

# Putting Fuel on the Afghan Drug Trade Fire

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The word out last week was that Canadian troops may soon expand their combat operations in Kandahar to target drug dealers in addition to Taliban insurgents. This widened mandate was first proposed by U.S. General John Craddock, NATO's top commander, when he issued a "guidance" that would authorize NATO troops "to attack directly drug producers and facilities throughout Afghanistan." According to Craddock's directive, the alliance could employ deadly force against drug traffickers, even if there is no evidence that the proceeds of their illegal trade are being used to support the insurgency.

Several NATO commanders immediately objected to the proposed new rules of engagement and proclaimed Craddock's direction to be "illegitimate" and in "violation of international law." These strong objections resulted in NATO ordering a review of Craddock's instruction, and a subsequent clarification has yet to be approved.

Canada's top general, Chief of Defence Staff Walter Natynczyk, indicated in his comments to the media that he supports the widened mandate.

"Most times that we have operations, our soldiers, sailors and airmen have found drugs right there with the Taliban." Natynczyk was quoted as saying, "so the nexus between drugs and terror is very, very strong."

Canada will still wait for official sanction from NATO before authorizing any attacks against drug dealers. International law clearly forbids the use of military force against civilian targets—even if they are involved in criminal activities. Those drug traffickers with clearly identified links to the insurgency could possibly be considered legitimate targets. However, under Craddock's new doctrine, all Afghans involved in the drug trade would become fair game.

Those familiar with the complex tribal mosaic of Afghanistan, and the equally fractious composition of the insurgency, will understand that Craddock is in fact proposing to throw more fuel on an already raging fire. The Afghan drug trade has exploded since the U.S. toppled the Taliban in 2001, and this black market is estimated to represent somewhere between 33 and 50 per cent of the Afghan economy.

Not all Afghan drug dealers support the Taliban, but by declaring war on them collectively NATO will only guarantee that, if only for self-preservation, the traffickers will be forced to throw in their lot with the insurgents.

Also lost in the Craddock proposal is any mention of the fate of the poppy farmers. By targeting the drug lords and actively eradicating the farmers' crops, NATO will leave tens of

thousands of Afghans with no viable livelihood. Without a commodity to sell and/or no trafficker to purchase their poppies, these destitute farmers would become a fertile recruit base for insurgents.

In fact, this particular phenomenon among Afghan villagers has already been labelled the “accidental guerrilla.” Described by Australian counter-insurgency expert David Kilcullen as having no grand transnational agenda and no dreams of a global jihad, the “accidental guerrilla” is simply someone defending their local ways and customs from outside encroachment.

The Afghan people are not drug users, and the vast majority of the farmers involved in the opium trade are guilty of nothing more than growing and harvesting poppies. Their concern is not how that product is processed into narcotics, nor do they care about the street value of those drugs in Western cities. Their goal is instead to simply sell their crop for enough money to feed their families.

Many proposals have been put forward for the international community to purchase the Afghan poppies at the current market value and to convert them into legitimate pharmaceuticals to supply the Third World. These initiatives have thus far all been vetoed by the U.S. authorities in Kabul. Now an American general in the top NATO post wants the international alliance to add their muscle to what is essentially an extension of the U.S. war on drugs in conjunction with their war on terror.

Would it not make infinitely more sense for us to purchase the poppy crop at a competitive price, even if we simply destroy it afterwards? This would keep both the farmers employed and out of the ranks of the Taliban, and the low-level drug lords (let’s call them pharmaceutical executives instead) content and unthreatened by NATO forces.

The only losers in this equation would be high-level international drug traffickers, junkies in Western cities, and Taliban recruiters.

Sure it would cost billions of dollars, but I suggest that would be an inexpensive sum compared to the fortune in blood and gold which will be required to enforce Craddock’s new strategy.

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