



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: [contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org)

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

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## Meeting Summary: Russia and Eurasia Programme

# The International Relations of the Narcotics Trade through Afghanistan and Central Asia

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## **The Politics of Drugs at Source and in Transit**

The first speaker focused on Afghanistan. The fight against poppy cultivation and opium production has achieved considerable results. Cultivation levels have been reduced from 193,000 hectares in 2007 to 131,000 hectares in 2012. The opium poppy has been eradicated from seventeen provinces. Helmand province in particular has benefited from the 'Food Zone' programme supported by the UK government, and should act as a model for other provinces.

Drug-trafficking is related to insecurity due to on-going war, unemployment and poverty, and a high demand for drugs in the global market. A direct connection can be traced between poppy cultivation and insurgency as well as drug traffickers and Al-Qaeda. The drug trade is a major source of funding for terrorist activity in Central Asia.

Drug trafficking poses a security threat not only to Afghanistan, but also regionally and globally. Although Afghanistan is the main opium producer, trafficking is not a one-way process. The Afghan farmers' share in the \$68 billion opium trade worldwide is only 5%. It is therefore of the utmost importance to identify practical ways of regional and international cooperation to combat drug trafficking. Against the background of the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan in 2014, the international community should develop a counter-narcotics strategy for the long term in order not to jeopardise the achievements made over the past ten years.

The second speaker explained that drug control agencies in the Central Asian countries play an important role, particularly within the context of the 'anti-drug quartet' consisting of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia and Tajikistan. A 'Northern Route' initiative includes Russia, the United States, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and aims at investigating the criminal groups which are smuggling drugs from Afghanistan into Europe. Tajikistan has signed intergovernmental counter narcotics treaties with 17 countries. Furthermore, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) established a Counter-Narcotics Centre in Dushanbe in August 2008. Also in 2008, the international ministerial conference on 'Border Management and Drug Control in Central Asia' in Dushanbe established a specialized training centre for training and professional development of law enforcement officers involved in the fight against drug trafficking. In addition, the drug control agencies in Central Asia adopted a new United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) program to support efforts to combat narcotics in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries in 2011-2014, with international and regional cooperation on legal matters, based in Dushanbe.

The third speaker argued that regional cooperation is the key to a successful fight against drug trafficking. The EU-funded Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) aims at encouraging Central Asian governments to commit to sustainable strategies in the field of drug addiction and to bring current systems of drug addict prosecution into accordance with international strategies and standards. However, a preliminary assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and its consequences for Central Asia is not optimistic. Although the drug control measures introduced and implemented in the last few years led to reduced opium cultivation in Afghanistan and therefore a lower volume of illegal drug trafficking via the Northern Route, the implications of narcotics trafficking for Central Asia are immense.

Narcotics-related corruption and organised crime undermine the authority of the Central Asian states in the long term, as drug-lords and corrupt officials are elected to state parliaments or appointed to administrative positions in law enforcement agencies. Organised criminal groups keep the transport channels open and provide armed escort and security if necessary. The Kyrgyz Central Agency on Development, Investments and Innovations (CADII) was a remarkable example of a well-established money-laundering scheme. It received incomes from pension funds, tax payers and drug trafficking in order to launder the money through legal governmental programmes.

Drug trafficking should be regarded as a global security threat: up to 70% of Afghan heroin is directed to Western Europe via Iran, Turkey and the Balkan states, and up to 60% of the drugs trafficked through the Northern Route remain in Russia. Some EU member states, e.g. Romania, Hungary, Poland and the Baltics, are already affected by Northern route transportation as criminal organizations are looking to open up new markets.

The fourth speaker discussed the politics of drug trafficking in Central Asia. It is a remarkable paradox that while international assistance has increased significantly since 2001, the level of drug seizures in the region has remained flat or decreased and the levels of traditional types of drug-related violence remain very low. One of the reasons for this paradox is the fact that state security institutions and political elites play a growing role in controlling drug trafficking. An increasingly close inter-relationship between criminal networks and the political system has been established under successive presidents in Kyrgyzstan.

Chaotic and competing drug trafficking networks are replaced by fewer 'nationalised' groups which are loyal to the political/security elite and thereby

become more and more 'untouchable', which limits the scope for seizures or arrests. This applies both to high-level criminal transit (transnational organised crime) and low-level local retail (local crime and police). In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, 'drug seizures' are frequently recycled into the local market by the police, who thus establish direct and indirect control of the retail markets. Political elites control drug-trafficking not only for their self-enrichment but to ensure political control through patronage networks - counter-narcotics initiatives are often used for crushing political rivals or regional elites.

From a geopolitical perspective, regional cooperation remains weak. Russia is suspicious of US support for counter-narcotics which is viewed as having geopolitical significance. Returning Russian border guards to the Tajik-Afghan border also has both counter-narcotics and geopolitical reverberations. International counter-narcotics programmes are not just ineffective in their primary aim – reducing the volume of trafficked narcotics – but actually encourage the consolidation of trafficking by state-linked groups.

The discussion focused on international counter-narcotics initiatives. Tajikistan is currently considering two proposals: the establishment of special divisions to fight drug trafficking, proposed by the US Drug Enforcement Administration, and a Russian proposal to invest 7 million USD in the Tajik Drug Control Agency. There is two-way traffic in Afghanistan: precursor chemicals are brought into the country and opium and heroin are exported. The level of cooperation with China on tracking precursor chemicals is not high. Also, border guards are often young and not well educated and have problems distinguishing precursors, such as acetic hydride, from common chemicals.

There is often a temptation to generalize the Central Asian countries as 'drug states', but the dynamics in each of them are different. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan seem to have the most effective and professional anti-drug organizations, while little is known about the efforts of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This need not to say that state corruption is higher in the latter two, but it does indicate a lack of transparency.

## **Effects and Recommendations**

The first speaker opened by discussing the impact of the drug trade on the Central Asian states. UNODC figures on narcotics trafficking do not

correspond to circumstantial evidence. It is difficult to try and gauge the real volume of the narcotics trade as the operations are illegal. The low level of economic development is also a problem. The financial situation in Central Asia and Afghanistan and the states' weakness make it extremely difficult to combat drug trafficking, although Kazakhstan is better equipped to fight the drug trade than other Central Asian states.

There are some positive elements to drug trafficking; in Kyrgyzstan, drug traders are known to have provided books for schools.

A degree of instability is convenient for the drug traders, which is why a significant percentage of Afghan opium is trafficked through Central Asia. The situation in Central Asia might worsen over time as the Northern Route is likely to overtake the Balkans Route in terms of volume transported. The capacity for laundering money in Central Asia is limited and it is reaching its upper limits; the traders need to set up money-laundering schemes elsewhere, e.g. in Xinjiang. Also, Central Asian drug users cannot afford to pay high prices, which is why traffickers are eager to move their cargo to more lucrative countries like China and Russia.

Narcotics are a multi-faceted problem and it is not possible to eradicate or manage them completely. There is no cheap way out; it is a question of economic development, strengthening the local legal economy, promoting alternative crops, and investing in education. Corruption and money laundering are endemic to the drug trade and they have to be fought at both ends - in Afghanistan as well as Europe. Russian-speaking communities' organised crime is a serious problem in Europe as it is difficult to prove whether the incoming money is from an illegal source. Closer cooperation with the Russian police is needed.

The second speaker focused on the situation in Afghanistan. In areas where the state is strong, there are more economic opportunities, including salaried jobs. In Shinwar, for example, the economy is diversified. Many farmers grow multiple short season crops, most of which bring a good return. In marginal areas like Nangarhar and Nazian, the state is not functioning properly. The land is divided into small holdings; it is dry and difficult to farm. The price of opium drives cultivation – in 2011, opium sold at \$400 per kilogram. Successes lead to expansion of agricultural land and many farmers start to monocrop. Also, sharecroppers' labour is needed for cultivating poppy but not for wheat, which is why they migrate out of the areas where poppy cultivation has been reduced.

It is often implied that if the state was strong in Afghanistan, there would be

no illicit poppy cultivation. But eradication of opium poppy is not an indicator of success and will not create a strong state in itself. Poppy cultivation is being pushed into areas with no viable alternative. Many groups have a vested interest in continued insecurity, aiming to fill the gap after foreign actors have left. Taliban resists placing a complete ban on poppy cultivation; such a ban is difficult to enforce anyway if there are many groups to reconcile. The local elite is instrumental in combatting poppy cultivation. The Afghan government should go after the traffickers, not the farmers. When the metrics are bad, all regional and international institutions are drawn into the discussion about the narcotics trade as they have to be seen to be doing something. Yet they do not have a common understanding of the consequences of their policies further down the line. The question is how to expand what has already worked.

The third speaker argued that while drugs in general are not new to Central Asia, intravenous use of heroin is a relatively new phenomenon. Prevalence of heroin addiction among adult users is twice as high as the global average, and the prevalence of HIV and Hepatitis C virus among injecting users has also reached alarming levels. The national aggregated HIV rates may not reveal a full picture as there are pockets of high HIV prevalence that overlap with key drug trafficking routes. HIV used to be an issue primarily among injecting drug users (IDUs), but that is not the case anymore. For example, in Uzbekistan, there has been a drop in new cases among IDUs since 2007 and an increase among non-IDUs. Furthermore, official statistics suggest the number of drug related deaths is low, but the total number of autopsies is also low. Drug users are often reluctant to call an ambulance to overdose cases as they are afraid that the police and health authorities would immediately register them as drug users.

Blood-borne infections among drug users are caused by sharing unsterile drug equipment. Individual risk is determined by the social, economic and physical environment. In some areas, the coverage of drug users with sterile injecting equipment has dropped in the recent years. It is often difficult to do outreach activities in Central Asia in view of police harassment. Rural communities may also be suspicious to novel public health interventions. Drug users are often reluctant to use public health and harm reduction services. Opiate substitution treatment is available only for a very small number of users and it has been discontinued in Uzbekistan. While Kazakhstan can afford to increase public spending on HIV prevention, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan cannot.

Security services often plant drugs on and extort bribes from drug users.

Female users are even more vulnerable as it is more difficult for them to get drugs – they need a middleman and have to pay higher prices. Female drug users are often asked for sexual favours in return for drugs.

Arresting drug users is costly, yet between 13% (in Tajikistan) and 64% (in Kazakhstan) of drug crime convictions in the Central Asian states are related to possession of small quantities with 'no intent to sell' by people who are dependent on drugs. The Central Asian states are reluctant to change their policies, but it is time for them to rethink their approach and target traffickers instead of users. However, it is important to invest in public health interventions and local advocacy in parallel with targeting the supply side. For example, there has recently been a decrease in the flow of heroin into Russia and, in many cities, only elite users can now afford the drug. However, the demand for harm reduction services has not decreased. Instead, many heroin users have switched to 'krokodil', a derivative of codeine-containing pharmaceutical substances, which requires more frequent injections and can be far more harmful than heroin. This is what happens if one only deals with the supply side of the drug problem.