

Title:

Afghanistan: NATO's Classic Self-Defeating Exercise

Word Count:

1045

Summary:

A few days after it was announced that Afghanistan's opium production may well exceed 53% of national GDP in 2007, an investigative reporter asked an officer inside the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime about the impact (i.e. the futility) of hundreds of millions of dollars spent on poppy eradication and crop substitution schemes since the Taliban were forced out of Kabul in late 2001. "We don't appear to achieve anything credible," the officer acknowledged on condition of anonymity. "In fact, we just do our best, year after year." If you think that you are aware of what's going on in Afghanistan today, think again. The very people-politicians, generals and journalists--feeding you information on the Afghan matrix are unsure about both, their facts and their conclusions.

Keywords:

NATO, Titles, Land Reforms, Mullahs, Taliban, Al Qaeda, Drugs, War on Terror, Myth.

Article Body:

If you think that you are aware of what's going on in Afghanistan today, think again. The very people-politicians, generals and journalists--feeding you information on the Afghan matrix are unsure about both, their facts and their conclusions.

A few days after it was announced that Afghanistan's opium production may well exceed 53% of national GDP in 2007, an investigative reporter asked an officer inside the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime about the impact (i.e. the futility) of hundreds of millions of dollars spent on poppy eradication and crop substitution schemes since the Taliban were forced out of Kabul in late 2001. "We don't appear to achieve anything credible," the officer acknowledged on condition of anonymity. "In fact, we just do our best, year after year."

An Afghan volunteer supporting NATO's drug eradication programmes was a bit more precise when confronted with the hard fact that more than 660 tons of opium and morphine, valued at US\$4 billion, have been exported from Afghanistan last year. "We keep telling the small farmers to grow poppy substitutes and they keep telling us that they don't own the land, they don't have title," the volunteer

revealed in a private conversation. "It is obvious that the warlords and clerics determine who grows what and where, not the farmers we keep talking to daily." The volunteer appeared to have no idea whether the various groups currently directing crop cultivation—drug kingpins, pro-Taliban Mullahs and religious radicals—were working in conjunction or otherwise.

In 1978, there were hardly any poppy fields in Afghanistan, despite the fact that the trade in drugs was flourishing in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. In 1978, despite a deep-rooted feudal structure in the countryside, where the majority of Afghans lived, Afghanistan was substantively self-sufficient in food. In 1978, the Afghan government determined that economic and social progress in Afghanistan could only take place if (a) land reform laws were effectively implemented, (b) the huge rural debt due to moneylenders was cancelled without delay and (c) adequate rural credit was made available to small farmers.

After all, as a foreign economist visiting Afghanistan at that time concluded that "without fundamental changes in the agrarian milieu, this country will not achieve any breakthrough whatsoever. This is primarily an agricultural country, and a complex one at that, and there is now an urgent need to sharply increase investments in rural infrastructure, in order to raise productivity, and to improve the quality and packaging of output."

But that vision of an economically resurgent Afghanistan was in tatters well before the reform agenda threatened to become a viable reality. The anti-Soviet Jihad of the 1980s set Afghanistan on a different path altogether. Land records were destroyed in more than 80% of the provinces. Freshly-armed tribal chiefs forced sharecroppers and landless labourers to grow poppies instead of grains, fruit and vegetables. Militias under the umbrella of self-proclaimed freedom fighters, like Osama Bin Laden and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, opened up new drug smuggling routes to Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe. And, in the midst of the complete transformation (i.e. a deterioration) in Afghan agriculture over a 5-6 year period, village Mullahs, many of whom landowners in their right, were telling poor Afghans that "only Allah can give you land, not the communists."

Today, twenty years later, the issue of land titles is mired in even greater confusion. Some of the refugees returning home from Pakistan and Iran have indeed been allotted land; but, in the absence of access to reasonable credit, refugee families are rapidly falling into the same old cycle of perpetual debt. Land officials in Kabul, attempting to formalize a land title regime to be applied throughout Afghanistan at some point in the future, are confronted by the challenge of possession. "Here possession is 100% of the game, and we all know who has possession of the vast majority of fertile land," a UN aid worker

explained. "By our estimates, 95% of fertile land is in physically in the hands of only 2% of the population, and it is not difficult to see who comprises that 2%."

Not that Afghanistan's landholding ratios by themselves are alarming by third-world standards. South Africa, to cite just one example, has failed miserably in delivering land reforms, a good 13 years since the end of Apartheid. What makes Afghanistan unique is that the impact of those ratios is compounded by the absence of a secure land title system, and by the desire of those influencing the use of agricultural land to grow poppies for profit.

But wait. There are a few more depressing statistics which you need to be aware of. The wholesale price of a gram of heroin is a mere US\$2.50 in Afghanistan. Just beyond Afghanistan's borders, in Iran and in Pakistan, a gram changes hands at US\$3.50. That figure reaches US\$10 by the time the heroin reaches Turkey, Kosovo and Albania. Today's wholesale price in Europe ranges between US\$22 and US\$33 per gram. One final note: retail prices can be more than 10 times higher on the street.

Just do the maths, and figure out the phenomenal impact Afghan poppies are having on an entire array of economies. At the same time, the situation inside Afghanistan, and along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, can only be subject to a credible determination once some basic questions are answered.

Are those so-called religious extremists—Al Qaeda and the Taliban—simply glorified drug traders? "They don't seem to be doing much praying in the mosques around here," an Afghan border guard told a British journalist at a busy Kandahar border crossing, as donkey-drawn carts moved weapons, whiskey and pirated Bollywood videos in the vicinity.

The second set of questions must be addressed with an elevated degree of seriousness. Who else, besides these militants, is participating in the opium wealth? Are law enforcement agencies on both sides of the border actively or passive players? Finally, what kind of war is NATO actually fighting when more than a few backers of the Karzi government are widely suspected of being direct beneficiaries of the Afghanistan's opium export boom?

Without comprehensive answers to a series of fundamental and disturbing questions, talk of Afghanistan's reconstruction is meaningless, without context, without any grasp of the reality on the ground.