By Patrick Nopens

A perfect storm

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Vienna, "a perfect storm of drugs, crime and insurgency that has swirled around the Afghanistan/Pakistan border for years, is heading for Central Asia".

Afghanistan is the major producer of the world's opiates and cannabis. From there the drugs are trafficked chiefly to Europe, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and China. Drug trafficking and consumption are linked to other crime, turning Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan into narco-states. Furthermore, money generated by the drugs trade is being channelled to insurgent movements, not only in Afghanistan but also in Central Asia.
If the international community does not act swiftly and in unison, this will not only impact drug related crime and consumption worldwide but also jeopardise the vast energy reserves in Central Asia and risk further destabilising the Caucasus.

Counter-narcotics in Afghanistan are an area where NATO's and Russia's interests clearly coincide. If NATO and Russia cannot find a way of effectively cooperating in this matter, not only will the Afghan narcotic problem spiral completely out of control, but NATO-Russia cooperation could come under pressure.

The magnitude of the problem

Afghan opiates kill 100,000 people a year globally. Every year NATO countries lose over 10,000 people to heroin overdoses, i.e. five times more than the total number of troops killed in Afghanistan since the beginning of military intervention in 2001 (as of the 4th of July 2010, the total number of ISAF casualties stood at 1822). In Russia an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 people die of drug overdoses yearly. This amounts to more than the total number of soldiers killed during the entire Soviet campaign in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 (about 14,000).

Moreover, roughly 8 percent of the Afghan population between 15 and 64 years of age is now addicted to drugs. Opium consumption jumped by 53 percent the last four years to 230,000 addicts and heroin consumption by 140 percent to 120,000.

Afghanistan not only produces over 90 percent of the world's opiates, it also has surpassed Morocco in 2009 as the main producer of cannabis. Opium derivates from Afghanistan are swamping global markets. Europe without Russia and Turkey is the largest end user, consuming 711 metric tonnes. Russia, with a population three times smaller than that of the EU, is the largest single consumer with 549 metric tonnes. Iran, with 547 metric tonnes, has one of the world's most serious drug problems with an estimated 1 million opiate users. Pakistan

consumes 214 metric tonnes. The countries of Central Asia, once mainly transit avenues for Afghan drugs, have become major consumers.

The global heroin market generates up to 65 billion USD. Afghanistan farmers, however, receive only about 1 billion USD, prompting President Karzai to say "we take 3 percent of the revenue and 100 percent of the blame". Russia, Europe, the U.S. and Canada make up 59 percent of the world opiates market. Yearly Afghanistan exports about 3500 metric tonnes worldwide (1/3 raw, 2/3 processed into heroin). There are an estimated 12,000 metric tonnes stockpiled and temporarily withheld from the world market awaiting higher market prices.

Only a small amount of transiting drugs is intercepted before reaching their markets. Iran, China and Pakistan intercept 20 percent, 18 percent and 17 percent respectively. Turkey intercepts about 9 percent. In Central Asia and Russia 4 to 5 percent is seized. Afghanistan only intercepts 2 percent. More worryingly, Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, and EU member states like Bulgaria, Romania and Greece only intercept 2 percent.

Russia's interests in Afghanistan

Russia's perceptions of Afghanistan are still influenced by the "Afghan syndrome" caused by the fiasco of the Soviet intervention in the eighties. Russian authorities stress time and again that they are not contemplating sending troops to Afghanistan.
The two main threats Russia perceives emanating from the situation in Afghanistan are the prospect of instability spreading throughout Central Asia and drug trafficking. Therefore, Russia has no interest in seeing ISAF fail in stabilising Afghanistan, or at least, keeping it under control.

However, as Russia seeks to get Central Asia back in its orbit, it looks at the war in Afghanistan through the prism of America retaining a foothold in the region. According to Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko, views as to Russia's objectives in Afghanistan within the Russian establishment differ. Some would like to see the U.S. and NATO getting bogged down in the "graveyard of empires" while keeping the Taliban in check. Others hope that, by supporting ISAF, Russia will be able to reap benefits in other diplomatic issues of more importance to itself. A third group wishes to see a neutral Afghanistan, stable but free from foreign troops, acting as a buffer between Central Asia and the volatile region of Iran and Pakistan.

Russia has been involved in all major international diplomatic decisions regarding Afghanistan. It supported the UN mandate for an international operation , and was party to the Bonn Agreement in 2001 which laid down the parameters of rebuilding state structures in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Medvedev also explicitly supported Obama's new strategy. Still, Russia's support for ISAF proceeds laboriously.

NATO-Russia cooperation on Afghan counter-narcotics

In 2005 the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) launched the "NRC Project on Counter-Narcotics Training of Afghan and Central Asian Personnel". The NRC works in close cooperation with UNODC which acts as the executive agent. The objective is to "build local capacity and to promote regional networking and cooperation by sharing the combined expertise of NRC

member states with mid-level officers from Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan." Russia and Turkey run training courses for Afghan and Central Asian drug enforcement agents at their national training centres and occasional courses in each of the six participating countries. The fact that the project was not interrupted in the aftermath of the war in Georgia in August 2008 demonstrates the importance all parties attach to the project.

The ISAF's role in counter-narcotics

Although nine Security Council Resolutions relate to ISAF, it is not a UN force but a coalition of the willing deployed under the authority of the UN Security Council.
Within this framework ISAF is committed to supporting the Afghan government's counter-narcotic programme within its mandate.

ISAF's mandate precludes eradication operations. Moreover, UNODC does not at present believe that ISAF should get involved in eradication at the farm level. This has to be carried out by Afghan authorities, but ISAF provides support to Afghan led eradication programs by deploying forces to increase security in the vicinity of areas where Afghan government agencies are conducting eradication operations.

The mandate also provides explicitly for ISAF to support the Afghan government and internationally-sanctioned counter-narcotics efforts through intelligence-sharing and the conduct of an efficient public information campaign, as well as to support the Afghan National Army Forces conducting counter-narcotics operations. ISAF, however, is not directly involved in poppy eradication or destruction of processing facilities, or in taking military action against narcotic producers.

ISAF lends support in a whole range of counter-narcotic activities covered by the Afghan National Drugs Control Strategy. ISAF has aligned its counter-narcotic strategic communication plan with that of the Afghan government and it facilitates government messaging on television, radio and posters. ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) support and assist alternative crops and livelihood programmes to help transition to licit farming

The presence of 125,000 ISAF soldiers together with over 134,000 Afghan National Army soldiers provides an environment in which counter-narcotic activities can be conducted. ISAF supports Afghan law enforcement operations on request by providing medical evacuation, surveillance and air support.

In 2009 the Afghan law enforcement agencies conducted 81 interdiction operations, of which 53 were supported by ISAF. This resulted in the capture of 96 metric tonnes of opium, 9 metric tonnes of morphine, and 1.2 metric tonnes of heroin together with almost 35,000 litres of precursor chemicals. The value of these seizures in Afghanistan was almost 50 million USD. In the first three months of 2010 ISAF supported 56 similar operations.

Russia's perception of ISAF's role in counter-narcotics

Russia perceives its drug problem as directly related to the situation in Afghanistan. It underlines that drug trafficking, and in particular that of heroin has skyrocketed since coalition forces entered Afghanistan in 2001.

Russia by and large perceives ISAF's response to the drug problem in Afghanistan as completely insufficient. Some Russian observers see this as a sign that the war against terrorism and drugs are not the main concern for the U.S. and NATO. Especially, ISAF's refusal to participate directly in poppy eradication at the farm level is symptomatic of the coalition not treating Afghan drug production with the necessary priority. Viktor Ivanov, the head of Russia's Federal Drug Control Service, although critical of ISAF's track record dealing with narcotics, rejects conspiracy theories put forward in some quarters that NATO is growing poppies in Afghanistan to undermine Russia. He does, however, argue that ISAF troops are reluctant to get involved in poppy eradication out of fear of casualties. The Russian argument goes that it is the duty of the military to put the lives of the Afghan population and their own populations back home before their own safety. As such, they should be prepared to risk retaliation by the people behind opium cultivation. In the longer term eradication of poppy fields would, furthermore, undercut terrorism.

But while this may be a reasonable argument, even taking into account that it is not Russia's own servicemen's lives which are being discussed, some other insinuations are highly provocative. A paper distributed at the International Forum on Drug production in Afghanistan in June 2010 in Moscow argues that the U.S. and NATO abuse their position in Afghanistan for geopolitical purposes, "using their unique position in Afghanistan, the U.S. and NATO political and military powers have a unique opportunity to control and influence Russia and China, the largest oil producers (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq) and crucial nuclear powers (India and Pakistan) from one location, and if need be, mobilize for military operations in the shortest time possible. In the short-term perspective, this would most likely be against Iran." Furthermore, the U.S. is promoting its own fight against the drug trade, which it considers the basic source of funding terrorists globally. In doing so, the U.S. hopes to have one more excuse, next to proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in Iran and terrorists hiding in Pakistan, also to deploy so-called peace keeping forces in these countries. The paper further contends that "the drug trade is being used to maintain military and political tension in the country and the entire Central Asian region."

A further major frustration for the Russians is what Russia's permanent representative to NATO, Ambassador Rogozin, calls the "illogical" contrast of ISAF's unwillingness to destroy drug crops in Afghanistan with successful U.S. eradication efforts in Colombia. In 2008 229,130 hectares of coca fields were destroyed in Columbia against only 5480 hectares of poppy fields in Afghanistan. Moreover, the discrepancy between the correlation between foreign troop numbers and the number of hectares destroyed is significant: more than 125,000 soldiers for 5480 hectares destroyed in Afghanistan and only 1,400 soldiers to 229,130 hectares eradicated in Columbia.

In spite of these widespread allegations, the Russian discourse at the International Forum on Drug Production in Afghanistan was remarkably guarded. The tone was set by the opening remarks of President Medvedev. He called upon all parties involved to depoliticize the issue

"And so political games around what is without any exaggeration a common global problem are simply unacceptable as they undermine our common international efforts and weaken our entire anti-drugs coalition."

Russian proposals

Russia's proposals are laid out in the 'Plan "Rainbow-2" for the Elimination of Afghan Drug production'. The plan calls to raise, through the UN Security Council, the status of the problem of Afghan drug production to that of a threat to global peace and security. It furthermore calls for elaborating and implementing a programme of Afghan economic development, the eradication of poppy crops, and to draw up a UN sanctions list of landowners who provide land for growing poppy. It would, furthermore, include in ISAF's mandate the obligation to eradicate opium poppy crops in Afghanistan. Especially this last proposal promises to be contentious as several NATO countries oppose getting directly involved in poppy eradication.

Conclusion

Narcotics from Afghanistan are a clear and present danger, and dealing with the issue is of vital interest, both to Russia and to NATO. Moreover, drugs are intimately linked to international crime and terrorism.

Fighting the Afghan drug scourge is an obvious, if not the area par excellence for NATO-Russia cooperation. The existing initiatives within the NRC certainly are worthwhile but insufficient. Drastically reducing the flow of drugs, especially to Europe and Russia, and preventing Central Asia being destabilised by drugs has to be a priority. This not only involves eradication of poppy fields but also interdicting the drug traffic, providing alternative crops and livelihoods, interdiction of drug shipments, arrest of traffickers and building up an effective judicial system in Afghanistan.

However, the threat of narcotics is such that an effective eradication programme should not be held hostage to a lack of progress in other counter-narcotics activities.

Voices are going up in Russia to make the level of support to ISAF conditional on the effectiveness of poppy eradication in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Russia realises that ISAF's presence serves its interests not only in stabilising Afghanistan but also in preventing instability spreading from Afghanistan throughout Central Asia.

If NATO and Russia cannot even agree on how to address a problem which is of such a vital interest to both parties, this will not bring all cooperation on Afghanistan to a standstill, but it does not bode well for further effective cooperation in the NRC on Afghanistan.

About the author

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