

David Leshchiner

dleshchiner@gmail.com · [David Leshchiner](mailto:dleshchiner@gmail.com) · 224-321-2188

Boren Scholarship National Security Essay

David Leshchiner

02/01/2022

Kazakhstan's historical association with global commerce has a contemporary dark side: The drug trade. The State Department's narcotics bureau and its annual 2021 narcotics report identify Kazakhstan as a transit country of Afghan-made opiates. By tackling narcotrafficking in Kazakhstan, the US can promote national security interests by mitigating a key revenue stream benefitting regional terrorist groups who threaten the safety of the US and its allies, counter the negative human security risks and societal harm posed by the drug trade, and improve cooperation with Kazakhstan, an important regional power inside Mackinder's Heartland. The transnational and undisputed threat of narcotrafficking might also be leveraged by the US as a win-win issue to rebuild US relations in Central Asia. Through data analytics and Russian language skills, policymakers can better interpret and execute policy related to the nuanced threats posed by narcotrafficking in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan's drug issue stems from Afghanistan; which, according to a 2021 UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, supplies 80% of the world's opiates. Kazakhstan is a primary transit country along the northern route, a trade network that trafficks 25-30% of pure heroin manufactured in Afghanistan through Central Asia into markets in Europe and Russia, according to a 2014 report by the Pompidou Group, the Council of Europe's drug policy cooperation platform. Furthermore, a 2018 UNODC report estimates that 85% of narcotics on this route are transported on land by cars, trucks, and rail, meaning all drugs going by land from Afghanistan must pass through Kazakhstan to go to Russia. Additionally, drug-carrying vehicles crossing the Kazakh border are rarely inspected until they reach the Russia/EU border because Kazakhstan and Russia are part of the Eurasian Economic Union, a customs union that allows for the free movement of goods. The volume of drugs trafficked through Kazakhstan, combined with the country's soft border with Russia demonstrates that despite Astana's efforts to combat narcotrafficking, the issue persists.

Drug trafficking across Kazakhstan is expected to increase due to the sudden contraction of Afghanistan's economy after the Taliban's return to power, which resulted in the suspension of Western-funded aid and investment worth billions. After the Taliban takeover, the 2021 UNODC report's authors predict significantly increased drug production. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in September, President Putin admitted that the present socio-economic situation in Afghanistan would incentivize the country to increase drug manufacturing. This trend has simultaneously been corroborated by statements from Taliban officials who say they cannot combat rising drug production and BBC reporting in December 2021. Terrorist groups profit from these operations by taxing farmers who cultivate drug produce and sell the drugs themselves. Even before the Taliban takeover, the UNODC estimated that Afghanistan's drug sector was more profitable than the

David Leshchiner

dleshchiner@gmail.com · [David Leshchiner](#) · 224-321-2188

sum of its legal exports. As drug production is expected to correspond with an increase in narco-trafficking in Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, alongside its CSTO and SCO partners, said during these respective organizations' summits in September that it is working to mitigate narco-trafficking.

Kazakhstan's vast, unpopulated borders, combined with endemic corruption that blunts any national response, hamper the country's counternarcotics capabilities (Turnbull, 2015). Washington understands the threat posed by the issue and includes counternarcotics as part of its Kazakhstan "country strategy." In 2020, roughly 20% of the State Department's Central Asia counternarcotics operations budget was spent on Kazakhstan. Additionally, the US has invested \$90 million in Central Asian border security with a focus on improving the rule of law, training customs and border guards, and upgrading border security equipment.

Data analysis, visualization, and mapping can improve Washington's understanding of this issue and recommend policies. This type of analysis has been used to elucidate factors for statistical analysis and may identify causes or correlational factors shaping Kazakhstan's relationship with the drug economy (Omilecheva, 2016). As UNODC surveys such as the Afghanistan Opium Survey may become less accurate due to the Taliban's lack of cooperation, alternative datasets from the UNODC's Drug Monitoring Platform, which have information about Kazakhstan, can be used to interpret the evolution of Afghanistan-centered opiate trade.

Numbers alone cannot solve narco-trafficking in Kazakhstan. Russian language skills are essential because the language is spoken in numerous countries along the Northern route. Many useful reports, publications, and articles related to Kazakhstan's drug policy are written in Russian. For example, CARICC, an Almaty-based Central Asian counternarcotics organization supported by the UNODC, publishes many articles only in Russian.

The US needs more engagement with Kazakhstan vis-à-vis narcotrafficking due to expanding drug production in Afghanistan, a place where Washington cannot directly influence domestic policy anymore. The US should use its current partnerships with Nur-Sultan to work on implementing border security policies across Central Asia, where there is a market for contraband trafficked by terrorist organizations, increasing American, Central Asian, and Eastern European cooperation, and reaffirming US national security interests in the region.