

The Logistics of Opiate Trafficking in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

Based on fieldwork in Central Asia, the article details the routes and methods of smuggling that make up the northward flow of opiates out of Afghanistan and through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Information obtained from Central Asian officials is used to discuss trends in the composition, organization and practice of opiate trafficking groups. Key among these is their growing professionalism and their degree of specialization by product and trafficking route. These trends and the growing potential for trafficking from these trunk routes into Xinjiang highlight the challenges to Central Asian law enforcement agencies: to match the level of professionalism of traffickers; and to cooperate internationally, including with China and possibly through engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Keywords • Central Asia • trafficking • smuggling routes • narcotics • Tajikistan • Kyrgyzstan • Kazakhstan • organized crime

This paper investigates how criminal groups organize opiate trafficking from Afghanistan through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. These three countries were chosen because they are a geographical axis of the Central Asian drug trade, taking heroin directly from the source in Afghanistan and moving it north to the Russian border. While Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are also transit countries, transport options through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are less numerous and therefore more amenable to analysis and interdiction. The article draws on four months of fieldwork in Central Asia that included meetings with approximately 100 local law enforcement officials as well as numerous interviews with staff from international organizations and residents in key trafficking regions. It begins by describing the routes through each country and trafficking groups' modes of operation at different points on the journey north, from swimming and walking to car and train. This is followed by an analysis of broader trends in trafficking and a discussion of the implications of these trends for regional law enforcement agencies.

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Map 1. Opiate Trafficking Routes through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan & Kazakhstan

Note: Routes transiting Uzbekistan are not shown; routes over the Tajik-Afghan border are essentially uncountable.

Trafficking Into and Through Tajikistan

As Afghanistan's northern route has flourished since the mid-1990s, Tajikistan has become the heaviest transit country for opiates in Central Asia. It shares a 1,200 km border with Afghanistan and its capacity for border policing is low. The border follows the Panj river from a high

altitude, rugged terrain close to China down to open plains near the nexus of the Tajik-Afghan-Uzbek borders. In recent years Tajikistan has faced the challenge of reclaiming responsibility for this border from Russian troop contingents that have gradually been withdrawing. This process is now complete and although Russia still keeps a garrison in Tajikistan its commanders no longer have control over troop activity on the Afghan border.

As heroin processing capacity has shifted into Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran, facilities in northern Afghanistan have sprung up that are dedicated to serving the northern route via Tajikistan.¹ Dedicated heroin processing in Afghanistan and a porous border has resulted in very large flows of a variety of opiate grades into and through Tajikistan. The logistics of trafficking opiates across the Tajik-Afghan border present little challenge and the probabilities of law enforcement interdiction are firmly in favour of the traffickers.

A successful crossing for individual traffickers can be made by swimming and wading across the Panj river. This is the simplest form of trafficking whereby one, sometimes two to three men, typically carry a few kilograms each across the border.² Since the surveillance abilities of border guards are extremely limited individual traffickers can easily make the trip across the river undetected. The main challenge for the traffickers is the climate, which makes swimming unlikely in autumn and winter, or even spring along the elevated sections around Khorog. However, boat crossings are common and enable year-round trips.³

The area around Moscovsky and Shurobad has also witnessed more large-scale incursions by traffickers. In discussions with a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) border assessment mission in 2004, Tajik Border Guard units reported smuggling groups consisting of “up to 120 persons with armed escorts and communications units’ backing.”⁴ While these reports may be somewhat exaggerated, it is also apparent that there are occasional crossings of sizeable, well-armed groups who are willing to rely on self-defence capabilities as much or more than stealth.

The real risk of failure in this type of trafficking is posed by border guard patrols within the first few kilometres inside Tajik borders. There is a degree of luck in this, since an individual trafficker or group can be

¹ Brian Iselin, *The Afghan-rim's Heroin Economy*, Stockholm, 2004; UNODC, *Central Asia Strategic Framework 2004-2007*, 2004.

² Women are unheard of in this form of trafficking

³ In 2005 a further method was discovered – micro-light aircraft. Shot down in August with 18 kg of heroin aboard as it crossed into Tajikistan, it is unknown whether the aircraft had made previous successful deliveries.

⁴ UNODC Regional Office for Central Asia, *Tajik-Afghan Border Assessment Mission August 2004*, 1.

spotted at random by troops. Generally, however, the limited mobility of border guards and the difficulties in their communication systems give the advantage to the trafficker, who is usually knowledgeable regarding the areas in which troops can easily and often patrol. Furthermore, even when detected, smugglers often have enough warning of the approach of border guards to escape, occasionally dumping the opiates and leaving troops with a seizure but no arrest.⁵

In the medium term, the balance of risks is likely to change somewhat as border guard capacity improves. For example, UNODC has been providing equipment and training to mobile troop units, who will become active in early 2006 and will create greater uncertainty for traffickers. Similarly, support from a number of other donors such as the European Union, will improve communications and general troop effectiveness. However, in the short term, the risk level for traffickers using illegal immigration as their method will remain largely unchanged.

Another method of bringing opiates from Afghanistan to Tajikistan is via legal crossings. These are economically and socially important for both countries, particularly for communities on either side of the border. The volume of traffic using these crossings has risen rapidly in recent years and Tajik border officials expect this trend to continue, creating a significant challenge for Tajik border control at fixed checkpoints.⁶

Smuggling methods through these checkpoints vary from the very simple to the very sophisticated. At the Tajik-Afghan bridge in Khorog, for example, it is possible to carry drugs without any great effort at concealment, since body checks or inspection of goods are very rare on what are predominantly foot crossings to markets in Khorog.⁷ However, such simple methods are becoming more risky at the majority of Tajik-Afghan crossings as a result of more stringent Tajik controls, mostly the result of international assistance in response to the Russian handover and increasing trade. Particularly important is the common use of drug-sniffing dogs; these are now crucial to Tajik counter-narcotics efforts and account for around 40 percent of all drug seizures (both inland and at the borders).⁸ They are quite effective at detecting the more sophisticated efforts at hiding drugs, such as within car panels and engine parts. However, the potential of dogs cannot be exploited entirely in Tajikistan because unfavourable local conditions (such as temperature, altitude,

⁵ It is quite regular for local press to report the seizure of drugs but not the escape of the smuggler(s).

⁶ Author's interview with the Chief of Tajik Border Guard Intelligence and the Tajik Border Guard Analysis Centre, September 12, 2005; and with the Chief of Customs and the Chief of Border Guards at the Tem (Khorog) crossing, September 13, 2005.

⁷ Author's interviews with the Chief of Customs and the Chief of Border Guards at the Tem (Khorog) crossing, September 13 2005.

⁸ This estimate was provided by the Tajik DCA's Analytical Centre in Dushanbe – author's interview, September 12 2005.

kennel conditions) reduce the duration in which they can be used. This is particularly the case at higher eastern altitudes.

Traffickers using vehicles and legal crossings are more likely to continue further into Tajikistan before connecting with the next link in the smuggling chain. By contrast, incursions by foot, swimming or boat require the trafficker to make contact in settlements close to the border. Thus, the next link in the trafficking chain is likely to be a resident of these settlements, receiving those who have crossed successfully and serving as a storage depot. Those in control of these depots are the same people who organize onward trafficking through Tajikistan, while the couriers return to Afghanistan.

As the abilities of Tajikistan's border guards improve and as trade between Tajikistan and Afghanistan expands, traffickers are likely to increase their use of legal border crossings and decrease their reliance on river crossings and illegal immigration. The likelihood of growing legal flows of traffic across the Tajik-Afghan border will create pressure on Tajik checkpoints that already struggle to monitor the goods and people passing through them. With facilities improving, any trend that increases the preference of traffickers for using legal crossings will encourage a greater reliance on corruption in order to avoid random inspections or detection by sniffer dogs.

Drug trafficking through Tajikistan towards Kyrgyzstan occurs via both the east and west of the country. The Deputy Director of the Khorog Drug Control Agency (DCA) office sees the town of Darvaz as a fairly clear dividing point, with everything crossing the border to the west travelling via western Tajikistan, probably transiting Dushanbe. To the east, the vast majority of opiates trafficked over the border are destined for centralization in Khorog in preparation for the Pamir Highway to Osh.⁹ The possible exceptions to this rule are crossings from Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor into the southeastern corner of Tajikistan, which may bypass Khorog – according to locals, Afghans cross the border in all seasons¹⁰ and the Khorog DCA has begun to investigate the possibility.¹¹

Trafficking through both the east and west of Tajikistan relies overwhelmingly on car and truck trips and opiate seizures on roads accounted for 70 percent of the total in 2004,¹² since rail and air links are

⁹ Author's interview, September 13 2005.

¹⁰ Author's interviews in Shaymak and Tokhtamish, September 15 2005.

¹¹ Specifically, they took advantage of my fieldwork to conduct a drive-through investigation of trafficking routes across the south-eastern section of the Tajik-Afghan border.

¹² 13 percent by railway, 8 percent by air and 7 percent by off-road tracks – Drug Control Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Report on Drug Control Situation in the Republic of Tajikistan in 2004*, Dushanbe, 2005.

not well-developed. Trafficking east from Khorog and along the Pamir Highway through Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO – capital Murgab) mostly occurs in private cars. Due to its remoteness, altitude and poorer condition, the Pamir Highway does not receive as many large trucks as roads in western Tajikistan. Car drivers are typically either Tajik or Kyrgyz citizens, although the majority leaving Khorog are Tajiks. It takes a car at least eight hours in good conditions and significantly more in the lengthy periods of bad weather to drive the 311 km to Murgab.

Depending upon the trafficking group and the security of its connections, there may be a change of car and driver in Murgab. The Chief of the Tajik KGB in Murgab is aware of six or seven groups that organize opiate shipments from Khorog to Osh in Kyrgyzstan via Murgab.¹³ The high proportion of ethnic Kyrgyz that live in eastern GBAO and around Murgab is conducive to trafficking into Kyrgyzstan, but more important is the economic dependence of Murgab upon Osh,¹⁴ which creates a high flow of traffic (relative to population size) across the Tajik-Kyrgyz border at the Bor Dobur crossing.

Opiate addiction in GBAO has been decreasing over the last couple of years and the DCA in Khorog reports that the general population is intolerant of dealers and will pass on information about their activities.¹⁵ This is a first step towards monitoring traffickers, to whom locals are more indifferent, or at least cautious. Despite decreasing consumer demand in GBAO, Khorog DCA does not agree with the belief of outside observers that the volume of drugs travelling the Pamir Highway has decreased.¹⁶ Instead, both the DCA and the KGB regional office feel that they are increasingly disadvantaged in terms of equipment and useful connections when compared with the traffickers. Trafficking groups are becoming smaller, more cohesive and more professional, specializing more strongly in trafficking and becoming less concerned with selling to local consumers. This is something of a return to historic trends, since demand for heroin grades in GBAO was never high until large quantities began transiting the region in the late 1990s, spilling over and creating addiction. Now, it seems, trafficking groups are relatively less interested in retail sales.

¹³ Author's interview, September 16 2005.

¹⁴ Traditionally, almost all consumer goods and a significant proportion of eastern GBAO's food came from Osh. Dependence on Osh is still high, but is increasingly complemented by imports directly from China via the crossing at the Kulma Pass.

¹⁵ Author's interview with the Tajik DCA's Analytical Centre in Dushanbe, September 12 2005; author's interviews with Khorog DCA officers, September 13-14 2005.

¹⁶ It should be noted that this view also conflicts with Khorog DCA's own headquarters in Dushanbe, where the DCA Director was in agreement with UN assessments on the decreasing importance of the GBAO route.

The flow of drugs through western Tajikistan is greater than through GBAO. There are myriad routes by which traffickers can move opiates through southwestern Tajikistan. In terms of crossing the Afghan border, the area around Moscovsky has become the biggest concern when measured by the quantity of seizures and in 2004 it accounted for 78 percent of all opiate seizures.¹⁷ However, these figures may be misleading since the Moscovsky Border Guard unit is the best-equipped of any along the Afghan border and therefore better at effecting seizures.

Almost all opiates destined for Kyrgyzstan via western Tajikistan transit Dushanbe and use the M34 north to Ayni and onwards to the Ferghana Valley and Khudjand. The tangle of borders between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan means that some traffickers go to Khudjand via Uzbekistan while others take less developed roads that keep them within Tajikistan. Crossing into Uzbekistan and back again requires clearing additional border checkpoints, but bribery at these is standard and vehicles inspections uncommon. As one example of the fluidity of borders and corruption between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, a Tajik DCA officer related a case in which he had tracked an Uzbek policeman crossing the border repeatedly to facilitate drug shipments. During preparations to arrest him, however, the DCA officer was pressured into abandoning the case by members of his own office.¹⁸

From Khudjand, there are several routes to Osh. The Kyrgyz border is near to Khudjand and crossing this border is simple, as is bribing or circumventing official crossings further east in the Ferghana valley, leading to Batken in Kyrgyzstan. Alternatively, the more direct route of trafficking requires going through Uzbekistan, via Kokand and then either Andijan or Ferghana. The road network and terrain here allow for many variations in routing, including the ability to avoid the major cities. However, this is unnecessary as the risks do not increase significantly by entering settlements. Furthermore, the handover from one driver to the next generally occurs in or on the outskirts of cities, sometimes with a division of the load in order to serve the local consumer market (more on this below).

There is also a central route through Tajikistan that joins with the Pamir Highway at Sary-Tash in Kyrgyzstan. The road from Garm to the Kyrgyz border is in very poor condition but is navigable by four wheel drive in spring and summer. During Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) actions in 1999 and 2000, it appeared that mountain crossings into Kyrgyzstan from this area were regular. Currently, opiate trafficking

¹⁷ Drug Control Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2005.

¹⁸ Author's interview, September 15 2005.

flows here are unknown but likely to be tiny, although the feasibility of trafficking will improve as the local infrastructure is upgraded.¹⁹

The many internal checkpoints present in Tajikistan in Soviet times are now unused for drug detection. Law enforcement officers see the removal of checkpoints as a positive development in general, but lament its effect on their ability to intercept opiate trafficking. This is a questionable comparison since intercepting drugs was not the purpose of these checkpoints in the pre-independence era. Having said that, it is nevertheless true that the movement of traffic is freer.

Trafficking Into and Through Kyrgyzstan

In contrast to Tajikistan, where over half the opiates seized are intercepted on its borders²⁰ (primarily with Afghanistan), few seizures take place at Kyrgyz borders. Whereas the greatest hurdle for traffickers in Tajikistan is the Tajik-Afghan border, the equivalent in Kyrgyzstan is the avoidance of law enforcements' intelligence collection within the country.

Smuggling into Kyrgyzstan via the Pamir Highway in eastern Tajikistan is considered easy, as border controls are not stringent. Despite the difficult terrain around Kyrgyzstan's Bor Dobur crossing, Customs and Border Guard officers both report that it is possible to circumvent their post via foot or pack animal.²¹ For traffickers however, the more appealing method is to continue with the vehicles organized in Khorog and/or Murgab, particularly because the distance between settlements on either side of the border is problematic given the terrain. The distance from the border to Osh is 229 km, which also is a major trade route for goods arriving from China. The risks of detection are minimal and the feasibility of trafficking is likely to increase further with the rehabilitation of stretches of this road by an Asian Development Bank loan.²²

From western Tajikistan directly into Kyrgyzstan or via Uzbekistan, opiate trafficking groups are able to take advantage of Kyrgyzstan's Osh *oblast's* weak border controls. Its borders are very porous, subject to huge

¹⁹ The main road to the Kyrgyz border is the subject of an Asian Development Bank rehabilitation project. Asian Development Bank, *Technical Assistance to the Republic of Tajikistan for Preparing the Second Road Rehabilitation Project*, Document TAR:TAJ 32531, 2001.

²⁰ Drug Control Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2005.

²¹ Interview with Chief of Bor Dobur Customs, September 18 2005; interview with Commander of Bor Dobur Border Guards, September 18 2005.

²² "ADB to help upgrade 124 km stretch of former southern Silk Road," *Asia in Focus*, September 28 2005, available: Factiva; <<http://global.factiva.com/sb/default.aspx?NAPC=S&fcpil=en>> (September 30 2005).

amounts of smuggling of all categories of goods²³ and are pervaded by corrupt law enforcement officials on both sides. With regard to direct crossings from Tajikistan, the border near to Khudjand and further east near Kyrgyzstan's Batken are both permeable and were given notoriety by IMU successes in the area in 1999 and 2000; Kyrgyz Customs and Border Guards rate the area a high concern and consider its borders very porous.²⁴

With a number of feasible routes, there are a variety of trafficking methods. Compared with crossing the Afghan-Tajik border however, opiate trafficking from Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan involves a greater use of vehicles and greater effort at concealment. Where opiate stockpiles in Afghanistan can be kept close to the Tajik border and then ferried across to nearby settlements, the priority destination for trafficking from Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan is Osh, which is 417 km from Murgab and 299 km from Khudjand. The preference of traffickers is therefore to use vehicles to cross borders and there is also a growing preference for eschewing vehicle changes. Along the Pamir Highway, it is the norm to have a single driver and vehicle from Murgab to Osh, generally carrying passengers because concealment and convenience are improved by conflating the trafficking journey with a normal trading trip.

Osh is the staging post for trafficking further north and a city of significant drug addiction in its own right.²⁵ The estimated flows of heroin through Kyrgyzstan make Osh one of the world's heroin trafficking capitals. The Osh City Police identify two types of groups involved in the drug trade in their jurisdiction. The first type consists of wholesale receivers who purchase drugs for distribution to their retail networks, generally including the area to Jalalabad but centred upon Osh. The second type of group sits more firmly in the international trafficking network and generally avoids retail sales. Instead, its profits arise from receiving drugs from Tajikistan and organizing their onward transport to Bishkek, most of which is intended for Kazakhstan and beyond.²⁶

For onward transportation, the Osh-Bishkek road is dominant, since options through central Kyrgyzstan are very limited. As through Tajikistan, the risks of detection along this major artery are small and seizures within Kyrgyzstan are overwhelmingly concentrated in Osh and Bishkek. Most loads are hidden with varying degrees of sophistication in

²³ For example, the Head of Osh Customs Counter-Smuggling Department estimated that some 85-90 percent of the goods imported from China into Osh are smuggled onwards to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – author's interview, September 19 2005.

²⁴ Interview with Deputy Head of Osh oblast Customs, September 19 2005; interview with Deputy Commander of Kyrgyz Border Guards Southern Command, September 19 2005.

²⁵ The Osh area has 3,457 registered addicts, with UNODC estimating the real number at 16,000-20,000 – correspondence with UNODC Tashkent, January 2006.

²⁶ Author's interviews with the Chief of Osh City Police and the Head of Osh City Police Counter-narcotics, September 19 2005.

vehicles, with a mixture of private cars and trading trucks. The latter carry legitimate trade goods simultaneously, with the profit on these raised by the fees from drug trafficking, which more than pay for transportation costs. In northern Kyrgyzstan, the DCA has observed that the secondary road running parallel to the major highway from Kalininskoy/Kara-Balta to Bishkek is popular for opiate transportation in private cars since the road is in good condition but traffic is light.²⁷

Bishkek is the final centralisation point in Kyrgyzstan. As in Osh, there is a significant division between groups that focus on retail sales and those that re-pack shipments for transport into Kazakhstan. However, some consignments leaving Osh have no need to make contact in Bishkek and simply carry on over the Kazakh border. For those that feed dealers in Bishkek, supply networks from Osh might be characterized better as national retail distribution organizations than as international trafficking chains.

Trafficking Into and Through Kazakhstan

The Kyrgyz-Kazakh border is very porous. Not only is it easy to walk across undetected, but large vehicles also cross illegally, such as in the regular smuggling of fuel from Kazakhstan in large trucks.²⁸ It is likely that opiate couriers in Kyrgyz trucks that use illegal crossings would prefer a handover in Almaty, since they will be unregistered in Kazakhstan's Customs and Border Guard systems which are computerized nationally. Here, private cars offer more flexibility but the driver still faces problems with the immigration system, should he or she ever be challenged.

If a trafficking group has invested effort in concealing a shipment in a vehicle before setting out from Osh or Bishkek, it is then more likely to use official crossings. For opiate smuggling from Kyrgyzstan northwards, the most important of these are to the north and to the west of Bishkek. However, these crossings are not major venues for opiate seizures, which suggests two possibilities: traffickers are avoiding these crossings; or the volume of legitimate traffic and/or the level of corruption has rendered trafficking invisible. The latter explanations seem more likely, given that inspections of the large flows of traffic are very rare and drug-sniffing dogs are not regularly used.

The majority of opiates coming from the Bishkek area pass through or near Almaty. This is due to both the layout of the road network and the significant consumer market in Almaty *oblast*, now one of the largest

²⁷ Author's interviews with DCA officers from Bishkek, September 20-21 2005.

²⁸ Author's interviews with DCA officers and local UNODC staff, September 22-24 2005.

in the country.²⁹ Almaty had the largest volume of heroin seizures in Kazakhstan in 2004 and this situation is likely to be repeated in 2005.³⁰ According to the Almaty Drug Combat Unit, opiate stockpiling occurs on the outskirts of the city and retail groups break this down for supplying low-level dealers. Again, there is apparently a division between local receivers and onward traffickers, since following the trail back from street dealers only leads to small stockpiles dedicated to retail sales.³¹

From Almaty, Kazakhstan's transport infrastructure offers many options for trafficking further north and into Russia. The country's combination of long, porous borders and relatively well-developed infrastructure makes it a huge challenge to track and intercept opiate trafficking routes. It is therefore difficult to pinpoint particular transport corridors as necessary,³² although it seems likely that the Almaty-Taldyqorgha-Georgievka and Almaty-Balkash-Astana roads are popular – both these routes have witnessed sizeable seizures in recent years. While the general direction of routes towards Europe encourages heading west through Kazakhstan from Kyrgyzstan, Almaty nevertheless remains a link in the international trafficking chain, with significant groups based there.

Southeastern Kazakhstan is also where traffickers can access a rail network. From Almaty, two routes are available - the first travels north-west to Astana, from where there are a number of rail links into Russia. The second follows the road north to Taldyqorgha, Georgievka and into Russia. It seems that these options are not heavily used by opiate traffickers and few seizures occur on trains relative to those by road.³³

The Professionalization of Trafficking

The Deputy Director of the Tajik DCA Khorog sub-office summed up the evolution of trafficking groups by noting that “they are becoming smaller, their members are becoming more stuck to each other and they are becoming more professional.”³⁴ This trend is also prevalent in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where professionalization has proceeded further. It is therefore more obvious in Tajikistan and is noted with alarm by many officials. Instead of a disparate network consisting of a

²⁹ UNODC estimates the number of heroin users as 24,000–27,000 – correspondence with UNODC Tashkent, January 2006.

³⁰ UNODC, *Country Profile: Kazakhstan*, 2005.

³¹ Author's interview with the Chief of the Almaty Drug Combat Unit, October 20 2005.

³² UNODC is currently organizing support to Kazakhstan for creating internal checkpoints trained and equipped for trafficking detection, a project which requires identifying these corridors if it is to be efficient.

³³ Author's interview with the Chief of the Almaty Drug Combat Unit, October 20 2005; correspondence with UNODC Regional Office for Central Asia, January 2006.

³⁴ Author's interview, September 13 2005.

large number of low-level traffickers, trafficking networks that link through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are becoming more streamlined.

This is not to suggest that they are becoming overarching transnational groups organized with strong hierarchies, although efforts to establish these have been observed in other types of organized crime in Central Asia.³⁵ Nor is this trend at odds with the readily observed phenomena that those carrying drugs between points in the network are rarely knowledgeable about their 'superiors'. Each driver still operates on a delivery-based contract that does not require him or her to know much about the group of which he or she is a part. However, it does seem that each node in the network is becoming more tightly-knit, with repetitive contracting of low-level drivers and a hardening of criminal group membership at the middle levels as criminality becomes their core occupation (more on this below). Drivers are rarely self-motivated entrepreneurs but instead rely on the contacts between groups at a level above them. To give a (legal) business analogy, it is as though small-scale, local companies are evolving into medium-sized nationally federated organizations, with greater capacity for cross-border distribution. In one case in early 2005, Kazakhstan's Committee for National Security reported the arrest of members of an all-Tajik group operating out of south Kazakhstan, organizing couriers and supplies from Tajikistan with the intent (and presumably the capability) to move these on to Russia.³⁶

The professionalization of opiate trafficking groups poses significant additional challenges for Central Asian law enforcement. Most importantly, it indicates that enforcing the law against the middle and upper levels of trafficking groups will become even more difficult. Doing so is already a huge challenge given the entanglement of politicians and law enforcement officials with organized crime (if not their direct involvement in it). The majority of operational officers interviewed by the author could relate a story in which they felt pressure to halt an investigation, sometimes coming from within their own agency and sometimes from another agency. Significantly, the warning or 'advice' rarely came from outside the law enforcement community.

As members of organized criminal groups in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan become more devoted to professional criminality, their incentive to cultivate and maintain relationships with officialdom becomes stronger. At the middle levels of such groups, personnel evolve from being 'moonlighters' to 'day-jobbers', from criminality as a parallel

³⁵ UNODC Regional Office for Central Asia, *Organized Crime in Central Asia*, 2003.

³⁶ "Drug trafficking route is closed," *Khabar News*, January 26 2005, via the Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agency, relayed January 27 2005.

income to criminality as a livelihood.³⁷ Moreover, if the degree of specialization perceived by Central Asian officials is accurate, then the professionalization of criminals in a particular business, such as opiate trafficking, makes it more essential for them to insulate their business from law enforcement action, since they do not have an immediate second occupation. As groups become more professional, so does their interest in professionalizing the corruption of security agencies, reducing their incentive to gamble on ad hoc corruption in the event of detection.

At the level of couriers, the vast majority have traditionally been unemployed, at least in the formal economic sense, but the view of Central Asian officials is that involvement in opiate trafficking is increasingly seen by some as a first option rather than a final one.³⁸ As with the relationships between law enforcement and the middle levels of trafficking groups, the relationships between carriers and wholesalers are becoming more regularized and mutually dependent. In the words of the Chief of the Tajik KGB in Murgab, “these people now do nothing except for moving drugs.”³⁹

Professionalization raises the skill requirements for successful counter-trafficking efforts. First, it becomes more difficult to infiltrate groups as their membership becomes less diffuse and more focused on their speciality, something mentioned specifically by the Chief of Osh City Police,⁴⁰ the Chief of the Almaty Drug Combat Unit⁴¹ and the Chief of Tajikistan’s Border Guard Intelligence.⁴² Low-level couriers are more expensive to buy off because they anticipate a stream of future income and mid-level organizers become harder to identify because group cohesion increases and the regularity of contact between group members for the purposes of organization falls. The Head of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Security’s assertion that trafficking flows vary with the arrest of particular opiate smuggling professionals⁴³ stands in contrast to the findings of Icdyugu and Toktas on human trafficking through Turkey, where a primary characteristic of the trafficking network was its flexibility and lack of dependence on particular nodes.⁴⁴ As per the

³⁷ This appears to be a tendency in Central Asian organized crime in general - UNODC Regional Office for Central Asia, 2003.

³⁸ The Deputy Director of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure commented that a “scary” sign of professionalization is when drug trade occupations are passed down in a family, “father-to-son” – author’s interview, December 5 2005.

³⁹ Author’s interview, September 16 2005.

⁴⁰ Author’s interview, September 19 2005.

⁴¹ Author’s interview, October 20 2005.

⁴² Author’s interview, September 12 2005.

⁴³ Author’s interview, September 21 2005.

⁴⁴ “How do smuggling and trafficking operate via irregular border crossings in the Middle East?” *International Migration* 40, 6 (2002): 26-54.

discussion of specialization below, this seems to indicate that trafficking coordination modalities vary significantly with the smuggled product.

Second and related to this, the value of informants rises and therefore their handling by law enforcement is more crucial. While the impunity with which opiate traffickers operate in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan is still striking by western standards, the professionalization of trafficking groups is reducing the surrounding community's knowledge of the specifics of criminal activities. For example, while the DCA in Khorog has identified a significant number of active traffickers in their jurisdiction, collecting intelligence on the timing of their contact with opiate shipments is becoming more difficult.⁴⁵ In all three countries, the need for care in handling informants is growing, something that has been acknowledged recently by UNODC in its assistance to the Tajik DCA.⁴⁶ In general, the capacity of Central Asian agencies to handle delicate information and protect sources is low because of corruption and the generally low level of professionalism in law enforcement institutions.

Third, there is a growing need for effective cooperation between law enforcement agencies that share responsibility for counter-trafficking. If intelligence becomes more fragmented as trafficking groups become more professional, it reduces the ability of any single agency to form a useful profile of group membership or to triangulate operational intelligence fragments in order to make significant interceptions. Corruption is once again a problem here in compromising the willingness of officers to share intelligence, but also relevant is the institutional rivalry that currently affects inter-agency cooperation, particularly in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁷

Last, the effectiveness of counter-trafficking regimes at specific points on popular trafficking routes becomes more important. As groups become more professional and concealment techniques become more sophisticated, the need for intelligence collection and analysis grows relative to the effectiveness of random checks. Nevertheless, identifying bottlenecks and bolstering their detection capacity – such as through the use of sniffer dogs – would raise the risk to trafficking groups investing in a long-distance, high-profit shipment.

Overall, the challenge for Central Asian law enforcement is to improve their own professionalism in order to combat the professionalization of opiate trafficking groups. However, the financial incentives are much stronger for the latter. That this is important is acknowledged in UNODC's DCA projects in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan,

⁴⁵ Author's interviews with Khorog DCA officers, September 13 – 15 2005.

⁴⁶ This has, for example, included training sessions on advanced informant handling.

⁴⁷ Jacob Townsend, "Counter-narcotics Competition and Cooperation in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 19 2005.

where bonuses are available to officers that make substantial seizures. Since professionalism is mostly induced from expected prestige and/or payment, the differing expectations of law enforcement officers and opiate traffickers make this a difficult imbalance to address.

Possession of Arms

The prevalence of arms-possession by traffickers varies geographically and between levels within the trafficking group. When crossing the Tajik-Afghan border, it is common for traffickers to carry their own weapons, generally a pistol or semi-automatic machine gun. Gunfights between traffickers and border guards occur frequently and regularly involve more than one smuggler. When smugglers are caught, press reports often refer to a seizure of drugs and arms, although the view of Tajik law enforcement agents is that arms seizures are only incidental to drug trafficking, since smugglers usually do not intend to trade the weapons they are carrying.

Beyond the Tajik-Afghan border, armed confrontation between traffickers and law enforcement is much less common. Individual drivers do not regularly carry weapons and their ability to use these successfully to avoid arrest is very limited. According to Kyrgyz and Tajik DCA officers, the possession of arms by traffickers operating away from the Tajik-Afghan border is more for protection from other criminals and for security during a handover of drugs than for protection from law enforcement. Instead, the first device a trafficker deploys against officials is the offer of a bribe. In the first instance, this might be in the context of the regular but random extortion situations initiated by police officers on the side of the road. In the unlikely event that a vehicle inspection is carried out, a substantially higher bribe is required and will more often prove ineffective.⁴⁸ At the extreme end, where law enforcement agents are already aware of the shipment, neither bribe nor weapon is likely to be effective unless the arresting officers act with the intention of securing a payoff.

Above the lowest level of the trafficking group, the possession of arms is ubiquitous, which fleshes out the observations of Macfarlane and Torjesen in Kyrgyzstan, where they found that gun ownership in the general population was low despite an apparent increase in organized crime.⁴⁹ In the words of the Deputy Director of the DCA in Bishkek, “organized crime has its own rules, including having a nice car and a nice

⁴⁸ Author's interviews with: Kyrgyz DCA officers, September 19-22 2005; Tajik DCA officers from the Khorog sub-office, September 13-15 2005; UNODC Bishkek staff, September 22-25 2005.

⁴⁹ S. Neil Macfarlane and Stina Torjesen, “Awash with Weapons? The Case of Small Arms in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 24, 1 (2005): 5-19.

weapon.” However, he also added that “they are not afraid of us”, reiterating that if traffickers expect to use arms, it is more often against one another than against law enforcement.⁵⁰ The greatest significance of weapons for members of trafficking groups at the middle and higher levels is as a status symbol. Eschewing violence is their optimal logistical strategy and it is far more productive for them to deploy corruption rather than weapons to ward off encroachment on their business by the authorities.

Concealment Techniques and Specialization

A trend observed by law enforcement officers in all three countries is the increasing sophistication of concealment techniques. For example, Kyrgyzstan’s Ministry of National Security mentioned a case in 2005 in which a “significant quantity” of heroin was hidden in the expertly-modified rear axel of a BMW, stowed in Kyrgyzstan with the intention of driving the high-grade product through Kazakhstan for unloading in Russia.⁵¹ Seizures in Afghanistan of loads in preparation for the northern route have shown even greater sophistication and in some notable cases traffickers have packed heroin into coffee and cat food packages, disguising them as internationally-recognized products such as Nescafe and Kitekat, complete with labels in different languages (mostly European).⁵²

These cases highlight two features of traffickers’ investment in concealment: it varies with the grade of heroin being smuggled; and related to this, with the distance over which the trafficking network intends to deliver. Generally, higher purity heroin is destined for Europe and the greater expected profits from these shipments justify more effort in organizing sophisticated concealment. The trend towards better methods of concealment and the preparation of these shipments closer to the source hints at the international links enjoyed by trafficking groups in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Their investment in concealment so early in the illicit journey implies that they have received orders from, or organized distribution for, a long way down the trafficking chain, in some cases Western Europe.

Air links create another opportunity for long-distance delivery and require less complex logistical arrangements. In the majority of cases, intercepted drugs are found in the possession of a citizen from a Central Asian republic and the flight is bound for Russia. Concealment in body

⁵⁰ However, he did report two recent cases of traffickers firing on DCA officers - author’s interview, September 21 2005.

⁵¹ Author’s interview with the Ministry of Security’s Head of Counter-Narcotics, September 21 2005.

⁵² Drug Control Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2005.

cavities is common. Such shipments usually consist of a small amount of high-quality heroin and although there is an up-front investment in the airfare, when compared with the costs and logistical challenges of overland trafficking from Central Asia to Russia, the profit margin is still attractive. To the author's knowledge, there have been no bulk seizures of opiates on commercial aircraft, which suggests either that trafficking via air consists exclusively of small loads or that any large loads have been well concealed, physically and/or through corruption.

It is common for western analyses of trafficking groups around the world and in Central Asia to include the assessment that they are involved in smuggling a variety of illicit goods, because groups or individuals that smuggle narcotics would be well-placed to traffic in weapons, drug-producing precursor chemicals, or even human trafficking.⁵³ There seem to be good reasons to believe that any smuggling group can distribute a range of illegal goods, since their abilities in one illicit industry should be easily carried over into another. Their corrupt contacts within government authorities have the potential to be particularly important, since we would not expect these to be focused on facilitating the movement of specific goods, but more on facilitating smuggling in general.⁵⁴

However, most Central Asian law enforcement officials interviewed by the author contradict the view that groups trafficking opiates also smuggle other goods. The biggest gap between western and local views is on trafficking in precursor chemicals, which the International Narcotics Control Board believes has significant synergies with drug trafficking⁵⁵ but which Central Asian officials believe is a separate business. Similarly, they believe that groups trafficking drugs will rarely get involved in trafficking arms, except on a small scale in order to supply members of the group. Human trafficking is quite a different business again and given the logistics of drug trafficking described here, it is difficult to believe that the same groups moving opiates would also be

⁵³ UNODC Regional Office for Central Asia, 2003; Bobi Pirseyedi, *The Small Arms Problem in Central Asia: Features and Implications* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2002); Gerben Bruinsma and Wim Bernasco, "Criminal Groups and Transnational Illegal Markets," *Crime, Law & Social Change*, 41 (2004): 79-94. This view is often expressed with the brevity of assumption at conferences dealing with security issues in Central Asia, or on organized crime more generally. For a discussion of the accuracy of these views, see Nicole Jackson, "The Trafficking of Narcotics, Arms and Humans in post-Soviet Central Asia: (Mis)perceptions, Policies and Realities," *Central Asian Survey* 24, 1 (2005): 39-52.

⁵⁴ As one example, in a different region - the Finnish-Estonian border - Junninen and Arimaa observed that professional criminals are involved in a variety of smuggling businesses, which suggests a propensity for criminality in general rather than a devotion to particular crimes - Mika Junninen and Kauko Arimaa "Professional Crime Across the Finnish-Estonian Border," *Crime, Law & Social Change* 34 (2000): 319-347.

⁵⁵ INCB representative at a meeting of the Central Asian Support Group for Precursor Control, Tashkent March 2-4 2004.

optimized for organizing illegal immigration.⁵⁶ The Chief of Osh City Police summarized the Central Asian assessment by observing that there are a few broad organized crime businesses, but any group that can be identified as engaged in repetitive trafficking will usually specialize in a particular product.⁵⁷ In addressing the causes of involvement in organized crime, it may be useful to view all smuggling activities from a single perspective, but for the purposes of disrupting the logistics of opiate trafficking it is more useful to address these groups separately.

Central Asian analyses of the geographical specialization of opiate trafficking groups vary. General opinions are evenly split between those who believe that prior connections mandate continuing adherence to particular smuggling routes and those who believe that traffickers can switch rapidly between routes. However, the geography of smuggling through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan creates a tendency towards specialization at some points and a freedom of movement at others.

Groups in Tajikistan that source opiates directly from Afghanistan essentially have an unlimited number of options for crossing the border if the courier is travelling by foot. Geographical specialization occurs within Tajikistan around the point at which individual loads are gathered together. In and around Moscovsky and Shurobad is one prominent area for this; Khorog is another. Travelling through GBAO is therefore the specialization of some groups, while others only work in western Tajikistan, the latter category divided further into those that aim for Uzbekistan and those smuggling into Kyrgyzstan.

The Osh-Bishkek road forces all traffic heading north to use the same route as far as Kara-Balta, from where options open up again in reaching and traversing Kazakhstan. Geographical specialization is therefore possible through Kazakhstan, although as the discussion above presaged, the preference for particular routes depends upon whether there is an intention to sell retail in Kazakhstan or to continue to Russia/Europe. For those with links beyond Kazakhstan, the number of possible routes is large and specialization occurs only in relation to the terminal points. For example, the Chief of the Almaty Drug Combat Unit described a group operating in his jurisdiction that specializes in trafficking to the North Caucasus and believed that the number of Kazakh-Russian border crossings and the transport options heading west in Kazakhstan means that detection and monitoring of their activities could only occur in Almaty and their destination city in southwestern Russia.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Jackson, "The Trafficking of Narcotics, Arms and Humans in post-Soviet Central Asia: (Mis)perceptions, Policies and Realities".

⁵⁷ Author's interview, September 19 2005.

⁵⁸ Author's interview, October 20 2005.

The primary implication of these trends is that the most efficient deployment of detection resources can only occur following the identification of transport corridors that are difficult for traffickers to substitute. The concentration of detection capacity raises the risk that major routes will be overlooked and remain open, but with the importance of intelligence rising relative to the importance of random detection, a focus on bottlenecks is the most efficient policy,⁵⁹ accompanied by an effort to ensure that intelligence on changing routes is disseminated rapidly. The preceding discussion highlights the Osh-Bishkek road and the Pamir Highway as two such bottlenecks, where a single effective checkpoint would significantly raise the risk to traffickers along these routes.

For the Pamir Highway, any such effect would likely accelerate the shift to more numerous options in western Tajikistan.⁶⁰ On the Osh-Bishkek road, alternative routes are extremely limited and therefore increased detection capacity there could have an impact on trafficking logistics through Kyrgyzstan. As Map 1 in this article shows, trafficking routes through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan form an hourglass shape with the Osh-Bishkek highway as the pinched waist. Internal checkpoints are technically outlawed in Kyrgyzstan, but two are still in operation, one of which is in Sosnovka on the Osh-Bishkek road.⁶¹ However, it is only used on an ad hoc basis, often for police extortion but also for DCA interceptions.⁶² The flow of traffic is quite high and a commitment to inspecting every vehicle would probably be unfeasible, yet a (semi-)permanent post conducting random inspections would be justified.

The apparent professionalization and specialization of groups around opiate trafficking also suggests the nature of their possible links with extremist/terrorist groups. Since the regression of the IMU, which appeared to spend substantial resources on drug trafficking in order to fund its terrorist activities,⁶³ the cross-over between the opiate trade and terrorism have been more circumscribed in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Most Central Asian officials see the two phenomena as

⁵⁹ Trafficking by commercial air links is subject to bottlenecks in the form of airports, something currently being addressed by the European Union and UNODC, who are funding the training of drug profiling units in every Central Asian international airport.

⁶⁰ Contradictory opinions on the magnitude of this shift were noted above.

⁶¹ The other is near Sary-Tash, on the Murgab-Osh road.

⁶² Author's correspondence with UNODC's Bishkek sub-office, January 2006.

⁶³ Tamara Makarenko, "Crime, Terror and the Central Asian Drug Trade," *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 6, 3 (2002); Justin L. Miller, "The Narco-Insurgent Nexus in Central Asia and Afghanistan," *The National Interest*, May 7 2003; Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

symbiotic.⁶⁴ However, when asked to describe how terrorists are involved in drug trafficking, it seems that groups in Central Asia such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (which all officials consider a terrorist organization) overlap with opiate trafficking groups only at the fringes.⁶⁵ They do so not because terrorists ship the drugs, but rather because members of terrorist cells deal opiates to fund themselves. This view suggests it would be inaccurate to believe that terrorists are traffickers but justified to see the drug trade as one of the criminal activities that terrorism feeds off.⁶⁶ It would also show significant correlation with terrorism operations in western countries, where local drug dealing is apparently a significant source of funds.⁶⁷

Opiate Trafficking into China

A significant trend that will affect trafficking routes through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan is the increasing feasibility of supplying China's western province of Xinjiang. Heroin retail prices are 4-5 times higher in Xinjiang than in the Central Asian countries it borders⁶⁸ and the province has a sizeable and growing drug addict population.⁶⁹ The primary supplier to this market has been Myanmar via lengthy routes across China but the logistical challenges to Central Asian suppliers are diminishing quickly. This issue has been discussed elsewhere⁷⁰ and the

⁶⁴ "They stand back to back," in the words of the Deputy Director of the Tajik DCA Khorog sub-office – author's interview, September 13 2005.

⁶⁵ It must be said that not many officials could give a clear picture of the overlap between terrorist groups and drug trafficking groups. The more detailed opinions came from the following interviews: Chief of Tajik Border Guard Intelligence, September 12 2005; Deputy Director of the Tajik DCA Khorog sub-office, September 13 2005; Chief of Osh City Police, September 19 2005; Kyrgyz Ministry of Security's Head of Counter-Narcotics, September 21 2005; Deputy Director of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure, December 5 2005. The last interviewee also mentioned terrorist cells in Xinjiang in the same analysis.

⁶⁶ In the view of the Deputy Director of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure, within Afghanistan it is more likely that traffickers (as opposed to dealers) are also promoting, funding or engaging in terrorism – author's interview, December 5 2005.

⁶⁷ Chris Dishman, "The Leaderless Nexus: When Crime and Terror Converge," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28 (2005): 237-252; Javier Jordan and Nicola Horsburgh, "Mapping Jihadist Terrorism in Spain," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28 (2005): 169-191.

⁶⁸ Taking averages from information available to UNODC's Regional Office for Central Asia, the price per gram of heroin in Tajikistan is \$7, in Kyrgyzstan \$15 and in Kazakhstan \$17. The average price in Xinjiang, estimated by a Chinese law enforcement officer in the province in late 2005, is \$70.

⁶⁹ China National Surveillance Center on Drug Abuse, *Report of Drug Abuse Surveillance 2003, 2004*.

⁷⁰ Jacob Townsend, *China and Afghan Opiates: Assessing the Risk* (Uppsala: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2005); Jacob Townsend, "All Quiet on China's Western Front? Xinjiang and Afghan Opiates," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*,

primary contextual factors that are increasing feasibility of opiate trafficking across the Central Asian-Chinese borders are the rapidly expanding trade and community links. For trafficking groups in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the longstanding economic enticement in Xinjiang is growing because cross-border contacts are available and trade flows make the detection of illicit shipments unlikely given current facilities and attitudes at the border posts.

To date, there have only been a small number of arrests in relation to opiate trafficking across the Central Asian-Chinese borders but those that have occurred have included citizens from all three Central Asian countries. Currently, this trafficking appears to involve sporadic illicit shipments rather than the ongoing distribution that occurs on routes to Russia and Europe. In terms of logistics, these shipments have utilized a range of methods, including foot crossings over an unguarded section of the Tajik-Chinese border⁷¹ and more sophisticated concealment of drugs in an attempt through Kazakhstan's Bakhty checkpoint,⁷² but the quantities seized have only been a few kilograms each.

It is likely that more regular opiate flows into China will develop over the medium term. Given the location of the established trunk flows of heroin northwards through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the use of Kyrgyzstan's Irkeshtam crossing and Kazakhstan's Khorgos and Dostuk crossings with China seem particularly likely. These have little capacity for detecting opiate trafficking and officials at the posts are generally unconcerned with the possibility.⁷³ The distances from Central Asian hubs to retail markets in Xinjiang are not great, particularly compared with the profit-distance ratio of trafficking through Kazakhstan and into Russia.

The demands for effective international cooperation that potential trafficking into China place on Central Asian law enforcement add to those already felt for addressing trafficking within Central Asia.⁷⁴ The professionalism and internationalization of opiate trafficking through these countries, including the pursuit of new markets in China, creates pressure for an official response at the level of the threat. The exchange

December 15 2005; Hayder Mili, "Xinjiang: An Emerging Narco-Islamist Corridor?" *Terrorism Monitor* 3, 8 (2005); see also Jacob Townsend, *A Single Security Space on the Central Asian-Chinese Borders: Assessing the Risk from Integration*, publication forthcoming (available from the author upon request).

⁷¹ Author's interviews with the Chief of Irkeshtam Border Guards, September 18 2005; and with the Deputy Director of the Kyrgyz DCA, September 19 2005.

⁷² Author's interview with the Chief of Khorgos Customs, October 21 2005.

⁷³ Author's interviews with: Chief of Irkeshtam Customs, September 18 2005; Chief of Irkeshtam Border Guards, September 18 2005; Chief of Khorgos Customs, October 21 2005; Deputy Chief of Dostuk Customs, October 22 2005; Head of Dostuk Customs Counter-Smuggling, October 22 2005.

⁷⁴ Iselin, *The Afghan-rim's Heroin Economy*.

of intelligence between countries and their facilitation of joint operations will become ever-more important in maximizing law enforcement effectiveness – these are threats present in each jurisdiction but animated by their international links.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will likely become an important catalyst for a regional response to this demand. It has noted drug trafficking as a major threat to its members, although to date the primary security preoccupation has been terrorism. The most visible manifestation of this is the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), which is also concerned with opiate trafficking insofar as it overlaps with terrorism. According to the Deputy Director of RATS, the SCO is now considering the establishment of a similar institution for counter-narcotics, either to be combined with RATS or modelled on its structure.⁷⁵ Cooperation on terrorism is likely to foreshadow the SCO response to opiate trafficking and it is therefore significant that although RATS is yet to be enabled by national legislation in all members, it is already parasitizing bilateral intelligence exchange agreements for its own purposes. As the Deputy Director describes it, “agreements are still in finalization but in practical terms information collection still occurs.” Currently, RATS acts more as an observer of intergovernmental efforts than as a coordinator, although it intends to develop a capacity for sharing a full array of intelligence products, from direct operational information to broad assessments. As part of this there are plans to expand the current anti-terrorism database to include information on opiate trafficking and trafficking groups. However, this might duplicate to a significant extent the work of UNODC in attempting to establish a similar database, accessible to Central Asian governments and law enforcement agencies.⁷⁶ While UNODC has proceeded further, the RATS Deputy Director points out that the advantage of his putative database would be that it includes China.⁷⁷ With both sides aware of the inefficiencies of parallel efforts, effective regional cooperation will in part depend upon the implementation of an efficient solution.

Conclusions

The logistics of opiate trafficking through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are fairly simple and routes are fairly clear but for the most part difficult to police. Central Asian law enforcement capacity for detection is generally low in most geographical and logistical areas, from boating across the Panj River to concealing drugs in the car while driving

⁷⁵ Author's interview, December 5 2005.

⁷⁶ Under its *Establishment of the Central Asia Regional Information and Coordination Center* project.

⁷⁷ Author's interview, December 5 2005.

through central Kazakhstan. The use of more sophisticated techniques for concealing opiate loads compounds this problem. The efficient improvement of detection capacity depends upon the identification of priority regions and the inculcation of professionalism in law enforcement officers.

However, the professionalism of traffickers is simultaneously increasing. Groups are becoming more difficult to infiltrate and more cohesive. Professionalism at lower levels is also increasing, with repetitive contracting of couriers and a growing commitment by couriers to the drug trade as one of their major means of economic and social advancement. The separation of courier from trafficking group patron is almost absolute and the nodes of trafficking networks are protected by surrounding webs of corruption. Furthermore, Central Asian officials believe that specialization by smuggling product is common for criminal groups, such that many individuals have become focused on opiate trafficking, making their operations more effective and more difficult to combat. However, specialization by trafficking route varies with the location of the group and the options it has for distribution further along the chain.

Finally, the (re-)integration of Central Asia with Xinjiang complicates further the counter-narcotics programs of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. It highlights even more strongly the need for effective international cooperation in combating opiate trafficking. As the economies and societies of these countries are internationalized, it is the traffickers, driven by the profit incentive, who are adapting quickly. Central Asian law enforcement officers need to respond operationally in terms of international cooperation and mentally in terms of professionalism. Their ability to do so will have a significant impact on what remains a potent regional security threat.