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Lessons from Colombia for Afghanistan? (WP)**

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Summary

With the great increases in insecurity in Afghanistan and the overwhelming sense that the counter-insurgency in Afghanistan is not being won, analysts and policymakers are looking for analogies to understand the conflict's dynamics and devise counter-measures. One of the analogies that analysts are turning to is the counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency campaign in Colombia. Indeed, there are some striking similarities between the FARC and its relationship to the drug economy in Colombia and the Taliban and its relationship to the drug economy in Afghanistan. However, these similarities do not lie in what many consider the defining characteristic of the FARC, namely the loss of ideology and its transformation into a pure profit-driven organisation. Rather, from the point of view of counter-insurgency and the drug-conflict-nexus, the ideology-versus-greed debate is of far less importance than is frequently believed. Whatever their ideologies and the intensity of their beliefs, both the FARC and the Taliban are deriving not only substantial financial resources from the drug trade, but also substantial political capital. And this political capital is nonetheless greatly enhanced by government policies of eradicating the drug crops, which therefore is counterproductive for counter-insurgency objectives.

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(1) Introduction

As the NATO effort in Afghanistan to defeat the Taliban insurgents and their al-Qaeda allies and nurture the Afghan state to self-sufficiency falters, many analysts and policymakers are resorting to past Afghan conflicts and counter-insurgency struggles to isolate the critical drivers of the insurgency, recommend strategies and predict the outcome.

Those who emphasise the impossibility of prevailing in the effort frequently point to the previous Afghanistan wars: the British struggles in the 19th century to conquer the country and their defeats amidst very high casualties and the Soviet occupation in the 1980s that failed to boost the pro-Communist regime and bled the Soviet empire. For these analysts, Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires that swallows invaders and whose Pashtun tribes cannot tolerate any foreign presence. Nor, along with their other ethnic co-patriots, can the Pashtun tolerate any strong central Afghan state (Bacevich, 2008).

Analogies are also drawn from Vietnam where the US lost, and was traumatised by a protracted and costly counter-insurgency. Such analysts who stress the Vietnam analogy argue that Afghanistan today exhibits all of the features that doomed the Vietnam counter-insurgency to failure: in Vietnam the US slid into a quagmire amid ever-increasing troop deployments and casualties. The counter-insurgency strategy was undermined by its own contradictions, particularly the ever-present tension between winning hearts and minds versus killing the insurgents and focusing on the body-count. Moreover, the South Vietnamese government, like the government in Kabul, was corrupt beyond redemption and lost legitimacy with the population. Support by the American public for the effort began to fall off drastically, and allies whose understanding of the stakes in Vietnam were vastly different from the US understanding, increasingly urged withdrawal (Barry & Thomas, 2009).

Others find more positive analogies. They point to Iraq where, amidst a widespread perception of a doomed mission, a combination of the US military surge and the rise of Sunni Anbar militias appears to have resulted in a substantial weakening of the al-Qaeda-linked insurgents and significant abatement of the sectarian conflict. Hence they recommend standing up such militias in Afghanistan –ideally, by recruiting them away from the Taliban–. Such devolution of responsibility for security to the tribes, they argue, is also consistent with Afghanistan’s history (Ignatius, 2009).

Finally, the analogies also focus on Colombia. After all, Colombia has been the world’s largest producer of coca leaf and cocaine for over 15 years, as has Afghanistan been for poppy and opium. Those who embrace this analogy argue that the Taliban in Afghanistan, like Colombia’s leftist guerrillas the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de*

Colombia Ejército del Pueblo (FARC –the Revolutionary Forces of Colombia–), are essentially narco-traffickers with access to vast drug profits –on the order of tens or hundreds of millions of dollars a year– with which they can acquire sophisticated weapons and hire thousands of combatants. The policy such analysts frequently recommend is to suppress the drug economy so as to weaken and defeat the belligerents.¹ Indeed, the government of Colombia itself clearly believes that its strategies for dealing with the nexus of drugs and conflict are well applicable to Afghanistan and has offered to train on a small scale Afghan security forces in interdiction measures and to share its counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency lessons.

The analysis below explores how similar or different the FARC and the Taliban in fact are, and what lessons derived from Colombia can be applied in Afghanistan. The comparison is drawn along the following dimensions: (1) the belligerents’ motivation for conflict; (2) the evolution of the belligerents’ attitudes toward illicit crops and the drug trade; (3) the benefits that the two belligerent groups (the FARC and the Taliban) have derived from drugs in terms of financial profits and political capital; (4) their relationship with drug traffickers; (5) their relationship with other armed actors in the conflict; (6) the outcomes on the battlefield; (7) the economic and drug context of the two countries and its impact on conflict dynamics; and (8) US and European strategic interests in each country.

(2) Ideology versus Profit as Motivations for Violent Conflict

Many analyses of the violent conflict in Colombia today describe the persistent violence there as motivated purely by the desire for financial profit –in other words, the conflict is driven by greed on the part of the FARC and paramilitary groups and traffickers’ militias–.² This view, also prevalent in the Colombian government of President Álvaro Uribe and in the Bush Administration in the US, argues that the drug economy in Colombia is not only what sustains the conflict by enhancing the physical resources of the belligerents to conduct military operations, but that the effort to economically exploit the drug economy is in fact the sole, or at least dominant, motivation on the part of the belligerent actors –the FARC, the other leftist guerrilla *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN –National Liberation Army–) and the now officially demobilised, but resurgent, paramilitaries– to persist in the conflict. Ideological motivations or other bases of recruitment and mobilisation, such as socio-economic grievances and ambitions, are argued to be no longer important. This downgrading of ideology and the rise of profit as motivation for conflict perpetuation is noted to be especially prominent in the case of the FARC, given that the paramilitaries’ ideological justifications for their armed struggle

¹ See, for example, Peters (2009) and Schweich (2008).

² See, for example, Collier & Hoeffler (2001) and Ortiz (2002).

were always suspect and that the guerrilla movement emerged out of drug traffickers' militias and landowners' bodyguards.³

There is no doubt that the intensity of ideology in the Colombian conflict has declined substantially over the years. Today the ideological drivers of conflict among members of armed groups and the overall population are the weakest since the 1940s when the political and social tensions erupted in *La Violencia's* civil war, out of which the FARC emerged. The reasons why ideology declined as a salient feature of the conflict are multiple: unlike in the case of Peru's Shining Path, for example, the FARC's socialist ideology was never well defined to start with, and the demise of its old leadership, hiding in jungles and isolated from the changes in the country, only further decimated the intellectual capacity of the group over the past several years (Isacson, 2003).

Moreover, the end of the Cold War discredited socialist teachings of violent revolution of the masses and their resonance among Latin America's citizens. Fuelled by President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, *Bolivarismo*, a 21st century version of socialist populism, has breathed some life into socialist rhetoric in Latin America, and the FARC has attempted to latch onto it and incorporate it into some of its statements. But this does not seem to have improved its mobilisation capacity.

Most important, the Colombian population has been subjected to great brutality and massacres both from the rightist paramilitaries and the FARC; and after 60 years of vague promises of better lives with little concrete improvements to show for the violent struggle, the people have lost faith in the abstract and outdated notions of socialism. The hollowness of the socialist message of the FARC became apparent during the 1990s FARC negotiations with the Colombian government of President Andrés Pastrana. Its approach to the negotiations seemed not only disingenuous, but also devoid of any clear goals.

The various deals to divide up the drug territories as spoils of war between the FARC and its sworn enemy, the rightist paramilitaries, further strengthened the perception that ideology was no longer a part of the conflict. In many such territories, carved up between the FARC and the *paras* in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the FARC taxed coca cultivation and controlled coca paste production and sales, and then sold it to the paramilitaries for processing into coca base and cocaine. Even after the paramilitaries officially demobilised under an agreement with the Colombian government in 2005, such deals persist between the FARC and the newly resurgent paramilitary groups or *bandas criminales*, or *grupos emergentes* as the Colombian government prefers to call them (International Crisis Group, 2007). The decision in the mid-1990s of the FARC's recently deceased leader, Manuel Marulanda *Tirofijo*, to institute self-financing for each of FARC's operational units –

³ For the evolution of the paramilitary groups in Colombia, see, for example, Romero (2003) and Duncan (2005).

frentes– only raised the importance of the various illicit economies in the belligerents' overall strategy and their rent-seeking behaviour.

However, the dissipation of the FARC's ideology into amorphous socialist platitudes about a better life should not be equated with the FARC being motivated solely by profit. First of all, neither the leadership nor the combatants live in absolute or relative luxury. Profits are not used mainly for personal enrichment but for the funding of the war machine. FARC's combatants are not paid salaries (unlike the paramilitary combatants) and are indoctrinated with an organisational and ideological set of beliefs. Interviews with captured FARC members who went through the amnesty programme (including medium-level commanders) reveal an institutional commitment to the perpetuation of the struggle, even if individual motivations for joining are highly diverse (Gutierrez Sanín, 2004). Even today, many FARC members comprehend their participation in the conflict not in terms of a money-making venture with profits that will allow them to live in opulence and buy private islands and import rhinoceroses to their private zoos, like the prototypical drug traffickers of the 1980s (such as Carlos Ledher and Pablo Escobar, or the modern para-traffickers like *Jorge 40* and *Macaco*), but in terms of combating the state. Indeed, in many ways, the perpetuation of the struggle and at least a local defeat of the state have become the objectives in and of themselves.

This is not to say, however, that drugs are not seen as a crucial means which allows the struggle to be undertaken. Thus, the presence of coca cultivation in a particular locale is frequently a magnet for the FARC and other groups to seek to dominate that territory and control the drug trade in the area. By contrast, the Taliban's ideology is not only more clearly defined –a mixture of nationalism, religious fundamentalism and affinity with the global jihadi cause– but more intensely felt by many of its leaders and even rank-and-file combatants. However, even in the case of the Taliban, both the macro-drivers of conflict and especially the micro-motivations among the top leadership, medium commanders and foot soldiers are diverse.

At the top level, the *Quetta Shura* of Mullah Omar is probably most intensely driven by an ideological compulsion based on a fundamentalist vision of Afghanistan that harkens back to the 1990s. In the past few years, as this core leadership has become more closely aligned with al-Qaeda –facilitated by their shared refuge in Pakistan and their shared identification of the enemy as the US and NATO and the NATO-supported Afghan government–, Mullah Omar's embrace of the global *salafi* cause has also become more prominent.

At the same time, however, the Taliban leadership is also adapting its campaign to what appears to resonate among the Afghan population, especially the Pashtun. In his recent annual statement at the occasion of *Eid-ul-Fitr*, the Muslim holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan, Mullah Omar strongly emphasised nationalism and cast the Taliban struggle in

anti-imperialist terms, responding to the decreasing support among the Afghan population for foreign soldiers as a result of inadvertent civilian casualties caused by NATO airstrikes (similarly, the FARC tries to generate nationalist appeal for itself by exploiting popular anger at the US-sponsored aerial spraying of Colombia's coca fields).

Also, in various localities the Taliban, responding to reactions from the population, have scaled back some of their ideological dictates, such as those having to do with kites, music and the length of beards.⁴ This willingness to show some ideological flexibility –in stark contrast to their uncompromising attitudes of the 1990s– is especially manifest in areas where the Taliban feel they do not have good control and where they are competing for the support of the population.

Indeed, the Taliban's fundamentalist ideology hardly resonates with the larger population. The Taliban's dogmatism during the 1990s appealed to few, and the majority of the population resented many of the Taliban's extreme regulations and prohibitions. The population welcomed the movement's ability to institute order and provide security after years of civil war and life under predatory, capricious and conflict-embroiled warlords, not its prohibitions against listening to music or flying kites (Rashid, 2001). Similarly today, it is not the ideological fervour that the population laments missing, but rather the lack of security and the inability to conduct day-to-day activities due to corruption and predation of officials of the Afghan government, police forces and local powerbrokers. In many areas, the Taliban's ability to outperform the Afghan national government in providing law and order and arbitrating disputes is a key source of their support, along with capitalising on Ghilzai Pashtun sense of marginalisation and the Taliban protection of poppy fields (detailed below).

To appreciate the complexity of motivations at the top levels of the Taliban, it is worth looking at two other important factions of the insurgency in addition to the *Quetta Shura*: the *Haqqani* and the *Hekmatyar* networks (Jones, 2009). Like the *Quetta Shura*, the network led by Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin Haqqanis in eastern Afghanistan is fairly strongly motivated by the global *salafi* jihadist cause. Due to its sanctuary in Pakistan, the network came into strong contact with al-Qaeda and absorbed much of its worldview. Although the members of the network finance their operations by participating in another sector of Afghanistan's illicit economy, illicit logging and timber smuggling to Pakistan, the financial profits from the illicit economy clearly remain only a means to support their ideological project.⁵

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's network also operates in eastern Afghanistan and he too participates in a variety of Afghanistan's illicit economic sectors. But out of the three central groupings, Hekmatyar is least motivated by an ideology of any sort and most

⁴ Author's interviews in southern Afghanistan, spring 2009.

⁵ For details on this illicit economy see Chivers (2009), Robinson (2009) and Irfan Ashraf (2009).

focused on personal power accumulation and profits. A former anti-Soviet guerrilla and the favourite among the mujahideen sponsored by the US and Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence during the 1980s, Hekmatyar early on (in the 1980s) invested in Afghanistan's emerging drug trade. During the early 1990s, Hekmatyar first fought the Northern Alliance (mainly non-Pashtun anti-Soviet mujahideen) over power in Kabul and then the Taliban (Rubin, 1995). After 2001, however, Hekmatyar allied himself with the Taliban and has been aggressively fighting NATO forces in Afghanistan, even while sending periodic signals about his possible willingness to reach a deal with NATO and the new Afghan government and to put down weapons under terms favourable to him.

At the level of the tribe, the decision whether to join the Taliban or not is frequently driven by a varied sense of grievances. Many Pashtun, especially Ghilzai Pashtun, felt slighted and discriminated against by the early post-Taliban government composition that heavily favoured non-Pashtun members of the Northern Alliance. At the same time, Ghilzai Pashtun have historically been marginalised by Durrani Pashtun and already in the 1990s formed a key component of the Taliban (Goodson, 2001). Beyond the crude divisions of Pashtun versus non-Pashtun and Ghilzai versus Durrani, many other tribal affinities and rivalries exist and influence whether tribes align themselves with the government or the Taliban, such as Popalzai versus Barrakzai and Achezai versus Noorzai. Many of these rivalries are acutely felt and result in feuds, if not outright warfare. Motivated by such rivalries, district and provincial government officials frequently discriminate against communities of different tribal affinity.

The Taliban, despite drawing heavily on Ghilzai Pashtuns for membership, succeeded in the 1990s to portray themselves as pan-Pashtun and above these tribal divisions, and continue to frequently insert themselves into these local conflicts. They seek both to mobilise communities that feel discriminated to their side and to provide alternative rule of law mechanisms and governing structures that target these kinds of grievances. When the Afghan government, frequently only as a result of prodding from NATO or a local provincial reconstruction team (PRT), addresses these grievances and appoints officials who are seen as fair, the tribe may be willing to give up its support for the Taliban.⁶

At the same time, decisions whether to align with the government or the Taliban or avoid having to choose between them are also acutely driven by expectations of which side will ultimately prevail in the area. Without trust that Afghan government and NATO forces will be able to protect the community from Taliban retaliation and stay in the area sufficiently long, many will not risk cooperating with the government and NATO.

⁶ Author's interviews with PRT representatives, Afghan officials and Afghan and international NGOs in Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul and Uruzgan, Afghanistan, spring 2009.

At the individual level, many Taliban foot soldiers are not motivated by a specific religious doctrine either, even if nationalism frequently runs strong among them. While the so-called \$10-guerrilla, ie, men and boys willing to rent themselves to the Taliban for a pittance, is a gross oversimplification, the rank-and-file combatants do include poor men unable to find alternative employment as well as Afghan economic refugees recruited from Pakistan's refugee camps. But, as in the case of the FARC, many are motivated by highly personal concerns, such as revenge and friendship and family and mosque networks.⁷

The analysis indicates why the debate about greed versus grievance as drivers of conflict and about the relative decline of ideology is overstated in its importance with respect to counter-insurgency. In very few insurgencies, and even civil wars, ideology is the dominant motivation for the vast majority of the insurgents. Nor is it usually the primary motivation for the wider population to provide food and shelter to the belligerents and not to denounce them to the government. Other factors, including the determination of who will ultimately prevail in the conflict, also affect the population's alignments (Petersen, 2001; Kalyvas, 2006; Wood, 2003; and Lichbach, 1994).

Moreover, even purely criminal organisations, like the *Cosa Nostra* and Colombia's Medellín cartel of the 1980s, can have substantial political support among the wider population. When such crime groups have the capacity to mobilise their illegal enterprises and the overall illicit economy to improve the economic well-being of poor and marginalised segments of the population, they can reap substantial political acceptance and support. This is especially the case if they sponsor a labour-intensive illicit economy that generates employment.⁸ But even crime-group sponsorship or provision of labour-non-intensive economies can generate political capital among the wider population as long as the economic spill-over effects trickle down into the legal economy and among the population, such as in the form of increased sales of durables and non-durables, and increased demand for services, such as hotels and restaurants (Roig-Franzia, 2008). Moreover, in the absence of the state's effective presence and thus security on the street, dispute resolution mechanisms, and property rights and contract enforcement, crime groups frequently do provide some of these public goods to facilitate their own business, thus outperforming the state and obtaining political support (Gambetta, 1993).

The greatest support for the FARC and the Taliban, and for belligerents around the world, frequently comes in response to their ability to provide immediate material improvements to the population: secured livelihoods, minimal security and otherwise-absent social services, such as schools and roads, plus other public goods, such as the rule

⁷ Based on author's interviews in southern Afghanistan, spring 2009.

⁸ For a discussion of how Colombia's Medellín cartel succeeded in obtaining such political capital see Mary Roldán (1999).

of law, dispute and arbitration mechanisms, and the delivery of justice. This is what the involvement in the drug economy allows both the FARC and the Taliban to do, regardless of the intensity of their ideology or its wider appeal. And eradication of illicit crops, as I will detail below, only enhances the dependence of the population on the belligerents for the preservation of these basic material and public goods necessities, thus only strengthening the belligerents' political capital.

(3) The Evolution of the FARC's and the Taliban's Attitudes toward the Drug Economy

The evolution of FARC and Taliban attitudes to the drug economy (and in fact the evolution of the attitudes of very many other belligerent groups with widely differing ideologies) is strikingly similar. When the FARC first encountered the coca economy in the Caguán region in the late 1970s, it decided to prohibit it on Marxist-Communist grounds as a social vice. It also tried to enforce eradication. Immediately, its policy towards the illicit coca economy generated widespread dislike of the group. The poor population was dependent on the coca economy for its basic livelihood as well as any form of social mobility, and deeply resented the FARC's interference. The FARC was not able to hold on to the areas where it tried to maintain this prohibitionist policy, and the population shifted towards the traffickers' militias (Chernick, 2005).

After about three years during which the FARC failed to establish a stable foothold among the population, it concluded that it could not maintain the prohibition of illicit crop cultivation. Progressively, it came to first tolerate, then tax, and later even regulate both cultivation and at least some processing (Rabasa & Chalk, 2001). From the mid-1990s on, the FARC frequently has tried to eliminate independent traffickers in many areas it controls. And today the FARC is actively trying to participate in trafficking, certainly within Colombia, but it has also sought to expand its trafficking capacity internationally (International Crisis Group, 2005). However, given how much the FARC has been weakened by the Colombian military as a result of the increase in military's force levels and improvements in the quality of the forces,⁹ the FARC's capacity to develop international drug trafficking capacity has been greatly weakened. Instead, the FARC has been selling its coca paste, coca base, and cocaine mainly to Colombian drug trafficking groups and Mexican drug organisations.¹⁰

This learning curve of how to deal with the belligerents is analogous to the Taliban's. When the Taliban first encountered the opium economy in Helmand in late 1994 and early 1995 they decided to prohibit it and enforce eradication. Despite the ethnic, tribal and religious affinity of Helmand's population, the extent of the Taliban's networks in

⁹ For details, see Vanda Felbab-Brown *et al.* (2009), DeShazo, Primiani & McLean (2007) and Centro Nacional de Datos (2007).

¹⁰ Author's interviews with US and Colombian counternarcotics officials, Bogotá, Colombia and Washington, DC, summer and autumn of 2008.

Helmand, and the substantial support from Pakistan, the Taliban were nonetheless unable to hold onto Helmand. After years of the Soviet counter-insurgency policy of destroying the rural economy to drive the population out of the countryside and separate it from the mujahideen, the legal economy was completely decimated (Amstutz, 1986). Infrastructure, irrigation, orchards, crops and livestock, all were destroyed (Qasim Yusufi, 1988). Instead, poppy cultivation, which required many fewer inputs than other agricultural activity, had become the dominant economic activity in the South's countryside and the sole livelihood of large portions of the population in the rural areas. The spill-over effects also oiled the economy in many cities.

The population was thus antagonised by the Taliban's efforts to ban opium poppy cultivation. Instead of embracing the group like the population did in Kandahar, the population rallied behind the local powerbrokers, the Akhundzada. The Akhundzada were not highly popular: as governors they were highly brutal and they were embroiled in numerous conflicts, including with Hekmatyar (Giustozzi & Ullah, 2006). The population also still resented the Akhundzada's efforts some years back to ban opium poppy cultivation –which they had sponsored and exploited for years– in order to satisfy US demands to suppress cultivation. But, by the time the Taliban tried to suppress poppy in Helmand in 1995, the Akhundzada were back to sponsoring the opium poppy economy, the population rallied behind them, and the Taliban's position became precarious (Felbab-Brown, 2009a, chapter 5).

Within months, the Taliban thus rescinded the ban and came to tolerate the poppy economy. By 1996, the Taliban adopted a *laissez-faire* approach to drug cultivation, that progressively evolved into taxing the farmers as well as providing security for and taxing the traffickers. The new edicts the Taliban issued now read: 'The cultivation of, and trading in *chers* (cannabis, used for hashish) is forbidden absolutely. The consumption of opiates is forbidden, as is the manufacture of heroin, but the production and trading in opium is not forbidden' (quoted in Griffin, 2001, p. 153). In practice, however, heroin labs were not busted and trafficking with heroin was not interdicted. The 10% *zakat* on opium, formerly paid to the village mullahs, was now directed to the Taliban's treasury, earning an estimated US\$9 million in 1996-97, from the south's regular output of 1,500 tons of opium (Geopolitical Drug Dispatch, nr 63, 1997). A 10% *zakat* was also levied on the traffickers. As the 1990s progressed, these taxes were increased to 20%, bringing in between US\$45 million to US\$200 million a year.¹¹ By 1999, the Taliban also taxed heroin labs (Bartholet & Levine, 1999). The drug traffickers benefited too from the Taliban's sponsorship of the illicit narcotics economy, once the Taliban reversed its prohibitionist policy. Compared to the greedy and unpredictable local mujahideen who had controlled and taxed the trafficking routes prior to the Taliban, the latter significantly lowered many

¹¹ The TNI's Briefing Series give a much lower estimate, between US\$30-45 million a year than, for example, Rubin (2001).

transaction costs for the traffickers, preventing constant power shifts and bringing stability to the industry and helping to streamline it.

The highly pragmatic learning regarding the illicit narcotics economy, by an otherwise extremely doctrinaire and inflexible organisation, did not stay limited to simply taxing different aspects of the narcotics production and trade. The Taliban also sought to expand and regulate the narcotics economy by providing official government licences for opium cultivation, and by distributing fertilisers for the cultivation of poppy (Meier, 1997, and Rashid, 1999). Thus, poppy cultivation continued increasing throughout the 1990s. In 1980, the total production of opium in Afghanistan consisted of 200 metric tonnes. Cultivation had grown to 450 metric tonnes by 1985, 1,600 metric tonnes in 1990, and 3,400 metric tonnes in 1994. As a result of the Taliban's temporary eradication policy, combined with bad weather, production fell to 2,300 metric tonnes in 1995, but then continued to climb to 4,600 in 1999 and 3,300 in 2000.

In 2000, surprisingly, the Taliban banned poppy cultivation once again. Through bribes to tribes it did not fully control, and coercion in areas where its control was firm, it implemented the ban. The ban resulted in the largest reduction of opium poppy cultivation in a country in any single year. Cultivation fell from an estimated 82,172 hectares in 2000 to less than 8,000 in 2001. Globally, this reduction contributed to a 75% fall in the global supply of heroin for that year (Mansfield, 2004a). Needless to say, the ban severely affected the prospects for economic survival for vast segments of Afghanistan's rural population. In the words of one DEA official, the ban was 'bringing their country –or certain regions of their country– to economic ruin' (Crossette, 2001). Absence of viable alternative means of subsistence and income drove the majority of landowners and sharecroppers heavily into debt. Unable to repay their debts, the farmers were driven to borrow even further or abscond into Pakistan. The experience of a 70-year old sharecropper from Nad e Ali illustrates the destructive micro-effects of the Taliban's eradication programme: the sharecropper planted two to four *jeribs* (local land measure) of poppy to support a 10 member family. After the Taliban's eradication campaign, he was unable to pay his outstanding debt of US\$1,800 to his landlord, granted against his promise to deliver a certain amount of raw opium to the landlord after the growing season. The landlord whose land he worked agreed to extend him a further loan on condition that he accept a reduced share of the profit, receiving only a sixth of the final opium crop, compared to the traditional one third, and agreeing not to leave the area even if only to visit his extended family, thus *de facto* consigning himself to bond labour. The sharecropper felt he had no other option if he were to feed his family. He believed that if his crop of opium were not destroyed in the upcoming growing season, he could repay his outstanding debts. However, were the crop to be destroyed by the Taliban again, he would try to abscond by running away into Pakistan (Mansfield, 2004b). Why, given the previously encountered political costs, did the Taliban undertake such a politically dangerous policy? First of all, it is important to note that while banning opium

cultivation in 2000, the Taliban did not ban or otherwise attempt to interfere with the sale and trafficking of opium and poppy during that period. In choosing to curb the production, the Taliban were balancing their domestic popular legitimacy with their international legitimacy as well as the political gains from the illicit economy with the financial profits. As the UN, the US and other governments progressively caught on to the fact that despite their religious fervour, the Taliban were not curbing the drug trade in Afghanistan, they started treating the regime as the pariah that it was. By 2000, still only a few countries around the world, including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, recognised the Taliban regime as a valid ruler of Afghanistan and were willing to engage with it. Having consolidated power throughout the vast majority of the territory, the Taliban became progressively more and more determined to finally secure international recognition, and finally decided to respond to the UNDCP's repeated offers to curb opium if it would bring them international recognition. The 2000 eradication campaign, however, did not produce the desired income. In other words, the Taliban gambled their very thin domestic legitimacy for international legitimacy, calculating that their control of the territory was firm enough to weather any domestic resistance.

The second motivation that likely drove the Taliban's decision to impose the ban on cultivation was the desire to boost the price of opium and consolidate their control over the heroin trade. As cultivation exploded during the 1990s, the farm-gate prices for opium plummeted. The 2000 ban by the Taliban and the resulting supply contraction of 75% did in fact substantially increase prices for opium. The total farm-gate value of opium rose from US\$56 million in 2001 to US\$1,200 million in 2002 (UNODC, 2004). The financial profits the Taliban expected to reap as a result of the temporary eradication were thus very great.

The political costs to the Taliban, however, were also substantial. Although the movement carried out the eradication in regions where by then it had firm control and where there was no immediate organised armed opposition (a pre-requisite for any successful eradication campaign), it nonetheless encountered widespread popular resistance. This resistance was neither assuaged by the Taliban's negotiations and hefty subsidies to tribes affected by eradication (Rubin, 2004) nor deterred by the Taliban's brutal punishment of violators.

It is questionable whether the Taliban could have sustained the ban had they remained in power. Given the huge economic impact on the country, most likely not. Certainly, the Taliban did not try to sustain the policy for more than a year. By the summer of 2001, with the ban still in place, some peasants started seeding poppy once again (Caryl, 2001). The Taliban rescinded the ban on poppy cultivation in September 2001. Some analysts have attempted to explain the reversal of the Taliban's policy by arguing that they needed greater financial resources in order to fight the US after 9-11 (Lintner, 2001). For several reasons, however, this explanation is not likely to be accurate. First, as already mentioned,

the temporary ban on poppy cultivation vastly increased the price of heroin, thus significantly increasing the Taliban's financial profits. Moreover, the Taliban's stockpile and the stockpile of Afghanistan's major traffickers in 2001 were at least 3,000 tonnes. According to Captain Saif Riaz, a veteran of Pakistan's drug enforcement efforts, 'They have sufficient stockpiles to last at least 10 years' (Caryl, 2001). The UNDCP also pointed to the Taliban's vast stockpiles as indicators of their lack of sincerity with respect to the eradication campaign. In short, dire financial predicament does not appear to be what drove the reversal of the Taliban's ban on opium production.

The Taliban's sensitivity to the political costs associated with eradication, especially in anticipation of the upcoming war with the US, is much more likely to be what drove their decision. As mentioned above, even before the war with the US, the Taliban were already facing widespread resistance as a result of their prohibitionist policy. Moreover, the Northern Alliance, a conglomerate of various different former mujahideen groups still opposing the Taliban from a northern corner of the country and headed by Ahmed Massoud, continued producing opium at full speed during the 1990s and during the Taliban's 2000 ban. Its taxes were similar to those of the Taliban, between 10% and 20% on production and traffic, and opium production in Badakhshan, a province controlled by the Northern Alliance, vastly increased during the 1990s. It is very likely that the Taliban feared that if they continued with their ban on opium poppy, the Northern Alliance, with US support, would have been able to exploit the popular discontent with eradication to effectively challenge them. In fact, at least some peasants in Helmand province, disgruntled with the Karzai government's ban on poppy in 2002, alleged with chagrin that Hamid Karzai had promised to let them grow poppy in exchange for their help in toppling the Taliban regime, and that they now felt betrayed (Lakshmanan, 2002).

When the Taliban were pushed out of Afghanistan into Pakistan as a result of Operation Enduring Freedom, the Taliban also lost access to the drug economy between 2002 and 2004. But paradoxically, since 2004, crucially facilitated by eradication and the way interdiction has been carried out, the Taliban have been able to plug themselves back into Afghanistan's drug trade –protecting the traffickers' shipments and processing and the rural populations' poppy fields (Felbab-Brown, 2009c).

(4) The FARC, the Taliban and Drug Financing

What kind of financial profits do the FARC and the Taliban today derive from the drug trade? The actual level of profits is highly disputed in the case of both groups, and for both of them the estimates vary widely. In the case of the FARC, drug revenue (about US\$100 million a year) constitutes about 50% of the group's income.¹² The rest comes from

¹² For lower estimates, see Richani (2002). For higher ones, a study by the Colombian National Police (Internal Document A-4523) cited in Buscaglia & Ratliff (2001) put the FARC's and the AUC's income at a high of US\$105 million a month. Other intelligence sources placed the total

income from other illicit economies, including: smuggling gas from Ecuador and Venezuela and oil siphoned from Colombian pipelines (until recently the domain of the paramilitary groups); new paramilitary groups, such as the *Águilas Negras*, and the ELN; and extortion and smuggling rackets for legal goods, such as cigarettes.

How much has drug eradication via aerial spraying and manual eradication suppressed the FARC's income? The evidence suggests that eradication reduced the FARC's income but not enough to cripple the insurgency. However, the creation of military zones of encirclement within coca-growing areas, where the FARC has been pinned down by military action, has substantially curtailed its financial inflows. These direct military actions, in combination with localised interdiction operations, have disrupted the guerrillas' income by preventing the FARC from selling coca base to local traffickers. They also prevented the FARC from resupplying *frentes* operating outside the coca areas (Felbab-Brown, 2009a, chapter 4). As coca cultivation declined between 2000 and 2004, FARC resources were hurt to some extent. But the guerrillas adapted by switching to other illicit economies, including extortion and kidnapping and even made some efforts to trade in low-grade uranium.¹³ In June 2007, ONDCP estimated that Colombia's anti-drug efforts reduced the FARC's overall profits per kilogramme of cocaine from a range of US\$320 to US\$460 in 2003, to US\$195 to US\$320 in 2005 (USGAO, 2008). As a result, FARC's drug income fell by approximately US\$115 million a year to a still-sizable US\$65 million (ONDCP study cited by Forero, 2007). Some FARC *frentes* did suffer a significant resource crunch. Evidence from captured guerrillas and computers reveals that in some areas FARC combatants lacked ammunition and other essential supplies, including clothing.

However, as mentioned above, the primary cause of these *frentes'* weakness was not eradication, but the Colombian military's success in encircling the *frentes* and reducing their mobility, and thus disrupting their communications and logistics channels. These efforts had a particularly significant impact on *frentes* operating outside the coca zones, which were cut off from sources of re-supply.¹⁴ But military encirclement and pin-down operations also interrupted the flow of resources to *frentes* operating in the coca areas. Deserters have revealed that in some areas, such as Guaviare, the FARC now gives the

income of the guerrillas in 1995 at as high as US\$800 million (Chernick, 1997). However, given the size of the Colombian economy and its known difficulties in absorbing illicit monies, that figure is likely inflated.

¹³ Author's interviews with Colombian government officials and independent analysts who interviewed captured FARC members, summer and autumn of 2008. For more information on the cache of 66 pounds of low-grade uranium that the FARC apparently tried to sell, see Robles (2008).

¹⁴ Author's interviews with Colombian military officers in the war zones and officials of the Ministry of Defence, Bogotá, Colombia, summer 2008. Although since the mid-1990s, individual *frentes* were supposed to be more or less independently financed, there was nonetheless logistical and resources reallocation between the *frentes*, with supplies from *frentes* operating in drug regions going to *frentes* operating in non-producing regions.

farmers IOUs (*bonos*) for their coca paste because it lacks cash. Despite the government's eradication campaign, coca is still cultivated in such areas in abundance, but military operations have made it difficult for the FARC to get the paste to traffickers.¹⁵

As in the case of the FARC, drug income estimates for the Taliban vary widely, from tens of millions a year to hundreds of millions (a similar debate existed about the Taliban's income from drugs in the 1990s according to Peters, 2009; TNI, 2001; and Rubins, 2000). A comprehensive Congressional Research Service report (Blanchard, 2009) put the estimate at about US\$100 million a year, a number that many drug experts find most plausible (Paoli, Greenfield & Reuter, 2009). But just as in the case of the FARC, drugs constitute only a portion of the Taliban income, somewhere between 20%-50%. This income comes from taxation of poppy fields as payment for their protection and taxation of drug traffickers' labs and convoys. Meanwhile, some Taliban members and units are involved in the local drug trade within Afghanistan –collecting opium at the village level, for example– (it is also important to note that given the sense that the Taliban are on the march and because of the advantages of being seen as a political group rather than simply a criminal one, many crime gangs choose to call themselves 'Taliban'). The Taliban also probably have access to drug smuggling networks in Pakistan, and Afghan refugees, especially, participate in these networks. But there is little concrete evidence that the Taliban are directly trafficking at the international level.

Other sources of Taliban income include taxation of all economic areas where they have a strong presence, illicit logging, illicit trade in wildlife and donations from Pakistan and the larger Middle East (Chivers, 2009, and Robinson, 2009). Around US\$100 million a year and 50% of their income are numbers consistent with the history of the Taliban's own involvement in drugs. During the later 1990s, when Afghanistan was already the world's dominant supplier of opiates and the Taliban derived comparable amounts of money from the drug trade as they do today, drug revenues were still only around 50% of their total income, and the rest came from smuggling with legal goods between Pakistan and Afghanistan under the Afghanistan Transit Trade Agreement (Balfour, 2001).

Eradication of the poppy crops, undertaken in Afghanistan with varying degrees of intensity between 2003-08, has so far had little effect on Taliban finances and there is no evidence of such an effect in localities where eradication and other suppression measures have been carried out, including Helmand, the province that supplies around half (and at times even more) of Afghanistan's opium, or in Nangarhar, another important supplier at the provincial level.¹⁶ Moreover, as mentioned before, it is important to remember that the

¹⁵ Author's interviews with officials of the Colombian Department of Defence and military officers, Colombia, summer 2008.

¹⁶ Author's interviews in Southern Afghanistan, spring 2009, and interviews with US military officers previously deployed to Nangarhar, Washington DC, summer 2009.

Taliban were able to reconstitute themselves in Pakistan between 2002 and 2004 largely without access to substantial income from drugs.

(5) The FARC, the Taliban and Political Capital

Both the FARC and the Taliban derive substantial political capital from their sponsorship of the illicit drug economy. By political capital is meant legitimacy with and support from the population and the willingness of the population to deny intelligence to the government. This support does not necessarily entail active provision of food, shelter and combatants –these are frequently extorted at gunpoint– but, rather, the willingness of the population to deny intelligence on the group to government forces and/or NATO. Reliable, accurate and actionable human intelligence is, of course, critical for the success of counter-insurgency.

Why is it that belligerents obtain such political capital from participating in an illegal and, for many, immoral activity? The discussion of both the FARC's and the Taliban's evolution of attitudes to the poppy economy already foreshadowed the dynamics involved. By sponsoring illicit economies, belligerents obtain political capital because by protecting the illicit crops they protect the population's basic, reliable and frequently sole livelihood and because they can mobilise the illicit economy for the provision of various social services underwritten by profits from drugs. Since the cultivation of coca and poppy is highly labour-intensive, by sponsoring such illicit economies, the belligerents provide extensive employment opportunities to large segments of the rural population that otherwise face an acute paucity of employment and exist in great poverty. The livelihood obtained from these illicit economies in both Colombia and Afghanistan is also frequently economically superior to existing economic alternatives –not only in terms of price profitability, a factor frequently overstated in importance (Mansfield, 2002) but also in terms of reliability, low production and transaction costs, access to microcredit, land, etc–. In both the rural areas of Colombia and much of Afghanistan, the illicit drug economy underlies much of the economic, social and hence political life of the country. Although Colombia as a whole is much richer than Afghanistan, the rural areas dominated by coca continue to be very poor and isolated (Felbab-Brown *et al.*, 2009).

The importance of the belligerents' protection for the illicit economy, and hence the size of their political capital, is only enhanced by forced eradication in the absence of legal economic alternatives. Eradication eliminates the population's livelihood before alternative livelihood programmes have a chance to compensate for at least some of the losses. Eradication thus thrusts the population into the hands of the belligerents.

The evolution of the FARC's reactions to eradication and the effect on its political capital is revealing. During eradication campaigns in the 1980s and early 1990s –especially the 1994-95 eradication campaign– the FARC was able to mobilise large-scale popular

support in the rural areas by opposing eradication and shooting at both eradication teams and spraying planes. Its power was arguably at its peak, and the population not only denied intelligence on it to the government but actively provided intelligence to the FARC –viz., the attack on the 52nd counter-guerrilla battalion of the Colombian army's 3rd mobile brigade in 1998–. But, when as a result of Uribe's offensive in 2002, the FARC units shooting at the spraying planes became vulnerable to attack and decimation and it decided not to protect the fields and retreat, its political capital declined substantially. This abdication of its responsibility to protect the coca fields paralleled another profound source of the population's alienation from the FARC, namely its unwillingness to protect the population from massacres by the paramilitaries during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

As the FARC's political capital declined, it was not able to organise similar protests in the early 2000s, and political and social mobilisation independent of the FARC emerged in many of its former strongholds. The *cocaleros* learnt that they can survive eradication by moving elsewhere within Colombia and replanting after spraying, and that the FARC is unreliable as a protector. The FARC nonetheless realised the strategic importance of its demonstration of opposition to eradication, and thus in the past several years has become more active in opposing eradication again, and its political capital has somewhat recovered. In 2006 it was much more successful in organising social protests against eradication in Policarpa, Nariño for example (ICG, 2005). Still today, the areas of the strongest FARC support are the coca areas with intense eradication and no legal alternatives. There the population does not provide intelligence on the FARC. Indeed, some *cocaleros* badly affected economically by eradication still join the FARC as active combatants.

An equally important reason for the decrease of the FARC's political capital has been its decision to take control over coca paste sales, push out small traffickers and set monopoly prices for coca paste. The FARC did this in order to deprive the paramilitaries of profits from this higher-value phase of the trade even though the FARC still frequently needs to rely on sales to paramilitaries and new paramilitary organisations, like the *Águilas Negras*, for trafficking and further processing into cocaine (in other areas of the country, it is fighting the new *grupos emergentes*, as the new paramilitary groups are also known, such as the *Organización Nueva Generación* in Nariño, for control over territory and the drug trade. When the FARC eliminated small traffickers from the territories under its control, it not only stopped bargaining on behalf of the *cocaleros* for better prices and better working conditions as it used to, but it started abusing the *cocaleros* in other ways. For example, it is now setting low prices for coca paste and, as detailed above, is sometimes unable to pay for it and instead has been distributing IOUs.

Hence *cocaleros* in areas that had not been hit that hard by eradication, such as in parts of Nariño, often argue that they would prefer if the FARC were not present and they could sell coca paste to anyone. But in areas where eradication did take place and where there is

a paucity of legal alternatives, such as in Policarpa and Leyva municipalities in Nariño or in the Magdalena Medio area, *cocaleros* not only refuse to cooperate with the government and the military and fail to provide them with intelligence, but they are also willing to join the FARC.¹⁷

Today, the Taliban are not facing any decrease in its political capital as a result of their 'mis'-management of the illicit economy because, unlike the FARC, they never provided an expanded menu of regulatory and protection functions. They never bargained for better prices or working conditions nor did they use drug profits for the provision of social services. Between 2000 and 2002, however, as already mentioned, they suffered a significant decline in political capital as a result of their 2000 ban on poppy cultivation that brought poppy cultivation in Afghanistan down by 90% and greatly impoverished many (Felbab-Brown, 2006).

But since then, the Taliban have learned the lesson. Today, much of their political capital derives from their protection of the poppy fields and from the impact of eradication on the population. The effect of eradication is even more pronounced because several million people in Afghanistan (compared with several hundred thousand in Colombia) depend on the drug economy for their basic livelihoods and because the drug economy constitutes between a third and a half of the overall GDP (in Colombia it accounts for between 1% and 3%).¹⁸ Eradication in Afghanistan has antagonised the rural population from the government, NATO and, very importantly, also local tribal elites. This lacuna of legitimate leadership thus creates a crucial opening for the Taliban. Eradication has also generated economic refugees who frequently abscond to Pakistan and end up in the radical *madrastas* of the Deobandi movement and refill the ranks of the Taliban. And eradication has eliminated the willingness of the population to provide intelligence on the Taliban to NATO and the Afghan National Army.

Another difference between the FARC and the Taliban in their management of the illicit economy is their attitude to alternative-livelihood programmes. Overall, the FARC has learned to tolerate such programmes, realising that attacks on them would result in further losses of political capital and perhaps also that the programmes have so far failed

¹⁷ Author's interviews with *cocaleros* in Nariño and Magdalena Medio, summer and autumn of 2008.

¹⁸ For Colombia, UNODC (2009 and 2008) gives only the farm-gate value of coca leaf as a percentage of GDP and puts it at between 0.5% and 0.3% of GDP. This number, of course, vastly underestimates the total value of the drug trade in Colombia, since value greatly increases with each step of processing and trafficking. Still, it is reasonable to assume that even with the added value, the trade does not constitute more than 5% of Colombia's GDP. For Afghanistan's opium percentage of GDP, see UNODC (2007). Since 2002, the percentage of drugs to licit GDP has oscillated between 60% and 30%, not because the illicit economy has been reduced but due to the expansion of some sectors of the legal economy, such as telecommunications.

to improve the conditions of the rural population enough to wean it off coca. The Taliban, on the other hand, have actively attempted to attack many development projects, and in many areas of the south have effectively shut down alternative-livelihood programmes.

(6) The Belligerents and the Drug Traffickers: Striking Similarities and Different Contexts of Conflict in Colombia and Afghanistan

The relationship between the Taliban and the drug traffickers in Afghanistan is as complex as the relationship between the FARC and the Colombian drug traffickers. The FARC provided various services to the traffickers during the 1980s, but also fought the traffickers then, and was ultimately displaced by the paramilitaries as the dominant protector of the traffickers (Richani, 2002, and Romero, 2003). As mentioned above, during the 1990s the FARC effectively pushed out or eliminated small traffickers from the territories it controlled. Today it fights with some traffickers, such as the remnant of the *Macaco* and *Jorge 40* networks, while it has struck a good working relationship with Vicente Castaño in Vichada (ICG, 2007). Both the former paramilitary groups, such as the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia or AUC) and the new paramilitary groups and *bandas criminales*, represent yet another alternative claimant to power who seeks to control the drug trade. And with them, too, the FARC has a complex relationship, ranging from active warfare to collusion. The bottom line is that the nature of the relationship between traffickers and belligerents is very fluid and complex; alliances are unstable and quickly collapse and enemies and competitors at times join forces.

Although since their re-integration into the Afghan drug economy in 2004 the Taliban have not sought to displace and eliminate traders and traffickers as they did in the late 1990s, their 'alliance' with the traffickers is nonetheless complex. This complexity has to do with both tribal and ethnic affinities as well as with the erratic and selective nature of interdiction. Much of the violence in Afghanistan today is between the various tribes. The Taliban frequently insert themselves into these conflicts, by either seeking to suppress them or joining forces with one tribe. Since many tribes are also involved in competitive participation in the drug trade, getting involved in local conflicts also means fighting some traffickers while joining forces with others. Interdiction introduces further complexities. Given that many members of Afghanistan's elites –both in the government and out– are traffickers and that many interdictors themselves are traffickers, the Taliban currently have a good working relationship with the traffickers that are targeted by interdiction, but not with the traffickers that escape interdiction.¹⁹

As interdiction targeting and traffickers' fortunes change, so will their dependence on and their relationship with the Taliban. If the Taliban one day manage to conduct independent

¹⁹ For details on how interdiction has resulted in a vertical integration of the industry, see Mark Shaw (2006).

trafficking at least into Pakistan, they might well seek to eliminate some traffickers, and the complexity of the 'alliances', their fluidity and instability will only increase. NATO's new interdiction mission of targeting Taliban-linked traffickers, adopted at the NATO summit in October 2008 and gradually implemented during 2009, will critically influence what kind of relationship with traffickers and what kind of access to the drug trade the Taliban have (Felbab-Brown, 2009b).

Overall, there are thus some striking similarities between the FARC's management of the illicit coca economy and the Taliban's management of the illicit poppy economy and the dynamics of the drug-conflict nexus in both countries. However, there are some crucial differences in context. The segment of the population that is dependent on the drug economy in Afghanistan is far greater than in Colombia. And overall the economic importance of the illicit economy for the national economy is also far greater in Afghanistan. Consequently, the political and counter-insurgency costs of drug eradication there are also much greater. There is also a substantial societal difference: the Afghan population is far more mobilised, including being mobilised for armed struggle, than the population in Colombia, including its *cocaleros*.

Crucially, from a US and European strategic perspective, the stability of Afghanistan and the defeat of the Taliban are much more important than a victory in Colombia, however desirable the latter. Colombia is an important US ally in Latin America, and the US has multiple interests in seeing violent conflict there end. Security is a critical prerequisite for success in counter-narcotics efforts, which the US seeks in order to reduce the supply of drugs to the US and to weaken violent crime groups that benefit from it, such as the Mexican drug trafficking organisations. The US also has counter-terrorism interests in Colombia. Although allegations of FARC contacts to Islamist terror groups seem vastly exaggerated, if the claims by the Colombian government that the FARC obtained 66 pounds of uranium with the goal of re-selling it at the black market are correct, they are worrying (Romero, 2008). Nonetheless, despite holding three US counter-narcotics contractors hostage for many years and periodically shooting at spraying planes, the FARC has not sought to cause great US casualties or attack the homeland. Finally, the US also has humanitarian interests in Colombia, such as protecting and advancing human rights, increasing justice and reducing poverty; and the brutal actions of the FARC and other armed groups greatly jeopardise these goals. But however important these interests are –and the US has committed over US\$6 billion to advance them– they do not amount to primary security interests.

The situation in Afghanistan, however, does implicate primary US and European security interests. A defeat or early withdrawal from Afghanistan while the Taliban persist as a strong armed actor would likely spell the collapse of the national government, with the south and east of the country falling into the hands of the Taliban, and the rest of the country at best breaking up into a number of fiefdoms. The Taliban, now rather close to

al-Qaeda, are likely to, once again, provide havens for al-Qaeda operations against US and European citizens and their homelands.

Pakistan would also become severely destabilised beyond the current levels of instability. First, a victory that the Taliban could claim in Afghanistan would be a boost to their brethren in Pakistan. Secondly, the Pakistani military and intelligence services would likely abandon efforts to fight many of the jihadists operating on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. As before, they might well go back to trying to differentiate between the 'good' jihadists fighting India, whom they would not attempt to restrain and might even try to cultivate, and the unmanageable 'bad' jihadists fighting the Pakistani state. Fearing India's activities in Afghanistan and an encirclement by India, Pakistan might go back to fully supporting the Afghan Taliban (as it did in the 1990s). But apart from its dangerous regional consequences and its morally-reprehensibly nature, such a strategy is unlikely to be effective.

If anything, the rise of the Pakistani Taliban and their violent activity in Pakistan itself show how much control the ISI has lost over the jihadists. Pakistan's ability to control the 'useful' jihadists it believes it can manipulate for its purposes has been proved greatly limited. Instead, the jihadi *salafi* ideology has spread like wildfire in Pakistan, and permeates even traditional bastions of the Pakistani establishment and state, such as the Punjab. The various jihadi networks have been able to mobilise effectively among varied dissatisfied groups –not simply poor Pashtun in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, but also landless poor Punjabis persisting in conditions of almost feudal bondage–. And they have greatly expanded their infrastructure. Thus, the tiger that the masters had once tried to ride has torn loose and now has the capacity and motivation to take on the Pakistani state. The most dramatic evidence has been the fall of large territories in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and even in the Northwest Frontier Province to the Pakistani Taliban this year. The fact that the Pakistani military were finally able to wrest Swat back from them and begin once again fighting in the Khyber does not mean that the jihadists in Pakistan are finished. Indeed, any weakening of the Pakistani government's will and capacity to fight the jihadists will only undermine the Pakistani state, which is already hollowed out after decades of military rule and civilian mismanagement, corruption and political instability, as well as chronically undermined by long-term economic decline and acutely battered by the current economic crisis.

Taliban success in Afghanistan could also plunge the region into a severe crisis, as many of the now energised jihadi groups, seeing it also as their victory, will attempt to carry out terrorist attacks in India. Either a war between India and Pakistan or any break-up of Pakistan would be extremely serious, and even carry the possibility of nuclear weapons being used in conflict or fall into the hands of non-state actors. Moreover, such a conflict could easily expand regionally, with Russia, China, Iran and the US not necessarily having the same objectives in attempting to manage such a crisis.

Finally, a defeat of the US-lead counter-insurgency in Pakistan or a substantial withdrawal of ISAF forces before the Afghan national government can provide security to its people will provide a great boost to *salafi* jihadists everywhere –from Somalia, to Yemen, Nigeria, and the Philippines, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to poor boroughs of London and Minnesota’s suburbia–. They will be all the more motivated to maintain and expand the struggles against the Western infidels in their homelands and abroad and against Islamic apostates. For them to be able to claim that they succeeded in defeating the British Empire, the Soviet Union, the US and NATO in Afghanistan would be an awesome prize and a great infusion of energy.

Consequently, how the US manages the narcotics economy and counters the Taliban-drug nexus is absolutely critical not only for narcotics reduction in Afghanistan, but also for counter-insurgency and stabilisation of the country, regional security and global counter-terrorism efforts. A failure to secure these interests cumulatively would pose serious threats to the security of the US, the region and the world.

(7) Concluding Observations

The bulk of the analysis in this article has focused, comparatively, on how the belligerent groups’ involvement in the drug trade in Colombia and Afghanistan has influenced their ideology, physical resources and political capital. It has also explored how various counter-narcotics policies have affected the latter two.

Yet there is one more possible point of comparison. The final defining characteristic of the FARC could be its longevity. There is no doubt that the drug economy and eradication have given the FARC a second or third lease of life by providing the group not only with vast financial resources but also with steady political capital among the population dependent on the illicit economy. Will the Taliban be able to last as long as the FARC?

Analysis has shown that the Colombian military have been able to substantially weaken the FARC even though eradication has not succeeded in bankrupting the group. Instead, success against the FARC came from the Colombian military’s improved tactics and strategy and from better resourcing its military campaign (the recent revelations of the so-called ‘false positives’, ie, poor Colombian men whom the Colombian military shot and then dressed up as guerrillas to be able to claim a greater body-count not only undermine the legitimacy of the Colombian government’s effort, but also raise doubts about the effectiveness of the strategy). Nonetheless, it is undeniable that there are palpable security improvements in Colombia: the FARC is no longer sitting in the hills above Bogotá, nor does it have a stranglehold on Colombian cities in the farther departments. Land travel is also much safer.



NATO is struggling to reverse the trends in a similar way in Afghanistan and wrest the momentum away from the Taliban. While General McChrystal has rolled out new procedures to minimise civilian casualties and to improve intelligence gathering, he also indicates in his assessment of the security situation that far greater military and economic resources are necessary and that without them, progress and victory will be elusive (McChrystal, 2009). He also correctly identifies the corruption and incompetence of the Afghan government as a critical driver of the insurgency and one against which the international community has not yet find an effective answer.

Although both the poor track-record of the Afghan government and inadequate resourcing of the effort are on their own sufficient to result in defeat in Afghanistan, it is essential not to worsen the situation by mishandling the dangerous drug-conflict nexus. Counter-narcotics policies have therefore to be weighed very carefully, with a clear eye as to their impact on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism. Seemingly quick fixes, such as blanket eradication in the absence of alternative livelihoods, will only strengthen the insurgency and compromise state-building and ultimately counter-narcotics efforts themselves.

Thus, after years of such inappropriate focus on eradication of the poppy crop, the new Obama counter-narcotics strategy for Afghanistan, announced in the summer of 2009, promises to mesh well with the counter-insurgency and state-building effort. By scaling back eradication and emphasising interdiction and development, it will help to separate the population from the Taliban (Felbab-Brown, 2009b). A well-designed counter-narcotics policy is not on its own sufficient for success in Afghanistan, but it is indispensable.

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