along the periphery of GIROA control and by priority 1) target labs controlled by the Taliban and 2) targets

that result in fragmentation of cartels. Going after a checklist of 500 labs will result in tactical targeting that does not support operational goals.

If GIRoA's eradication efforts and strategy remains unchanged and limited, the US should cease funding crop eradication. The money associated with eradication efforts is fueling corruption, reinforcing the growth of cartel control of the drug trade, and having a negative impact on populace perception of the Afghan government. Eradicating only 1% of the poppy crop (and only in areas under GIRoA control) reinforces the unfairness and corruption narrative pushed by the Taliban. Money provided for eradication efforts should be refocused on long term economic initiatives that compete with the illicit economy.

Afghanistan should consider legalizing the growth of cannabis. Cannabis is now the second largest crop in Afghanistan and can compete with poppy. Cannabis requires a completely different economic model and supply chain than opium. An opium harvest is delivered to market in man portable bags, while cannabis requires trucks for movement and facilities to dry out the crop. Both trucks and facilities associated with the cannabis crop would find other uses off-season that would facilitate continued economic growth. Cannabis is a less profitable crop for traffickers, does not require precursors and laboratories to refine, and is more profitable per hectare for the Afghan farmer in comparison to poppy. By creating a competitive profitable crop that has greater acceptance on the global market and requires less action on the part of government for regulation, GIRoA offers a counter narrative to the Taliban and provides stimulus to its economy.

## Conclusion

The preponderance of sources referenced for this paper advocate for more of the same strategy, only with increased resources. Argument after argument offered that failure has been the result of disjointed actions within Afghanistan and not a misguided approach. Multiple experts offer buzzwords such as ‘holistic’ and ‘whole of government’ as panacea for solving the regional drug problem. US involvement in Afghanistan has never completely embraced the importance of disrupting the funding stream for sources of instability (corruption, criminals, and the insurgency). Often, shifts in strategy have been late to change and not matched means available due to inconsistent resourcing. Empirical data shows that the staples for counter narcotics strategies employed over the last 50-year; crop eradication, interdiction, and alternative livelihood programs have continually failed in multiple counter narcotics campaigns, to include Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup>

The larger impact of US counter narcotics policy in Afghanistan has been the creation of a regional and global issue arguably larger than the one that initially pulled the United States into Afghanistan in 2001. Al Qaeda activity in Afghanistan ceased to be a significant factor in the mid-2000’s; however, the narcotics industry in Afghanistan is now a source of instability that funds numerous violent extremist organization (Al Qaeda and ISIS included), criminal enterprises, and has grown into a nearly insurmountable internal source of destabilization.

Afghanistan has provided the watershed moment for the current international drug-control system. Policy, strategy, operational concepts, and tactics have failed to bring about change while narco-terrorists and criminal organizations have expanded their influence and

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<sup>22</sup> Behsat Ekici, "Why does the International Drug-Control System Fail?" *All Azimuth* 5, no. 2 (2016), 63

control in South Asia. The Taliban and Afghan criminals now impact global narcotics and terrorism issues. For the United States and NATO, changes in international and regional counter narcotics strategy may be the only option to achieve policy aims in Afghanistan. The counter narcotics strategy in Afghanistan must be raised to a level of importance mirroring the scope and scale of the problem. Continuing the current counter narcotics strategy is not an option, it has already failed. Competing and new ideas are fraught with risk and susceptible to flawed logic, but the old paradigm will only result in continued failure.

*The Terrorist-Criminal Nexus: An Alliance of Drug Cartels, Organized Crime, and Terror Groups* notes that “Two of our nation’s biggest enemies continue to be sunk cost and groupthink; if something isn’t working, we must cut our losses and move on quickly.”<sup>23</sup> US counter narcotics policy and strategy in South Asia is a tremendous example of sunk cost and groupthink. The U.S.’s inability to seek out alternate approaches when policies fail is a key detractor to US success against nimble and evolving adversaries. This paper provides several alternatives that could positively impact regional counter narcotics efforts and global efforts to stymie the drug trade. Ignoring the current circumstances and accepting the status quo will not achieve U.S. policy aims in South Asia.

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<sup>23</sup> Jennifer L. Hesterman, *The Terrorist-Criminal Nexus : An Alliance of International Drug Cartels, Organized Crime, and Terror Groups* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2013). Pg 298.  
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Pamela Constable contributed to this report from Kabul.

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