

Poppy Diplomacy in Afghanistan: Embracing the Benefits of the Illegal Opium Economy



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This year Afghan poppy cultivation is expected to expand for the third year in a row. It means Afghanistan will probably again produce around 90 percent of the world's opium. A recent UN report reconfirmed the strong links between insecurity, lack of agricultural support and poppy cultivation. Despite some annual shifts between and within provinces, and fluctuating levels of opium production from year to year, the international support for Afghanistan's counter-narcotics strategy has hardly been able to make a dent in the Afghan opium economy. And the situation could get worse following the withdrawal of most foreign military troops next year.

After 2014 Afghanistan's legal economy is expected to enter in recession, partly fueled by the decrease in international support and the military draw-down. This financial situation puts the debate about the illegal opium economy in a different light. Ironically, it means this huge black market could prove to be Afghanistan's knight in shining armor. The illegal economy already provides thousands of poppy farmers, wage laborers and middlemen with a subsistence income. Around 250,000 Afghan households were involved in poppy cultivation in 2010. In 2009, 1.6 million Afghans were directly involved in poppy cultivation -- many more indirectly.

Given the increase of poppy cultivation since then, these numbers will probably be even higher this year. Following the security transition, the illegal opium economy may further strengthen its position as one of the few stable pillars that keeps the Afghan economy afloat. The situation is similar to countries such as Colombia, Mexico and Morocco, where the illicit drug economy has been a major source of foreign exchange, jobs and income. While much attention has been paid to the drugs-related funding for 'narco-terrorism' or the Taliban insurgency, policy makers turn a blind eye to the positive effects of the illegal drugs market.

The international community may not like the benefits of the Afghan opium economy, but in the short term they should learn to embrace them as a temporal second-best option to the structural development of the legal (rural) economy over time. Moving away from the popular political message that 'all drugs are bad', we need a more intelligent 'poppy diplomacy' in Afghanistan that is realistic about what can be achieved in coming years and departs from the positive role poppy cultivation plays in the current economy.

Poppy diplomacy does not mean giving up on drug policy or taking sides in the two-sided legalization-prohibition debate. It means being smart about how the dependence on illegal opium can be slowly decreased, without upsetting impoverished farming communities, increasing instability or helping the Taliban to win the hearts and minds in poppy cultivating

rural areas. It requires moving away from labeling Afghanistan a 'narco-state' and other unhelpful political rhetoric.

While the international community continues to invest in long-term economic development, institution building and rule of law, poppy diplomacy means proper sequencing of counter-narcotics interventions. This entails serious investment in alternative livelihood strategies before supporting crop eradication and other law enforcement measures. So far, investment in alternative development has been small, irregular and geographically limited, and policies have not focused enough on poverty reduction. To rectify that situation, poppy diplomacy means focusing first and foremost on improving the living conditions in poppy farming communities.

Learning from recent experiences in Colombia, poppy diplomacy involves supporting the Afghan government to increase control over poppy growing areas, as a first step before any serious counter-narcotics efforts can take place. The successful Colombian model of territorial consolidation starts with establishing and maintaining state presence in rural areas and making sure basic services are provided to the people. This has proven to be the only way to integrate remote coca growing areas into the state, improve living conditions and increase alignment of farming communities with the policies of the central government.

After about ten years of international support for an ineffective counter-narcotics policy that was first implemented in 2003, a new poppy diplomacy means finally acknowledging that there are no quick fixes, short cuts or silver bullet solutions to Afghanistan's opium economy. Policy makers should embrace the short term benefits of the illegal opium economy and try to come up with useful, practical and realistic interventions that can help to structurally solve the Afghan opium crisis one step at a time.

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