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# Forces of Habit: Global SOF's Role in Countering Illicit Drug Trafficking

## **Author Biography**

Paul Rexton Kan is Professor of National Security Studies at the US Army War College. He is the author of the books, *Drugs and Contemporary Warfare* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2009) and *Cartels at War: Understanding Mexico's Drug-Fueled Violence and the Challenge to US National Security* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2012). He is the author of numerous articles on the intersection of drug trafficking, crime and modern forms of armed conflict.

## **Abstract**

Illicit drug trafficking is a prominent national security issue in a globalizing world. Drug trafficking intersects with major security issues such as rogue and narco-states, weak and failing states, insurgencies and terrorism, transnational organized crime and protracted intrastate conflicts. These are the same issues that sets the operational environment for the deployment of SOF. Rather than treating drug trafficking as a singular and separate security issue, global SOF counternarcotics operations must adapt previous approaches to new realities.

## Introduction

Illicit drug trafficking is a multi-billion dollar industry. The United Nations and the International Monetary Fund estimate that illegal drug trade derives \$600 billion in annual profit, or the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of New Zealand, Ireland and Portugal combined. As such, it accounts for 7.5 percent of global trade. If it were a country, this would make it eligible for membership in the G-20. However, rather than a source of international stability or global prosperity, the trafficking of illicit narcotics undermines the national security of many countries and distorts the development of many societies.

Early attempts to tackle illicit drug trafficking as a national security threat to the U.S. were focused on preventing drugs from reaching the homeland. In 1988, the U.S. Department of Defense was authorized to assist in stemming the tide of drugs entering the country. In response, Special Operations Forces (SOF) were dispatched to assist a number of countries to enact a counter-supply strategy. As part of this strategy, SOF have worked with host nations' militaries and law enforcement agencies to interdict, detect and monitor drug cultivation, importation of precursor chemicals and transportation of the finished product.

Such SOF operations fit into the current counternarcotics efforts as outlined in the DOD's 2011 *Counternarcotics and Global Threat Strategy*. These activities include measures taken to detect, interdict, disrupt, or curtail any activity reasonably related to drug trafficking. This includes, but is not limited to, measures taken to detect, interdict, disrupt, or curtail activities related to substances, material, weapons, or resources used to finance, support, secure, cultivate, process, and/or transport illegal drugs.<sup>1</sup>

Although SOF have derived important institutional competencies from their counternarcotics efforts, drug trafficking can no longer be isolated from other national security threats or viewed as collateral to other international security issues. Due to the unique nature of the trade, illegal drug trafficking networks have made threats to international and national security more complex, durable and acute. Drug trafficking intersects with major security issues such as rogue and narco-states, weak and failing states, insurgencies and terrorism, transnational organized crime and protracted intrastate conflicts; the same issues that SOF are often called upon to participate in tackling. Drug trafficking has transformed the security landscape by permeating nearly every aspect of it; meaning that SOF counternarcotics operations must adapt previous approaches to new realities and pursue a global, synchronized approach to combat illicit narcotics networks.

## Adapting Global SOF to the Drug-Security Nexus

A vast array of actors who present threats to U.S. national security find illegal drug trafficking an especially seductive business to enter for a variety of reasons. First, the profit from drug sales can be used to pay for arms, equipment, training, or turned towards bribing governmental officials and recruiting of sympathizers. Second, illegal narcotics also possess qualities that set them apart from other

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Counternarcotics and Global Threats Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: OSD, 2011): 4.

illicit commodities. Unlike the illicit trade in diamonds, copper, and oil, drugs are a renewable resource that can be regularly harvested, given the proper conditions. In short, they are a reliable means of generating high degree of profit. Third, illegal narcotics are also more appealing because of the ease of manufacturing, transportation and concealment, allowing for greater distribution and larger profit gain. Most drugs are low weight, high value commodities, making it relatively easy to move profitable volumes. The trade in oil, alluvial gems, and timber require the use of skilled labor and sophisticated technology whereas the trafficking in drugs requires low skill labor and limited technology. Fourth, drugs have an additional benefit that other commodities do not—they can be readily consumed by combatants to stimulate wartime nerve. Finally, drugs can be a means to attack an adversary's military and society in the belief that this will lead to battlefield or ideological victory. Encouraging drug use within the enemy's military or the enemy's society provides a group with one more weapon against its enemy. As a result of these characteristics, drugs are the most fungible commodity within some of the most challenging security dynamics of today.

A global SOF network can be particularly valuable in tackling the expansive challenges of the international drug trade. SOF personnel are accustomed to operating in complex political, social and economic environments where the drug-security nexus exists. Admiral McRaven articulated U.S. Special Operation Command's (USSOCOM) awareness of the complex interdependence of today's national security issues:

“We live in a world in which the threats have become increasingly networked and pose complex and dynamic risks to U.S. interests around the world. These networks are diversifying their activities, resulting in the convergence of threats that were once linear. In today's environment, this convergence can have explosive and destabilizing effects—there is no such thing as a local problem.”<sup>2</sup>

As a tool of U.S. security policy, a global SOF network will be used in conjunction with other facets of the DOD as well as with other government departments and agencies to further key strategic aims of the United States. These strategic aims include creating a stable and secure international environment for the pursuit of American interests through a network of regional partners.<sup>3</sup>

However, due to the deep enmeshing of drug trafficking into the fabric of other unconventional threats, a global SOF network cannot treat counternarcotics as separate and distinct from other operations deemed to be more tethered to broader national security aims. This is revealed in the DOD's 2011 *Counternarcotics and Global Threats Strategy* mission statement, which recognizes the perniciousness of drug trafficking:

“The Department of Defense, as the single lead agency for detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illicit drugs into the United States and an important contributor to national efforts to counter

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<sup>2</sup> Admiral William McRaven, Posture Statement before 113th Congress, House Armed Services Committee, *U.S. House of Representatives*, March 6, 2013, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Szayna, Thomas and William Welsler IV, *Developing and Assessing Options for the Global SOF Network* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2013): 1.

transnational organized crime, conducts operations and activities to disrupt and degrade the national security threats posed by drug trafficking, piracy, transnational organized crime, and threat finance networks *reasonably related to illicit drug trafficking activities.*" (emphasis mine)<sup>4</sup>

Because drug trafficking does not stand apart from other security issues, counternarcotics operations will become nested in a number of issues which SOF currently or potentially have a role in addressing. Rogue and narco-states, weak and failing states, insurgencies and terrorism, transnational criminal organizations and protracted intrastate conflicts each reveal the drug-security nexus where SOF are, or potentially may be, called on to operate.

## Rogue and Narco-States

A number of national governments have active links to illegal drug trafficking. North Korea, Afghanistan, Guinea-Bissau and Syria each have been implicated in distributing illegal narcotics to enrich the ruling elite. Bureau 39 of the North Korean government is dedicated to perpetrating criminal schemes, like drug manufacturing, smuggling and distribution.<sup>5</sup> Members of the Afghan government continue to be enriched by the opium trade, bolstering Taliban claims that the national leaders are corrupt and do not care for ordinary citizens.<sup>6</sup> Guinea-Bissau has become Africa's first narco-state; former President João Bernardo Vieira was assassinated in March 2009; meanwhile the country's leading military officers have been designated "drug kingpins" by the U.S. Government.<sup>7</sup> The ongoing Syrian civil war has been the scene of widespread drug manufacturing and consumption by pro-Assad forces, extremist militias and other rebel groups. A Reuters news agency investigation, for example, revealed that "Syria has seen a huge rise in the use and manufacture of amphetamines as fighters on either side of its civil war use the drugs for staying power in battle."<sup>8</sup>

In the cases of North Korea, Guinea-Bissau and Syria, drugs help keep afloat regimes that are inimical to U.S. interests and stated policy objectives. In the case of Afghanistan, the post-2014 stability of the country is in a precarious position due to the pervasiveness of the opium economy. SOF forces operating in proximity to these countries can assist in reinforcing allies and friendly nations by adding intelligence analysis and surveillance training to understand the patterns of the drug trade. In support of national security objectives, SOF personnel can also disrupt the flow of trade in order to bring pressure to bear on these governments. However, SOF personnel must also be aware of how drugs

<sup>4</sup> Department of Defense, *Counternarcotics and Global Threats Strategy*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "A North Korean Corleone," *New York Times*, March 3, 2012, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/04/opinion/sunday/a-north-korean-corleone.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/04/opinion/sunday/a-north-korean-corleone.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>6</sup> Dan Murphy, "Afghan Corruption, Opium and the Strange Case of Kam Air," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 5, 2013, available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/Backchannels/2013/0205/Afghan-corruption-opium-and-the-strange-case-of-Kam-Air>.

<sup>7</sup> Davin O'Regan, "Narco-States: Africa's Next Menace," *New York Times*, March 12, 2012, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/13/opinion/narco-states-africas-next-menace.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Freeman, "Syria's civil war being fought with fighters high on drugs," *The Daily Telegraph*, January 12, 2014, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10567021/Syrias-civil-war-being-fought-with-fighters-high-on-drugs.html>.

may undermine attempts to build partner capacity. Corruption and addiction can take hold of host nation militaries that lie along well-established trafficking routes.

## Weak and Failing States

The presence of drug crop cultivation and narcotics trafficking add fuel to the forces of internal disorder that disrupts governmental authority. Civil society suffers when disorder, criminality, and poverty become ingrained. Cynicism towards government can lead to resentment, which can foster support for alternative power structures in society. A vicious cycle ensues. Such degeneration in governmental legitimacy can lead to the creation of swaths of ungoverned spaces, which provide rich environments for various armed groups to operate freely. Diminishing governmental authority, and the consequent loss of power to protect citizens and provide modest economic security, promotes state weakness and failure. In countries like Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras this dynamic has led to the current state where criminal gangs control segments of cities, outmatching and outgunning law enforcement.

Legitimate agriculture also suffers in weak and failing states where drug are cultivated, thereby lowering prospects for sustainable economic development. Drug crops have a competitive advantage over legitimate crops. Farmers can earn more from drug barons than they can by relying on the workings of a legitimate market. In effect, drug barons can subsidize the production of crops at a higher rate than a government or international organization can with legitimate agriculture. With the profitability of drug crops outstripping that of legitimate crops and with finite arable land in a country, many farmers are compelled to enter the drug trade in order to earn a reasonable living. Peru and Colombia still struggle to bring the cocaine economy under control. The lack of legitimate economic incentives hamstring development projects that have the potential to put these countries on a better track to sustainable economic prosperity.

A global SOF network can assist in weaving a counternarcotics approach within a counter-disorder strategy as a way to promote efforts aimed at generating state strength. Taking advantage of the previous relationship with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in Afghanistan, SOF teams in conjunction with the DEA can assess areas where disrupting drug trafficking networks can reduce support to alternative power structures in a given society. Additionally, key to building partner capacity is reducing the level of corruption in state institutions. Identifying the ways that drug money infiltrates legal avenues would be beneficial to anti-corruption efforts initiated by agencies like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and international organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. In short, a global SOF network will need to treat counternarcotics operations as a way to support other efforts that help legitimate actors gain political capital within societies of weak and failing states.

## Insurgencies and Terrorism

Drug trafficking has been used to finance insurgent and terrorist groups, making them more resilient to attempts to disrupt, dismantle and defeat them. Groups ranging from the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in

Colombia to the Taliban in Afghanistan, from the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in Mali to al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mauritania have benefitted from trading narcotics to purchase arms, pay for expertise, and attract recruits. Additionally, members of jihadist groups from West Africa to the Hindu Kush have consumed a wide range of narcotics as a way to conduct violent operations like suicide bombings. Jihadist suicide bombers are known to consume drugs as varied as heroin, meth, and Ritalin as a way to steady themselves before detonating their devices.<sup>9</sup>

The 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review* directs that

“DOD will rebalance our counterterrorism efforts toward greater emphasis on building partnership capacity, especially in fragile states, while retaining robust capability for direct action, including intelligence, persistent surveillance, precision strike, and Special Operations Forces.”<sup>10</sup>

When permitted to work in a host nation to tackle insurgents or terrorists, SOF can draw on its experience from dealing with the drug-security nexus in Afghanistan. U.S. law permits military support for law enforcement activities when the military proves a direct connection between counterterrorism efforts and counternarcotics operations. One researcher notes:

“Military lift and security support have been provided by special operations forces (SOF) to target high-value individuals where the nexus can be established. In this case, there is no restriction to military support because it is considered a military mission rather than a law enforcement mission.”<sup>11</sup>

Because the military can only directly target drug traffickers who have proven ties to insurgents or terrorists within a host nation, “proving these links can be difficult and time consuming, making it unfeasible for the military to engage in situations that require a quick response.”<sup>12</sup> SOF can therefore be useful in supporting host nation forces with not only targeting high-value individuals, but with training host nation forces to understand the nexus and to incorporate this understanding into their strategies.

Another way to strike at the drug-security nexus is to target the drug financing of insurgent groups and terrorist organizations, which also falls into an area of SOF responsibility. SOF also contributes to counter threat finance (CTF) activities. DOD Directive 5205.14 states that Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special

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<sup>9</sup> Iftikhar Fidous, “What Goes Into the Making of Suicide Bomber,” *The Express Tribune*, July 20, 2010, available at: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/28976/what-goes-into-the-making-of-a-suicide-bomber/>.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014* (Washington, D.C.: OSD, 2014): vii, available at: [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014\\_Quadrennial\\_Defense\\_Review.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> LCDR Jonathan Biehl, USN, “Counternarcotics Operations in Afghanistan: A Way to Success or a Meaningless Cause” (Master Thesis: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2009), available at: <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA512380>.

<sup>12</sup> Curtis, Lisa, *U.S. Counternarcotics Policy: Essential to Fighting Terrorism in Afghanistan Background #2845 on International Conflicts* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, September 30, 2013), available at: <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/09/us-counternarcotics-policy-essential-to-fighting-terrorism-in-afghanistan>.

Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (DASD SO/LIC), serves “as the principal civilian advisor to the Secretary of Defense and the USD(P) on DOD CTF activities, capabilities, and employment of special operations forces, strategic forces, and conventional forces to engage in CTF activities.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the Commander of USSOCOM, is the DOD CTF lead component for synchronizing DOD CTF activities.<sup>14</sup>

## Transnational Criminal Organizations

Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTO) and gangs challenge the government of Mexico while exporting their violence and drugs into the United States. Because their logistics network for Andean cocaine runs over land, DTOs and gangs have also undermined stability in Central America. Mexican DTOs and gangs have close associations with other Central American criminal groups and militaries; law enforcement is often outgunned and outmatched. In Mexico alone, over 70,000 people have been killed in drug-fueled violence since 2006 while homicide rates in countries like Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are far above the regional average.

Where feasible, SOF can “support U.S. government efforts to improve the capacity of Mexico and other illicit drug transiting countries to secure their borders and enforce the rule of law within their territory.”<sup>15</sup> U.S. SOF can partner with the special forces of host nations to ensure their professionalism through anti-corruption and ethics training. Increasing professionalism can help reduce the collusion between host nation military members and drug traffickers. Intelligence and surveillance training can also assist in interdiction efforts, thereby striking at the profits of transnational criminal organizations.

## Protracted Intrastate Conflicts

Because warfare can now be more easily sustained with drug funding, the expected length of conflicts is more than double that of conflicts that started prior to 1980.<sup>16</sup> This can be attributed to the accessibility of drug resources and revenues that permit militarily weaker groups to maintain their viability rather than being swept from the battlefield. Segments of the drug trafficking infrastructure are now part of the strategic equation for many combatants. With drugs now playing the role of an economic engine for many belligerents, battles for control over aspects of drug trafficking has occurred. As a result, drugs have often deepened conflicts. Not only do drugs provide another means to continue fighting, but they also provide another reason as well.

Many violent non-state groups have a vested interest in the ongoing unrest and disorder in their areas so they can secure transportation routes for drugs. Clashes over drug resources, resembling “turf wars,” routinely occur among the warring groups in Afghanistan, Colombia, and Myanmar. These conflicts engender a vicious cycle where sustaining the conflict becomes necessary to secure access to parts of a trafficking network because the rise in violence

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Directive 5205.14* (Washington, D.C.: OSD, August 14, 2010): 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Defense, *Counternarcotics and Global Threats Strategy*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler and Mans Soderbom, “On the Duration of Civil War,” *Policy Working Paper 2861*, (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2001).

between groups becomes increasingly costly. These phenomena are not only present in drug producing countries, but in transit countries as well. For example, during the war in Bosnia the police chief of Sarajevo accused a tri-ethnic mafia of prolonging the siege of the city to profit from the black market.<sup>17</sup> Weapons were traded for drugs and smuggled to both sides of the siege; “the result was to reinforce the siege—and thus prolongation of the war.”<sup>18</sup> It takes considerable political will and equal resources for governments to deal with the actors engaged in drug trafficking who want conflicts to continue.

## SOF: A Global Force for a Global Problem

In an effort to end a protracted conflict and contain or mitigate its effects in these region, SOF can be especially valuable. SOF can work to monitor, detect and trace drug trafficking flows in order to disrupt the criminal activities of combatant groups; this can add pressure on these groups, making them more amenable to ceasefire or peace agreements. In situations where nation building and stability operations are mandated, SOF can adopt a varied counternarcotics approach. Hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies should be added to lists as objectives that need to be secured in an intervention. These facilities are also now a war-making resource for combatant groups where they have been looted. Attaching as much importance to these facilities as weapons depots, ammo dumps, and campaign headquarters may lead to a decrease in the overall violence in the conflict.

Additionally, reducing drug use among combatants can lead to the lowering of violence overall. By lessening the consumption of drugs among belligerents, command and control can be strengthened among them, thus increasing the likelihood of adherence to the parameters of any possible peace accord. Reducing drug use also limits the potential for further atrocities. This can promote a virtuous cycle. By focusing on reducing drug use, peace initiatives have a greater chance to flourish, thereby lessening the conditions of intense violence that led many fighters to take drugs. SOF can assist with disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs by supporting the Medical Civil Action Program (MEDCAP) efforts that are focused on treating drug addicted former combatants.

## Conclusion

The menace of drug trafficking will be an abiding source of insecurity and instability worldwide for the foreseeable future. International security and the drug trade will be intertwined against a backdrop of fragmented sovereignty, overlapping allegiances, and untold numbers of influential actors. As a result, the drug-security nexus will be more complex, involving more players, more sources, and more diversity than has been previously witnessed.<sup>19</sup> Such a nexus challenges the DOD’s strategic priorities, listed in the 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, to “protect the homeland; build security globally; and project power and win decisively.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Bourgarel, Xavier, *Bosnie: Anatomie d'un Conflit* (Paris: LaDecouverte, 1996), 126.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Andreas, “The Clandestine Political Economy of War and Peace in Bosnia,” *International Studies Quarterly* (June 2004): 39.

<sup>19</sup> Booth, Martin, *Opium: A History* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1996), 290-91.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, v.

Counternarcotics operations, therefore, cannot be done for counternarcotics sake alone. Counternarcotics is a means, not an end. SOF will play a key role in tackling the illegal trade and its role in bolstering threats to U.S. national security such as rogue and narco-states, weak and failing states, insurgencies and terrorism, transnational organized crime and protracted intrastate conflicts. Drug trafficking's deep intersection with other international and national has made the illicit trade a truly global problem that requires a response that is equally vast.