
The Eurasian Drug Trade

A Challenge to Regional Security

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The security of Eurasia can no longer be understood in separation from the drug trade. Given the importance of the region to the United States, the adverse effect of the drug trade is also bound to affect U.S. interests in Central Asia.

SINCE the end of the cold war, the need to widen the concept of security and distinguish between “hard” and “soft” security threats has been increasingly accepted, but the implementation of strategies to face soft security threats has been less prominent. Meanwhile, non-traditional and often trans-national threats to security have gained in importance, primarily in developing and post-communist areas. Among these, the trade in illicit drugs arguably carries the largest societal, political, and economic consequences. It threatens the fabric of societies through addiction, crime, and disease. It exacerbates corruption in already weak states, impairing their economic and political functioning. Through its linkages to insurgency and terrorism, it is an increasing threat to regional and international security in a traditional, military sense.¹ As such, the drug trade affects both hard and soft security.

Nowhere is the damning effect of the drug trade on multiple aspects of security more visible than in Central Asia.² With the galloping production of opium in war-torn Afghanistan and the trafficking of heroin northward through post-Soviet Central Asia to markets in Russia and Europe, the adverse impact of the drug trade on the wider region is becoming ever more apparent. However, systematic research into the phenomenon has been relatively scant.³ This article argues that the drug trade affects the security of the region to such an extent that Eurasia’s security can no longer be understood in separation from the drug trade. Given the importance of the region to U.S. national security interests, the adverse effect of the drug trade on the region is also bound to affect U.S. interests in Central Asia.

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The Security Debate and Transnational Threats

Academics and policymakers have traditionally not considered transnational organized crime, and more specifically the trade in illicit drugs, as a full-fledged international security issue.⁴ The conceptual debate on security has long focused on the dichotomy between “hard” military threats and “softer” issues, which have included everything from migration flows to environmental and economic threats and natural disasters, issues previously not discussed in the context of national security. Security threats were traditionally defined as directed exclusively toward the state and its military and political spheres.⁵ Security, moreover, was understood as a threat to the very existence of the state—to its survival as an entity.⁶ The end of the cold war and the collapse of the bipolar world order allowed new approaches to security to emerge. These grew in force to build a new paradigm of security, which came to include a more varied sense of what constitutes security. In the early 1970s, the idea of economic security became a subject of academic attention and policy interest.⁷ Subsequently, in the 1980s, environmental issues were gradually securitized. These changes in the perception of security spurred a debate on the wisdom of widening the definition of security.⁸ Traditionalists tried to sustain a focus on military security and on the security of the individual state, but often integrated politics and political economy into the definition.⁹ The diversification of state interests and the processes of globalization nevertheless gradually raised the importance of non-military security issues, especially those of an environmental and economic nature. Increasing interdependence also brought a need to account for threats directed not only at individual states but also at groups of states or the entire community of nations. Such threats have arguably been prevalent for a long time, but the end of the cold war and the demise of the bipolar security paradigm made it both possible and necessary to develop a more diversified view of security. Traditional approaches based on the military-political sector were no longer sufficient to explain and develop solutions to newly emerging challenges and threats.

Narcotics and Organized Crime as Security Threats

The evolution of the security concept has not fully remedied the need to consider hitherto neglected threats to security. One of these is transnational organized crime, which has been noted in the policy debate on security

but has received comparatively little attention in the academic debate.¹⁰ A number of states have securitized the international drug trade—that is to say, defined it as a security problem. These include Iran, the United States, and Thailand.¹¹ Nevertheless, very often it is treated as a national and law enforcement issue rather than as an international and security problem.

The impact of the international drug trade has reached far beyond the well-being of the estimated 200 million drug abusers worldwide.¹² The turnover of the global illicit drugs industry is estimated to be higher than all other industries save the arms industry. In the late 1990s, it was estimated at \$400 billion, but has been growing considerably since.¹³ The extent of global organized crime as a whole is even more difficult to map than the drug trade, with recent estimates putting it at anywhere between \$500 million and \$1.5 billion.¹⁴ The relevance of organized crime (and the illicit drug trade in particular) for security is best understood not by its financial value but through the prism of the various sectors of analysis in security studies. This article employs the categorization made by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, viewing security through the prism of five sectors: military, political, economic, environmental, and societal.¹⁵

Military Security: The Role of Drugs and Crime in Insurgency and Terrorism. The most dramatic threat to national and regional security posed by organized crime and the illicit drug trade is their increasingly intimate link to insurgency and terrorism since the end of the cold war. Insurgent and terrorist groups alike—whether ethnic secessionist, Marxist, or Islamist—are more and more becoming involved in large-scale organized crime to finance their armed struggle.¹⁶ This development is not new, but has increased significantly in the post-cold war era.

As Thachuk notes, “Organized crime groups rarely co-operated with terrorist groups, or engaged in their activities, as their goals were most often at odds . . . yet, many of today’s terrorist groups have not only lost some of their more comprehensible ideals, but are increasingly turning to smuggling and other criminal activities to fund their operations.”¹⁷ The end of the cold war drastically reduced the availability of state financing for terrorist and insurgent movements, thereby spurring this phenomenon. Simply being in opposition to a communist or non-communist regime no longer translated into financial support from a superpower or its proxies.¹⁸ In this context, organized crime became a leading way of obtaining necessary funds. International efforts to root out terrorism financing after September 11, 2001,

are further pushing non-state violent actors toward organized criminal financing.¹⁹ Another impetus for the nexus between ideological and criminal groups stems from the rapidly developing processes of globalization, making transportation and communications easier, enabling the concomitant evolution of transnational organized crime.²⁰ From having been geographically circumscribed and specialized, transnational criminal networks now operate across continents, in alliances with similar groups elsewhere, and engage in any form of criminal activity that combines high profit and acceptable risk.²¹

Both statistical and case study research confirms that a considerable number of insurgent and terrorist movements globally are funding their operations partially or mainly through organized criminal activities, most notably the illicit drug trade. In noting the link

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between “valuable contraband” and conflict duration, Fearon found that rebels relied extensively on contraband financing in 17 of 128 cases of conflict. These cases had median and mean conflict durations of 28.1 and 48.2 years, respectively, whereas the remaining 111 conflicts had 6.0 and 8.8, respectively.²² Indeed, major drug-producing countries such as Afghanistan, Burma, Colombia, and Peru have been home to some of the most intractable armed conflicts in the world.²³

As Makarenko has concluded, the blurred picture of the relations between criminal and political groups can be clarified by the analytical construct of a security continuum, placing pure organized crime at one end of the spectrum, and pure ideological groups at the other.²⁴ Between these two extremes lies a gray area where different variations and combinations of the two exist. Interactions between organized crime and ideological struggle can take place in two major forms: through cooperation between a criminal and an ideological group; and through the self-involvement of an ideological group in crime or, vice versa, the involvement of a criminal group in political violence.

A militant group’s involvement in crime changes the equation of its relationship to state and society. First, the proceeds of crime enable it to acquire better weaponry, attract more fighters, corrupt state officials, and propagate its ideology. Criminal involvement, therefore,

makes a group a more dangerous adversary to the government, resulting in a further weakening of the state, which in many cases even loses control over parts of its territory to the insurgent group. In this sense, drugs and crime can enable an armed group to threaten the security of the state at its very foundation: the monopoly on the use of force and control over territory. Criminal involvement has also changed the motivational structures of insurgent groups. Profit through crime often overtakes ideology, becoming an end in itself.²⁵ Colombia’s Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) is one of the main illustrations of this type of motivational change and in a sense of the criminalization of insurgency.²⁶ Insurgent groups in Burma, such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), are also thought to be motivated more by crime than ideology.²⁷ In the Balkans, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) is a possible example.²⁸ Increasing their capabilities through the proceeds of crime, these and other insurgent groups have challenged the very existence of the states concerned in their original shape and form. Moreover, these conflicts have all spilled over into neighboring countries, thereby being a regional and not simply a national issue.

The link between international terrorism and the drug trade makes the issue relevant to international security more broadly. In the 1980s, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia received funding from the international drug trade.²⁹ In Japan, the apocalyptic terrorist group Aum Shinrikyo was involved in various forms of organized crime in the 1990s, including drug trafficking.³⁰ Most potently, links between al-Qaeda and organized crime have increasingly been noted since 9/11, as international efforts to curtail terrorist financing have forced the group to look for new sources of funding: the Italian chairmanship of the European Union in 2003 noted the link between al-Qaeda and human trafficking networks,³¹ while U.S. and allied sources have linked al-Qaeda to drug trafficking networks in Afghanistan and in Persian Gulf countries.³²

Crime and narcotics are not the root causes of any of the mentioned conflicts or of terrorism, and should not be construed as responsible for the *emergence* of these threats. However, crime is an important factor in keeping armed conflicts alive. Criminal interests are an important possible cause for insurgents to resist negotiations and refuse to seek peaceful ways of resolving differences, instead continuing military action in order to weaken governments and sustain control over territories. As noted in the literature on economic incentives in civil wars, conflicts acquire an economic function for

insurgents: the opportunity to make money on crime.³³ Colombia's FARC is the clearest example of this.³⁴

Political Security: The Corruption and Criminalization of States. The drug trade possesses a large corrupting power over the political spectrum, with substantial implications for the functioning and legitimacy of the state. Organized crime is attracted to conflict areas because of the weakness of state power to uphold law and order. However, conflict is unnecessary if criminal networks can preclude government intervention through the subversion or infiltration of the state by means of corruption and violence. Throughout the world, organized crime inherently seeks to corrupt state authorities, since that facilitates business, decreases risk, and thereby decreases costs.³⁵ Low-level corruption may impede the state's capacity to withstand and combat smuggling operations, but hardly constitutes a threat to state security by itself. But as Thachuk notes, "corruption is no longer simply greasing the wheels of commerce, the paying off of government officials to expedite matters quickly. Rather, criminal organizations and terrorists use corruption to breach the sovereignty of many states and then continue to employ it to distort domestic and international affairs."³⁶ Criminal organizations seek to assert influence bordering on control over crucial government institutions in weak states. They particularly target the judicial system, security, police and border forces, and the financial sector. When successful, this amounts to the *de facto* criminalization of the state, in other words pushing corruption from the passive accepting of bribes to direct state involvement in organized crime. The worst-case scenario is what David Jordan calls "narcostatization"—where organized crime is perpetrated by the state, as in North Korea.³⁷

Wholesale state capture is rare, but more common is the penetration of law enforcement and particularly counter-narcotics units, which pose the most direct threat to criminal networks. Mexico, in the 1990s, had to dismantle its entire counter-narcotics unit three times after it had been co-opted by drug cartels.³⁸ The implication of high-level individual government officials in organized crime is also common. In Burma, Colombia, and Turkey, governments facing insurgent challenges resorted to the creation of pro-governmental militias that were all quickly implicated in the narcotics trade, becoming uncontrollable.³⁹ In all drug-producing countries, there is a comprehensive body of evidence implicating the highest levels, occasionally including heads of state, in corruption by or collusion with the narcotics industry. Credible allegations include the Burmese ruling junta,⁴⁰

35 percent of Colombia's Congress and a former president, Ernesto Samper;⁴¹ and most recently the president of Lithuania, impeached in late 2003 for his close contacts with Russian organized crime.⁴²

Such high-level complicity constitutes a clear-cut threat to the security of weak states. Growing criminal influence over state institutions changes the impetus for decision-making and implementation of laws. Institutions gradually cease to perform the functions for which they were instituted and are instead "privatized," serving the purposes of the criminal enterprise into which they are co-opted. Although these concrete effects of organized crime on political security are significant enough, its most debilitating and indeed existential effect may be to undermine the legitimacy of ruling elites. Domestically, the criminalization of a ruling elite poses a danger for its survival in the face of public protests. Internationally, it may cause economic sanctions and other forms of threats, including military action by states threatened by the resulting unrest. For example, Georgia's Ministry of the Interior in 1999–2001 allowed organized criminal groups to base themselves in the Pankisi Gorge bordering Chechnya in return for large sums of money. They used the gorge as a base for drug smuggling, abductions, and other forms of crime. Lawlessness in the gorge contributed to credible Russian threats of military intervention and eventually the deployment of American forces to train and equip the Georgian military. In Colombia, Italy, Georgia, Mexico, and elsewhere, evidence of high-level government collusion with organized crime constituted an existential threat to the governing elites of states and affected the survival of governments—in the case of Georgia, contributing directly to the overthrow of the Shevardnadze regime in 2003.

Economic Security: The Criminalization of State and Society. Organized crime can be construed as having a short-term positive impact, generating income for people in countries where little other licit economic activity is available. In the long term, however, drug production and trafficking and other forms of organized crime have a significant negative impact. In production countries, the displacement of other crops by cultivated drugs such as coca and opium reduces food production, thereby making local populations dependent on food imports. This economic distortion is most serious in major producing countries such as Afghanistan, Colombia, and Burma, which have developed veritable drug economies. Burma is reported to have a narcotics-export level equal to its legal exports.⁴³ Transit countries are affected too: Jamaica is believed to earn more from narcotics than all other exports combined,

and the \$600 million Bolivia earns on coca amounted to 15 percent of its GDP in the 1990s.⁴⁴

State complicity in the drug trade has much the same effects on the economy as on politics. In fact, many of the political consequences of the drug trade are due to the economic impact of criminalization of state institutions. In this sense, economic and political security can be difficult to differentiate. The decay of state institutions, and the drain of corruption on state funds, prevents the state from delivering economic goods to the population, sparking popular discontent and sometimes making the state dependent on economic aid. Money laundering and the financial aspects of the international narcotics

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trade are grossly understudied and difficult to deal with. An estimated \$300–\$500 billion is laundered annually through the international financial system, proving the lack of international control over financial flows.⁴⁵ One example of the magnitude and weakness of economic borders is the usage of Australia as a money-laundering area. Despite comparatively strict economic regulations, Australian authorities recently discovered that at least \$3 billion is laundered through the country annually.⁴⁶ If International Monetary Fund estimates are correct, the narcotics trade constitutes between 1.5 and 4.5 percent of the world economy, half of which is laundered through international financial institutions. This makes the amount of illegal capital invested in legal markets higher than that of most other industries. Most drug revenues are typically transferred to safe investment areas such as Australia, the European Union, and the United States, leaving production and transit regions with growing social, economic, and political problems while gaining very little from the narcotics trade in comparison to the outside economies.

The effects on productivity, costs for rehabilitation, and the other economic costs of the narcotics trade are rapidly increasing. Health care costs rise due to the increased prevalence of diseases such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C that follow drug addiction, exacerbating the depletion of human resources in the workforce. This affects productivity in legal markets. The struggle

against organized crime costs states enormous sums of money: Iran alone spends upwards of \$250 million a year on drug control.⁴⁷ The economic effects of the drug trade have forced many states to borrow financial capital from the outside, greatly increasing inflation and deficits and exacerbating distortions in socio-economic growth.⁴⁸

Environmental Security. The environmental effects of the narcotics industry are primarily related to the production and manufacturing processes and include deforestation, soil erosion, and destruction of water assets.⁴⁹ Deforestation related to poppy cultivation in Thailand during the 1980s was estimated to amount to 280,000–300,000 hectares.⁵⁰ According to some authorities, 10 percent of the Peruvian Amazon region has been deforested due to coca production.⁵¹ Soil erosion has increased in production regions because of the failure to tie down the soil given diminishing forest and agricultural areas. Narcotics production is not, of course, responsible for all soil erosion. The slash-and-burn technique responsible for the greatest environmental degeneration, however, is very popular in coca-producing states, with substantial impact on the environment and the legal economy.

Equally harmful is the processing of raw crops such as coca and opium into finished products such as cocaine and heroin, involving the use of highly toxic chemical precursors.⁵² The lack of environmental concern among illegal entrepreneurs unfortunately exacerbates the problem. The cocaine industry in the Upper Huallaga Valley of Peru was considered to have generated, in 1986 alone, “a toxic waste dump of 57 million liters of kerosene, 32 million liters of sulfuric acid, 16,000 metric tons of lime, 32 metric tons of carbide, 6.4 million liters of acetone, and 6.4 million liters of toluene.”⁵³ Clearly, the same processes are at play in Colombia on an even larger scale given the larger coca production there. Chemicals such as carbide and calcium carbide, and toxins such as acetone and toluene are extremely harmful to living organisms and are, to a great extent, soluble in water, which worsens their negative impact. Chemical waste from drug production is typically dumped in rivers or left at production sites, often contaminating ground water. In all cases the quality of the water is severely damaged and in some cases not usable for human consumption. In opium-producing countries, the use of fertilizers and insecticides in poppy cultivation is widespread, as opium poppies are vulnerable to disease and insect attack. The usage of chemical products impacts soil quality negatively in the long run, due to the loss of soil

nutrients.⁵⁴ The amount of acetic anhydride necessary for the production of heroin in Afghanistan and Burma has similarly grave consequences.

Societal Security: Drug Abuse, Epidemics, and the Physical Base of the State. The consumption of narcotics is a well-known threat to the health of the individual consumer, but the use of drugs is not a direct threat to the security of a society unless drug addiction and related crime reach proportions that challenge the structure of society. While it is difficult to determine at what point addiction and crime become societal security problems, the steps by which this can occur are identifiable. First, narcotics abuse threatens societal security if addiction levels threaten the physical base of the state by making significant parts of the population unfit to contribute to societal production. Second, societal security is affected if state resources are drained on a massive level in order to counter drug trafficking, treat drug addiction, and care for STD patients. Third, societal security is also challenged if drug-related crime makes society distinctly insecure by greatly increasing rates of murder, rape, burglary, and assault.

Most Western countries have levels of drug addiction that are far below 1 percent of the population, yet treatment and law enforcement costs are substantial. The total economic cost of drug users and addicts in the United States, for example, was \$98 billion, which is equal to \$384 per capita.⁵⁵ Moreover, on average, about 70 percent of violent crimes in major U.S. cities are drug-related. Industrialized Western countries can sustain this cost at the present level without compromising the entire functioning of society. Some urban areas are made insecure by drugs, but as a whole the problem is manageable. This is unfortunately not the case everywhere. In the states most affected by heroin addiction, such as Iran, Russia, and Pakistan, problems related to drug use have reached proportions that do threaten the structure of society.

Iran's position as the main traditional export route for Afghan opiates westward to European markets has concomitantly produced a large domestic addiction problem. Despite the \$250 million Iran spends yearly on drug control, the Iranian government's Drug Control Headquarters estimates that there are roughly 2 million "serious drug users" in the country, (i.e., about 3 percent of the population), of whom 1.2 million are problematic, insofar as their addiction has generated serious health or social consequences, or involvement in crime.⁵⁶ Russia's drug addiction problem is comparatively much more recent, but not less severe. Since the mid-1990s,

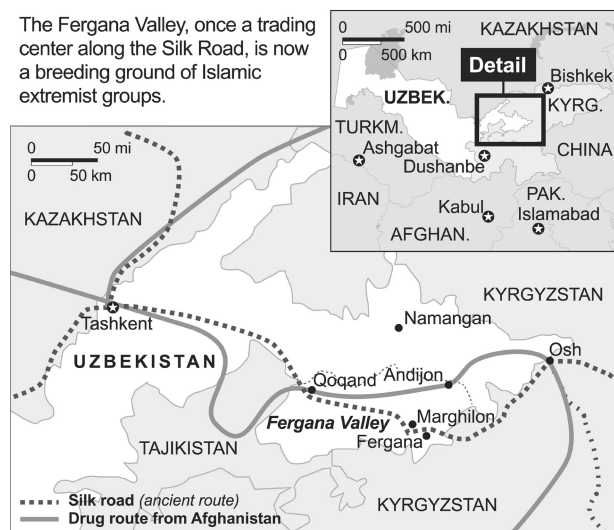
drug addiction has skyrocketed to a level that President Vladimir Putin termed a "national crisis of staggering proportions."⁵⁷ While Russia in 2003 had slightly more than half a million registered drug users, the real number is unknown, and estimates vary widely between 3 million and 5 million individuals. Drug use in Russia is dominated by intravenous drug use of heroin, and drug addiction is rapidly becoming "younger."⁵⁸ China's registered narcotics users officially amount to only 0.054 percent of the population, but this does not take account of unregistered users, who are estimated to number in the millions. The rise of drug addiction shows no signs of culminating, let alone abating. Meanwhile, the high rate of intravenous drug use has brought a strong increase in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, in particular HIV/AIDS. At present, an average of 80 percent of the estimated 1.5 million HIV cases recorded in Russia are intravenous drug users.⁵⁹ Moreover, the majority of addicts are at a sexually active age. Demographic studies predict that a mid-level AIDS epidemic would kill 10 million people by 2020.⁶⁰ The drug problem is likely to exacerbate Russia's existing demographic decline, estimated to contract from a population of about 143 million people in 2003 to 100–120 million by 2025.⁶¹ Some sources estimate that Russia will then only have 700,000 people available for its armed forces.⁶² In countries like Russia and Iran, the human, material, and economic consequences of drug addiction clearly pose a threat to society. This is worsened by the already low living standards and the weakness of the state, which is ill equipped to deal with the problem, hampering efforts to stem the contagion. Russia spends only roughly \$4 million on combating HIV, less than 1 percent of what Great Britain spends on a considerably less significant problem.⁶³

Drugs and State Weakness—a Vicious Circle. In Buzan's terms, organized crime affects all three pillars of a state: its physical base, its institutions, and its idea.⁶⁴ Drug-fueled insurgencies and terrorism threaten the physical base of society by targeting territorial control and the monopoly on the use of force. Addiction and epidemics, as well as effects on economic production, also affect the physical base of the state. Through corruption, organized crime affects not only the institutions of the state, but also its very idea, given the effect on a state's internal as well as external legitimacy.

Most worryingly, the drug trade penetrates state and society most easily in weak states with widespread poverty. Low salaries facilitate the bribing of low-level officials, while the lack of an efficient judicial system aids in the co-optation of high-level officials. Unemployment

Ancient valley, modern trouble spot

The Fergana Valley, once a trading center along the Silk Road, is now a breeding ground of Islamic extremist groups.



Map of Tajik-Afghan border

Source: ESRI, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Wm. J. Castello/AP)

and poverty make sectors of the population available as narcotics producers or couriers. Through its corruptive effect, the drug trade hinders sound and sustainable economic development, thereby keeping weak states weak and poor populations poor. State weakness makes the cultivation, production, and transit of narcotics easier. In turn, these activities further weaken the state. When states fall into the web of international crime, reversing the situation is extremely difficult, because substantial numbers of key individuals have a stake in the trade. Organized crime becomes entrenched, because available economic options for the population are limited. Breaking with criminal networks is dangerous, and organized crime, in any event, is normally incomparably more lucrative than alternative trades. The destabilized situation in such a state discourages investment by domestic and international capital in licit industries, given the typically high levels of corruption and political unrest.

Weak States and Struggling State-Building in Central Asia

Central Asia is characterized by the weakness of the states in the region and their deep economic and social difficulties, which are intimately interrelated. Before 1991, there had never been an independent state, kingdom, or emirate with the same name or similar borders as the five post-Soviet Central Asian states that suddenly gained independence. These territorial units had been

created by the Soviet central government in the 1920s, and the delineation was plagued by arbitrary decisions, much like colonial border delimitations in Africa and elsewhere. As a result, topography, ethnic settlement patterns, and natural resources very often have little relation to the borders. Especially in the Fergana Valley straddling southern Kyrgyzstan, northern Tajikistan, and eastern Uzbekistan, borders are an obstacle to transportation and economic relations between and within countries in an area that historically constituted a single economic space. More poignantly, the border delimitation created economically unviable states whose component parts are geographically isolated from one another. Numerous enclaves—small territorial units belonging to one state but encircled by another—exist, but more crucially, topography forms a formidable impediment to the physical unity of states, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Since independence, this has grown to be a significant impediment to trade and economic relations, especially with the securitization of borders following the Islamic insurgency of the late 1990s.⁶⁵

The absence of historical statehood and the existence of practical boundary problems contributed to the existential fears of Central Asia's ruling elites. The weak legitimacy of states internally and externally was exacerbated by the absence of vital state institutions at independence. These factors made state-building and consolidation of sovereignty a primary priority for the ruling elites in all five countries. In turn, they eschewed deeper regional cooperation, which was understood as a weakening of sovereignty.⁶⁶ The states of Central Asia were mainly raw material producers in the Soviet command economy. Cotton was the main crop, and traditional agriculture was downgraded. Their industrial products were expensive to produce, of low quality, and not in demand internationally, while the cost-efficiency of their primary products was uncompetitive. Integration into the world economy was complicated by their being landlocked, because Afghanistan's unrest prevented the restoration of traditional trade routes to South Asia and sustained their economic dependence on Russia.

Afghanistan has, by contrast, existed as a distinct entity for two centuries, but its slow process of state-building was completely undone by the Soviet invasion of 1979 and the ensuing civil war, which lasted for a generation with various configurations of power.⁶⁷ The war led to the collapse of Afghanistan's infrastructure and economy and to its international isolation, especially under the 1996–2001 Taliban government. As the historical heart of Central Asia, Afghanistan's centrality to the political and economic future of the entire Central Asian

region became increasingly clear by the late 1990s. It was simultaneously the main security threat to Central Asia through its exportation of Islamic radicalism, but also the hope for Central Asia's economic reintegration into the world economy, as transportation links through Afghanistan to Pakistan and beyond were understood to be crucial to the region's future.

The Structural Instability of Central Asian Regional Politics. Central Asia consists of relatively small, weak states surrounded by large regional powers. Four if not all five of its neighbors (the fifth being Iran) are nuclear powers. The interest and attention to Central Asia of these powers and of the United States is nevertheless in constant flux—as are relations among these regional powers.⁶⁸ The weakness of local states, their differing threat perceptions and priorities, and the absence of functioning mechanisms of regional cooperation have enabled regional powers to project influence in the region via military, diplomatic, and economic means.⁶⁹ Russia, the United States, and China are the major players, but Iran, Pakistan, and India—as well as Turkey—all play significant roles in the region. The latter group are, nevertheless, mainly actors in specific sectors or countries and in a more limited capacity, and they do not exercise the geopolitical weight of the former three. The interest of the major powers are reciprocated by the interest of local states in receiving economic and political, as well as military, assistance from abroad. Some states, like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, host troops belonging to several countries. Stronger states such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have a more independent foreign policy and cooperate with foreign powers on a more equal basis.

The structure of power relations in Central Asia is chronically unstable, because it is not the first priority of any of the great powers seeking influence in the region. All have other areas or issues demanding greater attention. Taiwan and the Korean peninsula are greater concerns for China; for Iran, it is the Persian Gulf area; for Pakistan and India, each other; for Turkey, relations with the European Union; for Russia, the Caucasus and Europe; and for the United States, a host of issues, most notably Iraq. As a result, none of these powers seems to be willing or able to pursue a focused, coherent strategy toward the region. They occasionally approach the region with great interest and launch various initiatives, but their attention is later distracted by other issues elsewhere. Moreover, domestic instability and, in the case of the United States and Turkey, election cycles also affect their attention. This makes Central Asian

politics inherently unpredictable and fluctuating. In turn, this has a negative influence on regional security, forcing local states to focus attention on the role of great powers and to engage in balancing acts that reduce their ability to pursue sustainable strategies of reform and development.

Domestic and Transnational Issues. While the region's political environment is unstable, the states of the region need to deal with a host of domestic problems in their quest for stability and development. Foremost among these is the development of the political systems of the region. The five post-Soviet Central Asian states have so far failed to make significant progress in building of participatory, transparent, and accountable government institutions. While some progress was noted in the mid-1990s, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, a certain backtracking in political reforms was widely noted from the late 1990s onwards.⁷⁰ As Stephen Blank notes, "Talk of prospects for democratization in Central Asia seemingly represents the triumph of hope over experience."⁷¹ U.S. engagement in the region following September 11, 2001, has not contributed significantly to reform. In fact regional leaders have largely been able to withstand Western demands for liberalization and use the argument of anti-terrorism to maintain a strong hold on political power.⁷² In sum, political reform in the Central Asian states is taking place at a painstakingly slow pace and is fraught with numerous setbacks. Positive signs exist—Kazakhstan's 2004 parliamentary elections were a step forward, and developments in Uzbekistan have not followed the downward trend in the region, although it made less progress in the 1990s to begin with. But political systems in the region remain relatively closed, with a dominant role played by informal "clan" networks.⁷³ Concomitantly, levels of corruption remain high and impede the efficiency and functioning of states and the building of the rule of law.

The Central Asian states face difficulties on several other levels, most notably boundary delimitation and energy resources. While border tensions have been a salient feature of Central Asian politics for the past decade due to the undemarcated and often undetermined drawing of their borders at independence, the area has seen considerable progress. By 2005, most of the boundary disputes between Central Asian states and between them and China were resolved. The process was often difficult and produced political crises, especially in Kyrgyzstan, but it nevertheless testifies to a certain maturity of the political leadership.⁷⁴ Energy issues have been more complicated, mainly because of the unbalance between

water and hydrocarbon resources in the region. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan dominate its oil and gas resources, whereas 90 percent of water resources are concentrated in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These resources were bartered in Soviet times, a process that effectively collapsed in the 1990s as gas producers demanded payment but refused to pay for water, a dynamic known from the Middle East and other areas.⁷⁵

The main and most publicized security challenge for the region is the rise of Islamic radicalism, a challenge identified since independence by local and external observers alike.⁷⁶ It stems from a combination of the religious revival taking place in the entire post-socialist sphere and the influx of radical Islamic ideas from Southwest Asia and the Middle East. Tajikistan's descent into civil war in 1992, pitting the former communist elite against an opposition force that contained strong Islamic

Tajikistan's descent into civil war in 1992, pitting the former communist elite against an opposition force that contained strong Islamic elements, led to the securitization of political Islam in the region.

elements, led to the securitization of political Islam in the region. This conflict led to desperate efforts in the four other regional states to check the development of political opposition, which was considered disloyal and subversive by nature. Governments particularly targeted Islamic radical forces influenced not chiefly by the moderate Hanafi Islam traditionally practiced in Central Asia, but from the purist Salafi tradition, such as Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi version of Hanbali Sunni Islam and the related South Asian Deobandi school.⁷⁷ Since the 1970s, young men from Central Asia have been going to Southwest Asia and Arab countries to study religion, bringing politicized and often radical views of Islam home with them.⁷⁸ The war in Afghanistan in the 1980s exposed many Central Asians to political Islam, affecting especially Tajikistan, given its ethno-linguistic affinities with Afghanistan. From then onwards, hundreds of Central Asian religious students enrolled in Saudi-sponsored Deobandi religious seminaries in Pakistan and elsewhere, which formed the ideological backbone of the Taliban movement.

The region's main militant representative of radical Islam is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Its precursors emerged in the city of Namangan in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley in the late 1980s, demand-

ing the proclamation of Uzbekistan as an Islamic state and gaining local influence.⁷⁹ The government cracked down in March 1992, forcing Islamic leaders into exile in Tajikistan, where they aligned themselves with radical forces in the Tajik opposition and participated on their side in the civil war. While a serious crackdown on Islamic movements in the valley swelled their ranks, the leaders of what would become the IMU opposed the 1997 Tajik peace accords and moved to Taliban Afghanistan, where they formally founded the IMU in 1998. In early 1999 a series of bomb explosions blamed on the IMU rocked Tashkent, the Uzbek capital, and almost killed President Islam Karimov.

Later in 1999, part of the IMU moved back into Jirgatal and Tavildara in Tajikistan's Garm province bordering Kyrgyzstan, and in August conducted its first military incursion into Kyrgyzstan. This caught the Kyrgyz military by complete surprise and prompted a mobilization of the Uzbek army. The IMU attack focused on the Batken region and the Vorukh and Sokh enclaves in southern Kyrgyzstan. These are small islands of territory belonging to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, respectively, but entirely surrounded by mountainous territory belonging to Kyrgyzstan and with little or no road communication to their respective homelands.⁸⁰ The enclaves suffer from a power vacuum, as neither the state they are geographically located in nor the state legally administering them is able to exert strong governmental authority.⁸¹ A larger group of fighters then moved in on Batken, capturing the commander of the Kyrgyz Interior Ministry forces and four Japanese geologists, for whom the IMU reportedly managed to extract a ransom of \$2 million from Japan.⁸² The IMU then retreated back into Tajikistan, aided by the mediating intervention of old allies from the civil war there, now in government.

Under Uzbek pressure, Tajik officials persuaded the IMU to leave for Afghanistan, and the main contingents, spent the winter in Kunduz and Mazar-i-Sharif.⁸³ The IMU struck again in August 2000, when its military leader, Juma Namangani, returned to Tavildara with several hundred men, and launched a series of attacks into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. This time, the sophistication of the incursions was considerably greater, although they were eventually repelled. As in 1999, Namangani was eventually flown to Afghanistan by a helicopter belonging in all likelihood to the Tajik Ministry of Emergencies.⁸⁴ Fighting with the Taliban and al-Qaeda against U.S. military action, the IMU was effectively decimated in the November 2001 battle for Kunduz, where Namangani was killed. Small groups of IMU militants nevertheless remain and have resumed

terrorist activities in the region, as evidenced by blasts in Uzbekistan in mid-2004.

Equally important is the challenge posed by avowedly non-violent groups strongly opposed to a U.S. presence and agitating against it. Chief among them is the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), which in recent years has had a strong presence in parts of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁵ The group's objective is to infiltrate government and society from below, though its aim, much like the IMU's, is the restoration of the caliphate. The non-violent strategy espoused by the Hizb-ut-Tahrir has led to a debate on its legalization, mainly argued by democratization and human rights advocates.⁸⁶ The party's strongly anti-Semitic ideology, and its ambition to create a caliphate that is incompatible with democracy or modern nation-states, makes it inherently revolutionary and anti-constitutional. That is why it was banned in Germany in 2002.⁸⁷ While posing no direct military security threat, Hizb-ut-Tahrir is clearly a threat to the political systems of the Central Asian states.⁸⁸

Drugs, State Weakness, and Security Threats in Central Asia

The havoc inflicted on Afghanistan by the Soviet occupation of the 1980s was the main factor that led to increasing opium cultivation in the country. At the time of the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan produced only about 200 metric tons of opium yearly, but production passed the 1,000-ton threshold in 1988, and then grew exponentially during the civil war that followed the 1989 Soviet withdrawal. Opium stepped in to fill the damage done to Afghanistan's population, economy, and infrastructure. The end of direct superpower involvement in the country led to a need for the warring factions to secure their finances through the drug trade. By the late 1990s, production had reached an average of more than 3,000 tons yearly, a level sustained ever since, with the exception of 2001, when the Taliban government's eradication briefly led to a large shortfall in production to only 185 tons. In 2002 and 2003, following Operation Enduring Freedom and the demise of the Taliban regime, production levels were immediately restored to pre-eradication levels. The year 2004 signified a quantitative but also qualitative change. There was a significant expansion—64 percent, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)—in the size of poppy fields, reaching 131,000 hectares, although adverse climatic conditions meant low yield figures and a total estimated harvest of 4,200 tons.⁸⁹ More important, opium production has changed shape, moving north and inland, and spreading



An Afghan farmer scrapes sap from a poppy bulb to make opium or heroin at a farm near the eastern Afghan town of Ghani Khel, April 26, 2002. Government forces raided Afghanistan's biggest drug market in Ghani Khel sparking anger among shopkeepers who said the government stole their drugs to sell them. (AP Photo/Amir Shah)

out across the country. It has now reached every single province and is moving into less accessible and unruly areas in central Afghanistan, as well as the northern provinces. Most processing of opium into heroin now occurs inside Afghanistan, and the largest increases in production are taking place in the country's northern parts, making large quantities available in the vicinity of the Central Asian states. Known heroin laboratories in Kunduz province and elsewhere in the north, as well as increased seizures of heroin coupled with decreasing opium seizures, indicate that the main volume of drugs moving into Central Asia is in the form of heroin.

By the early 2000s, the number of drug users in Central Asia had skyrocketed. Central Asia has so far not seen an addiction epidemic as Russia has, but heroin-addiction levels are rising rapidly.⁹⁰ Societal consequences are emerging, including a rapid rise in HIV cases and drug-related crime.⁹¹ Concomitantly, the economic and political impact of the drug trade in these states has also been significant, especially in the region's weakest states, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In the absence of a strong licit economy—especially in the case of Tajikistan, still suffering the ravages of war—the large turnover and profit margins of drug trafficking have a serious impact on state and society. This has created a severe corruption problem across the region at all levels, especially among low-paid government officials in law enforcement. High-level government officials have also been involved in the trafficking of drugs, raising the question of whether systematic criminal infiltration into state agencies is taking place. Meanwhile, the Islamic insurgencies in the region have been tied intimately to the drug trade.

In the nearly a decade that has passed since the first seizures of heroin, the development of organized crime in the region has profoundly affected the security of the regional states through three main sectors: the role of drugs in funding extremism and insurgency, the criminalization of states, and an impending public health crisis.

Drugs, Extremism, and Terrorism

Although the IMU incursions of 1999 and 2000 were ostensibly waged in the name of the creation of a caliphate with a base in the Fergana Valley, a strong body of evidence suggests they are, in fact, best explained by more mundane motivations, especially the drug trade. The geographic areas targeted, the timing of the attacks, as well as the tactics used all point in this direction.

In the late 1990s, the major transit route for drugs into Central Asia was the highway between Khorog on the Tajik-Afghan border and Osh, the largest city in the south of Kyrgyzstan, for it was the only major highway linking the Afghan border to the population centers of Central Asia. The Khorog-Osh highway was gradually brought under control of the Kyrgyz government, with assistance from the UNODC. Rising Afghan production meant that increasingly large quantities of opiates were being smuggled into Central Asia, and traffickers now sought new smuggling routes. An important new route crossed the Tajik-Kyrgyz border from Tajikistan's Garm province.⁹² Garm's Jirgatal and Tavildara areas had been IMU strongholds during the civil war, and the IMU used them to launch its two armed incursions into Kyrgyzstan via the Vorukh and Sokh enclaves. These enclaves became major hubs of the drug trade and storage points for heroin, while IMU militants freely crossed from Tajikistan across the Korgon Gorge, spreading their message and recruiting locals across the Batken region but especially in the enclaves.⁹³ IMU militants reportedly established routes for crossing the border with the help of "drug barons" in Kyrgyzstan's Osh region.⁹⁴ The geographic juxtaposition in the late 1990s of the IMU's camps and activities with the main areas of drug trafficking into Kyrgyzstan point at the very least to a symbiosis between the group and drug-trafficking networks.

But the IMU was, in fact, a leading actor in the drug trade in its own right. The group was singularly well placed to control the drug trade from Afghanistan to Central Asia. It had well-established links with the Taliban government and al-Qaeda,⁹⁵ while maintaining close contacts with old comrades-in-arms in the former Tajik opposition who were now part of the government.

The Tajik government, in turn, had close links with the ethnic Tajik-led Northern Alliance under Ahmad Shah Masoud. Opposing political forces were thus in control of the main production areas in Afghanistan and the main transit corridor in Central Asia. Only the IMU had a network of contacts on all sides, which enabled it to freely move across Afghanistan and Tajikistan unlike any other known organization.

The 2000 attacks again occurred in the summer season, roughly a month after the latest opium harvest in Afghanistan—allowing enough time for processing opium into heroin before smuggling it out of the country. The launching of simultaneous but small-scale incursions by comparatively small groups of fighters into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan makes little military sense, unless it is understood as a diversionary measure intended to create instability, confuse law enforcement and military structures, and allow for the use of mountain passes for trafficking.⁹⁶ The IMU had made a practice of staging August incursions, but this did not take place in 2001. While other factors may have been at work, it is an interesting coincidence that 2001 was the year in which the Taliban ban on opium had gone into effect: there was simply no harvest in Taliban-held Afghanistan that the IMU could smuggle out to Central Asia. There were nevertheless large stockpiles of opiates left in the country following the large harvests in 1999 and 2000.⁹⁷

A growing consensus holds that the IMU was deeply involved in the drug trafficking from Afghanistan toward Osh in Kyrgyzstan, where the opiates were probably handed to trafficking networks that could ship them farther north and west. Drug control experts concur with the estimate that the IMU controlled up to two-thirds of the opiates entering Kyrgyzstan.⁹⁸ Ralf Mutschke of the Criminal Intelligence Directorate of Interpol labeled the IMU "a hybrid organization in which criminal interests often take priority over 'political' goals," adding, "IMU leaders have a vested interest in ongoing unrest and instability in their area in order to secure the routes they use for the transportation of drugs."⁹⁹ During and after the 1999 incursion, law enforcement officials reported a threefold increase in trafficking attempts. Kyrgyz government officials noted that the volume of drugs trafficked into Kyrgyzstan increased significantly after the 1999 incursion.¹⁰⁰ The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan never lived up to its reputation as a monolithic, hierarchically structured organization. Most studies of the movement indicate the coexistence within the IMU of a more guerrilla-oriented and criminal faction and a more religious one.¹⁰¹ As such, a set of different motivations may well have been behind the IMU's actions. As

Frederick Starr has observed, the IMU is best understood as an “amalgam of personal vendetta, Islamism, drugs, geopolitics, and terrorism.”¹⁰²

The Privatization and Criminalization of the State in Central Asia

The collapse of legal economies in conflict-torn and transition countries has created a severe corruption problem across the region at all levels. Low-paid government officials in law enforcement are routinely bribed to look the other way as smugglers take a shipment through, and are otherwise involved in protecting the local transport and distribution of drugs. One leading Central Asian specialist estimated the average proportion of corrupt officials in the law enforcement agencies of the region at 70 percent.¹⁰³ The interior ministries across the post-Soviet space remain the most unreformed sectors of the state, and have attracted little foreign interest, with the exception of some activity on the part of the OSCE. This has helped to sustain high levels of corruption among these entities.

In Central Asia as in other post-Soviet states, however, the problem is larger than one of corruption. The systematic involvement of high-level government officials in organized crime in general and the drug trade specifically is borne out by substantial amounts of direct as well as circumstantial evidence. As will be seen below, this implies that the problem has passed the stage of passive corruption and bribe-taking and moved into complicity—direct involvement of state officials in the drug trade. This process has apparently affected all regional countries to a significant extent, especially at local and regional levels of governments but extending into the central government hierarchies. The availability of information depends largely on the openness of the country. Consequently, more information is available concerning Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, whereas information on Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is scarce.

Afghanistan. Afghanistan itself is the country probably worst affected by criminal infiltration. This is not surprising, given that the opiate industry is by far the country’s largest source of wealth, with a value equivalent to more than 50 percent of its GDP. The power of regional potentates is strongly linked to their involvement in the drug economy, and the national government is not exempt. Most blatantly, significant evidence links the dominant faction in the 2001–2004 interim administration, the so-called Northern Alliance, to the opium economy. The Northern Alliance’s power base is the Badakhshan prov-

ince north of Kabul, which it has continuously and firmly controlled over the past five years. Opium production in Badakhshan skyrocketed by 385 percent from 2000 to 2004, beginning with a 162 percent yearly increase in 2001, the year the Taliban implemented a ban on opium cultivation in the areas under their control. Of the 20,000 hectares of opium fields eradicated in Afghanistan in 2003, almost nothing was eradicated in Badakhshan.¹⁰⁴ All this suggests systematic involvement of Northern Alliance personnel in the opiate industry. No evidence of involvement has been advanced against the leaders of the Northern Alliance, although the hierarchic nature of the organization implies at least a tolerance at the highest levels for the continued opiate industry. The Northern Alliance is not the only political force in Afghanistan affected by the drug trade, but its significant influence on the government (holding for more than two years

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the ministries of defense, interior, and foreign affairs of the interim administration) makes the issue of criminal infiltration all the more salient.

Tajikistan. In post-Soviet Central Asia, the most directly affected country appears to be Tajikistan, which is also the country in the region with the most significant international drug control presence. It obtained funding (mainly from the United States through the UNODC) to create a Drug Control Agency (DCA) in 1999. In addition, the Russian 201st Motorized Rifle Division, tasked to guard large sections of the Afghan-Tajik border, plays a major role in countering the drug trade in the region. Both institutions have contributed to stemming the drug trade, but both are also riddled with problems. The DCA was widely lauded as a corruption-free institution until the appointment of General Ghafor Mirzoyev as its head in January 2004. A warlord during the civil war, Mirzoyev’s great personal wealth is strongly believed to have been accumulated from involvement in the drug trade in the mid-1990s. His appointment led to a collapse

of morale in the organization and dwindling seizures. His dismissal and arrest in August 2004 on unrelated charges may have alleviated the problem, but the episode stands as a dangerous precedent that questions the Tajik leadership's commitment to drug control. Likewise, the Russian military may be instrumental in intercepting large quantities of heroin, but its involvement in the drug trade is widely recognized and has of late been publicly acknowledged.¹⁰⁵ Although Tajikistan is desperately poor, great wealth is ostentatiously displayed in the palaces of government ministers and other members of the ruling elite, both in the capital and in the provinces. The involvement of officials at the highest levels of the state has repeatedly been credibly alleged. A much-publicized example occurred in May 2000, when Tajikistan's ambassador to Kazakhstan was seized with 63 kilograms of heroin in his car.¹⁰⁶ In 2001, the secretary of Tajikistan's Security Council acknowledged that numerous drug traffickers and couriers are representatives of government agencies, especially law enforcement and security services.¹⁰⁷ These incidents are compounded by a wealth of allegations implicating leading figures in the heroin industry, and are frequently alluded to by neighboring governments, especially by Uzbekistan.¹⁰⁸

Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan in the late 1990s seized substantial quantities of illicit drugs and precursors, with heroin seizures peaking at nearly 2 metric tons in 1997.¹⁰⁹ This suggests that smuggling networks were built up in the country and that a substantial quantity of Afghan heroin did transit Turkmenistan, even though little or no production took place near its borders at the time. Since 2000, however, Turkmenistan has refused to provide data on drug seizures. There is no evidence that the smuggling of drugs through the country has abated since. Quite to the contrary, police cases of heroin smuggling in Western Europe have uncovered links to Turkmenistan.¹¹⁰ Anecdotal evidence of grave heroin addiction problems in the country also indicates that smuggling is a growing problem.¹¹¹ In December 2003, Chief Prosecutor Kurbanbibi Atajanova was arrested after 15 kilograms of heroin were seized from her husband in a border region. Her presence at a government meeting shortly afterwards indicates that she was not relieved of her duties, let alone charged. While this indicates the presence of heroin in the country, it is also a rare example of direct information on government corruption. Allegations by exiled former government officers pointing to high-level collusion with the drug trade abound, but the objectivity of the sources is doubtful.¹¹² Incidentally, Turkmen President Saparmurat

Niyazov has publicly stated that smoking opium is good for one's health.¹¹³

Kyrgyzstan. While Kyrgyzstan does not border Afghanistan, it has become a major corridor for opiates from Tajikistan en route northward. The focal area is the southern Osh, Jalalabad, and Batken areas of the country. Osh is crucial to illicit trafficking of narcotics because of its geographic location close to the Uzbek border and at the head of the only road connecting the northern and southern parts of Kyrgyzstan. In the southern regions, the government's writ has gradually been withering away, and drug traffickers operate with impunity.¹¹⁴ Moreover, there are clear indications that drug trafficking groups in the south of the country have financed the political campaigns of individuals aspiring to political office. International drug control officials confirm that several successful candidates in the 2000 parliamentary elections were elected from the Batken district in the southern part of the country with the support of drug money.¹¹⁵ The same process was repeated in the February 2005 parliamentary election.

The 2005 elections and their violent aftermath increased the power of organized crime leaders in the country's politics.¹¹⁶ To begin with, the parliament that was elected consisted of cronies of former president Askar Akayev and local potentates who simply bought their seats. A number of figures with links to illegal business and organized crime were elected to parliament, partly because it is a source of influence and partly because it confers immunity from prosecution. However, southern Kyrgyzstan's drug barons also played a key role in the emergence of the popular movement that ended up overthrowing the Akayev government. Organized crime kingpins are known to operate paramilitary forces, under the guise of martial arts sport clubs, such as the *alysh* (traditional wrestling) clubs. In the aftermath of the elections, 2,000 young people from the *alysh* clubs were assembled and fed for twenty-five days, stormed state offices in Jalalabad and Osh, and later reached Bishkek. Initially, the opposition movement in Kyrgyzstan did not want to align itself with these organized criminal figures. However, they lacked substantial funds and a wider popularity among the important informal networks of the south of the country. Furthermore, the lack of a clear structure within the opposition movement made it possible for criminal leaders to infiltrate and provide financial support. At this point Bayaman Erkinbayev surfaced. He was one of the richest and most influential men in southern Kyrgyzstan, and his control of martial arts clubs was crucial in the initial phases of the protests there. An influential organized

crime kingpin, Erkinbayev was one of the first criminal figures to enter the political scene. He became a presidential candidate in 2005, but eventually endorsed President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Erkinbaev was assassinated in the summer of 2005 in an apparently drug-related dispute.¹¹⁷ This was only one of several political assassinations in the country that involved organized crime leaders. An April 2006 by-election led to the death of another criminal-political figure, Rysbek Akmatbayev.

As illustrated by the rising number of political assassinations in the republic, Kyrgyzstan's political situation has deteriorated since the 2005 revolution. The influence of organized crime over the country's politics has so increased that it is overtly visible in the country.¹¹⁸ Several government appointments have also raised consternation, most especially President Bakiyev's appointment of officials known for their past high-level involvement in gold-mining business scandals, including the disappearance of large quantities of gold revenues.

Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan is the strongest state in the region and effectively guards its border with Afghanistan. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that substantial quantities of narcotics transit Uzbekistan, mainly from Tajikistan. As elsewhere in the region, corruption in the ranks of the Uzbek law enforcement structures is endemic. The Interior Ministry is highly autonomous from the presidential administration, a fact that enables the infiltration of enforcement structures despite the consensus that the central government is committed to the struggle against the drug trade. Uzbekistan is also the home of well-known alleged organized crime leaders who have significant political influence and semi-official status. Australian authorities denied the head of Uzbekistan's boxing federation a visa to attend the 2000 Sydney Olympics because of alleged links to organized crime. The allegation was vehemently denied by Uzbek officials, sparking a diplomatic incident between Uzbekistan and Australia.¹¹⁹

In Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and probably Turkmenistan, the many accusations of high-level participation in the drug trade by government officials raise the question of whether these states are infiltrated by criminal interests to an extent that merits the use of the term "narco-state." In this context, the vague concept of corruption is unsatisfactory for an understanding of the processes occurring in South and Central Asia. The World Bank uses the term "state capture" to describe attempts by organized forces, whether legal or illegal, to buy, control, or otherwise influence administrative decisions, legislative acts, court verdicts, or state policy

in general. State capture involves turning the institutions of the state to serve the interests of narrow interests rather than the population at large. This is conducted by businesses, regional interest groups, and the like in many developing and post-communist states.

The World Bank definition does not differentiate between the types of interests that seek to influence state institutions. However, when organized crime infiltrates a state in order to influence or affect its decision-making mechanisms, the process is qualitatively different from "ordinary" state capture, in fact amounting to a *criminalization* of the state. Organized crime has so successfully infiltrated state agencies in Central Eurasia because of its

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absolute and relative financial strength in the region, but also because organized criminal networks have a greater interest than most actors in capturing the state, since the state is the main impediment to the development of organized crime. Consequently, the pervasive state weakness in Central Eurasia has enabled the gradual criminalization of state authority in the region. At present, the question is whether drug trafficking in Central Asia is turning into a business conducted by states or by individuals in official positions in states—and whether government complicity is a main reason for the booming organized crime in the region. In this sense, there is substantial reason to argue that the crime-terror nexus in the region is paralleled by a *crime-state nexus*.

Economic and Societal Aspects. In poor production and transition countries, organized crime and the drug industry can be construed as a positive factor. In Afghanistan, for instance, they save thousands of people from poverty. However, this view ignores the obvious negative factors. In Afghanistan, a debt trap making farmers dependent on opium traders is the main factor forcing farmers to cultivate opium to pay their debts.¹²⁰ Even then, the long-term consequences are striking. Areas of Afghanistan are becoming dependent on foreign food donations because of large-scale opium cultivation. Drug prices fluctuate greatly, providing little security for

farmers. Most important, the economic dependence on the drug trade is untenable. Afghanistan's drug industry in 2003 equaled 52 percent of the country legal GDP. The drug trade generates economic and social costs in the region that have a disastrous long-term impact. Crime, corruption, and instability impede investment and spur capital flight, further complicating the region's economic recovery. On a societal level, the present number of HIV cases in the region is estimated at 250,000 people, but estimates are very vague. USAID calculations show that the number could grow to 1.5 million in the next few years.¹²¹ Local states have little capacity to manage such epidemics. As a result, addiction and HIV are likely to put a significant brake on economic development in the region in years to come.

Implications for U.S. National Security

The preceding discussion shows that the illicit drug trade in Central Eurasia has grown to such proportions that it constitutes a clear and present security threat to the region—possibly even the leading challenge to peace, stability, and development in the area. It is a serious distorting element in the regional economies, hindering economic development, and a grave societal threat, given the increasing addiction problems, the rapidly growing HIV epidemic, and the deteriorating investment climate. Worse, the narcotics trade is a security threat both politically and militarily. The linkage between the drug trade and insurgent/terrorist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and violent groups in Afghanistan makes it an important challenge to the region's physical security. Through infiltration and actual criminalization of state authority, the drug trade distorts governance and undermines statehood. Put simply, the drug trade has grown into a multifaceted threat that sustains state weakness in Central Eurasia and constitutes a key impediment to political reform and economic development, and, as such, to the integration of the region into the world economy.

The impact goes far beyond the Central Eurasian region. Both directly and through its regional effect, the drug trade has become an important challenge to international security, including U.S. national security interests. First, the heroin industry in Central Eurasia appears to be financing terrorist groups that directly target the U.S. mainland as well as the U.S. forces and presence in the region. Al-Qaeda, the Hezb-e-Islami of Hekmatyar, the IMU, and the Taliban have all to some extent been involved in the drug trade. All have targeted

the U.S. diplomatic or military presence in the region, while al-Qaeda forms a qualitatively different threat of a global nature. Thus the link between the Eurasian heroin industry and terrorist financing threatens U.S. national and homeland security.

Second, the criminalization of insurgent groups, whether ethnic separatists or religious radicals, threatens the security of regional states and therefore U.S. interests, whether or not they engage in terrorism. These increasingly criminally driven groups exist in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Russia. In some areas, they have made use of ungoverned territories under their control without international oversight. As the motivation of their struggle develops from an ideological one into a criminal one—what U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Elizabeth Jones called “criminal secessionists” in the Caucasian context—they directly weaken statehood and democratic institutions and sustain conflicts that keep the countries politically unstable and the region's economies from developing. Increasing addiction and the spread of infectious diseases exacerbate the poverty fueled by this environment of insecurity, which further contributes to the dissatisfaction that stimulates Islamic radicalism and extremism.

With credible evidence suggesting that entire branches of government in the states of Southwest and Central Asia are directed or strongly influenced by individuals connected to organized crime, the criminalization of states further erodes statehood and complicates both economic development and the building of legitimate ruling structures. Widespread corruption and mismanagement prevent reform and democratization, and, as a result, inefficient governing structures of questionable legitimacy often remain in power in the region. Corruption ensures resistance to press freedom and transparency, thereby furthering opacity and unaccountable governments. All this destroys popular trust in secular government and makes alternatives, including extremist movements, more appealing.

Meanwhile, the United States and the West in general find themselves increasingly dependent on the continued stability and development of the Central Eurasian region. The United States is heavily invested in Afghanistan, and its engagement there and in Central Asian states is a long-term endeavor.¹²² The future of this region has considerable bearing on the development of the Global War on Terrorism and in general on U.S. security interests in Eurasia: the maintenance of access to airspace and territory in the heart of Asia, the development of alternative sources of energy, and the furthering of freedom

and democratic development. The Eurasian drug trade is a threat to all of these ambitions.

Conclusions

Central Asia stands out as an excellent example of how issues traditionally not considered part of international politics turn into security threats because of their multi-faceted effect on many sectors of security. In this sense, it is an important example of the development of new and salient cross-cutting issues in the study of international security, whose full impact and complex effect on security deserve to be studied at greater length.

On a practical level, recent developments indicate an awareness in parts of the U.S. government that the Eurasian narcotics industry poses multiple challenges to America's goals and ambitions in Central Eurasia and globally. Renewed attention to opium cultivation in Afghanistan is one indication of this. While a welcome development, it is unlikely at present to make a major difference in reducing the harmful potential of the Eurasian drug trade, for a number of reasons.

First, the realization of the drug trade's impact only began to fully sink in around three years after the liberation of Afghanistan allowed for the resurgence of opium in the country. Valuable time has been lost, while the considerable financial resources generated by the drug trade have undermined state-building and benefited criminal interests in state authorities as well as insurgent/terrorist groups in the region.

Second, the United States can only deal with the multi-faceted challenges posed by the drug trade in the region by a multi-agency response involving diplomatic, economic, and military facets as well as considerable targeted assistance. The issue does not squarely fall under the aegis of any specific government agency. This is most clearly illustrated by the military's reluctance to engage in countering the drug trade in Afghanistan, which effectively left the issue unattended. The drug trade is a matter that the U.S. government is structurally ill equipped to handle. The Defense Department, State Department, Drug Enforcement Agency, intelligence community, USAID, and even the Department of Agriculture could play important roles in future attempts to curtail the drug trade. This will require a form of inter-agency coordination and division of tasks that is typically difficult to build and sustain.

Finally, while awareness is growing in the United States regarding the challenge posed by the drug trade, the same is not true of America's European allies. Europe is the main consumer of Afghan opiates and therefore

has an objective interest as well as responsibility in the matter, but the issue is practically absent from the European political scene. Without meaningful European cooperation, Washington is unlikely to successfully contain and roll back the challenge posed by the Eurasian drug trade. Bringing about increased European attention to this problem and joint American and European work to address it is therefore a crucial element in eventually containing the effect of the Eurasian drug industry on the security of the region and the West.

In sum, it is increasingly obvious that the Eurasian drug trade constitutes a clear and present danger to the security of the wider Central Eurasian region. It is also clearly a significant threat to both the immediate and long-term security interests of the United States in this region. Whether it constitutes a clear and present danger to the national security of the United States is a question of a political nature. What is certain, however, is that the threat it poses is far from being thoroughly addressed.

Notes

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3. The literature on the drug trade in Central Asia consists mainly of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reports and a handful of articles and working papers. These include: Martha Brill Olcott and Natalia Udalova Zwart, "Drug Trafficking on the Great Silk Road," Working Paper no. 11 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2000); Alexander Seger, *Drugs and Development in the Central Asian Republics* (Bonn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, 1996); Kairat Osmonaliev, "Developing Counter-Narcotics Policy in Central Asia: Legal and Political Dimensions" (Silk Road Paper, Silk Road Studies Program, SAIS, Washington; Uppsala University, Department of Eurasian Studies, Uppsala, January 2005).

4. Transnational Organized Crime is defined by the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which entered into force in 2003. This article uses the UN definition of organized crime, briefly summarized as a structured group of three or more individuals created for the purpose of criminal activity, and whose operations or their effect have bearing on more than one country. The article also incorporates the definitions of the United Kingdom and Netherlands, among others, of "serious crimes," implying crimes with serious consequences for society. Primary among these is arguably the drug trade. For further details, see Svante E. Cornell and Niklas L.P. Swanström, *Transnationell Brottslighet: Ett Säkerhetshot* (Transnational Crime: A Security Threat) (Stockholm: Emergency Management Agency, 2005).

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work for Analysis (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 37.

6. Security studies have traditionally focused on the state or the classical phenomena of security complexes. This has changed because international and regional systems are now more important, but also because of the emergence of subunits of states, such as regions or ethnic groups, as economic and political actors. See Niklas Swanström, *Regional Cooperation and Conflict Management: Lessons from the Pacific Rim* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2003); Björn Hettne, Andras Inotai, and Osvaldo Sunkel, ed., *The New Regionalism and the Future of Security and Development* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

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