

THE ILLICIT DRUG INDUSTRY AS A SECURITY POLICY CHALLENGE

Drug production, trafficking, and consumption undermine the security of states as well as individuals and affect the economy and the environment negatively. Anti-drug strategies are the subject of controversial debates. Reformist actors argue that the US-led repressive approach that has dominated the field until now is inefficient and has caused a great deal of damage. They argue in favor of a paradigm shift towards a harm reduction approach. While no international consensus is in the offing so far, drug problems continue to increase.



A police officer supervises the destruction of a poppy field in Afghanistan, 7 May 2006 Reuters/Ah. Masood

The illegal drug trade affects all aspects of security. First of all, it jeopardizes the political security of states. Violence and corruption – two constant companions of this economic sector – undermine the rule of law and weaken the legitimacy of states. Secondly, the drug trade can undermine military security. In Colombia and Afghanistan, for example, insurgent groups finance their operations with income generated from drug trafficking. Thirdly, drugs frequently pose a challenge to economic security. Money laundering weakens the credibility of financial institutions; furthermore, combating the drug trade is very expensive. Fourth, drug trafficking also has a negative impact on ecological security, since many drug-producing areas are polluted by chemicals. However, the harmful effects of the illegal drug trade are felt most strongly in the area of human secu-

urity. In addition to the violence that routinely accompanies the drug trade as well as counter-narcotics operations, the main symptoms include drug-related procurement crimes and the frequent premature death of consumers.

In the past decades, narcotics-related problems have increased in several respects. The total volume of drugs produced, smuggled, and consumed has increased. For example, the quantity of illegally produced opium was five times greater in 1999 than in 1971. At the same time, drug-related problems have assumed a global dimension, and the distinction between producer and consumer countries has become diffuse. Furthermore, drug-related military violence has increased. For example, the drug economy is a significant contributing factor for the war in Colombia, which has

already claimed more than 250,000 lives since the 1990s. Additionally, consumption methods have become more hazardous. Many opium smokers have switched to injecting heroin. Re-use and sharing of hypodermic needles, in turn, is a major factor in the spread of HIV/AIDS. In view of these negative developments, the search for effective drug policies has gained urgency.

Prohibition and repression

Until now, international counter-narcotics policies have been determined by the paradigm of prohibition and repression. At the beginning of the 20th century, states began for the first time to impose restrictions on the trade in opium and cocaine. Since then, the production, trade, and consumption of opiates, coca derivatives, cannabis products such as hashish and marijuana, and synthetic drugs have been increasingly outlawed except for medical and research purposes. A restrictive drug control regime was established within the framework of the United Nations. The UN conventions of 1961, 1971, and 1988 have committed states to a prohibitionist course.

The US has been at the forefront in the creation of this regime. Even today, its counter-narcotics policies are still based mainly on repressive measures (“war on drugs”). Examples include police and military operations, especially in South America, against drug dealers as well as farmers growing opium poppies, coca, or cannabis (eradication); sanctions against countries whose counter-narcotics policies are viewed by Washington as unsatisfactory (as was the case, for example, with Colom-

bia in the mid-1990s); stricter border monitoring; freezing assets derived from the drug trade; and the incarceration of drug consumers.

One aim of this strategy is to decrease the domestic consumption of drugs by reducing supply. Since 1997, Washington has spent approximately US\$31 billion on efforts to diminish imports of narcotics through measures abroad and along the borders of the US. The US invests more than US\$40 billion annually at the federal and state levels to combat drugs. By comparison, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) has an annual budget of about US\$150 million.

The limits of repression

Since drug-related problems have increased despite such large-scale efforts to eliminate them, doubts have increasingly been voiced concerning the effectiveness of this strategy of repression. Critics point out that in view of the non-monopolistic, flexible structure of the drug economy, this approach can at most hope to be successful at the tactical level. The conditions of demand, poverty, and other factors ensure that new fields, laboratories, smugglers' routes, trafficking networks, and even new types of drugs are constantly emerging. For example, since 2000, the US has invested US\$5.4 billion in its campaign against drugs in Colombia; around two-thirds of this aid was in the form of military assistance. Increasingly large parts of the country are sprayed with chemicals. Despite these efforts, coca cultivation has not been reduced. It has only been displaced geographically. Within the US, the price of cocaine fell in 2006 while purity levels increased. "Plan Colombia" has failed.

Demand and supply of drugs feed each other. Suppliers benefit from prohibition because it drives prices up. Added value is generated mainly in proximity to consumers, since that is where the risk is greatest. The destruction of poppy or coca fields and drug laboratories in producing countries and confiscation of drugs at the borders therefore often do not affect the producers' profits to any considerable degree.

However, a repressive counter-narcotics strategy is not only limited in terms of effectiveness, but also causes considerable damage. Forced eradication deprives many farmers of the basis of their livelihood, thus strengthening insurgencies. This has been the case, for example, in Peru, Co-

Facts about the international drug trade

Drug production and trade

- ! 90 per cent of global illicit opium is produced in Afghanistan and Myanmar
- ! Two-thirds of global illegal coca cultivation, almost all of the illegally produced cocaine, and most of the heroin consumed in the US come from Colombia
- ! Cannabis and synthetic drugs are produced in many countries, including in Europe
- ! Estimates concerning the annual turnover of the illegal drug trade vary between US\$25 billion and US\$500 billion

Drug consumption

- ! About 5 per cent of the global population consume illegal drugs at least once a year
- ! Four per cent of the global population consume cannabis; 1 per cent consume cocaine, opiates, or designer drugs. By comparison, 28 per cent of the global population consume tobacco

lombia, and Afghanistan. Aerial eradication campaigns are hazardous to the environment and to human health. Military counter-drug campaigns can give rise to new human rights violations. The US, for example, has supported parts of the Colombian armed forces that cooperate with paramilitary groups. Consumers of drugs and street dealers are also affected: In the US, several hundreds of thousands of people are in prison on non-violent drug-related charges, while in many Asian countries, drug trafficking is a capital crime.

The proponents of a repressive counter-narcotics strategy attribute the lack of success so far to a lack of funding and shortcomings in the implementation of strategies. More and more governments and experts, however, argue that repression often causes more damage than the drugs themselves do. They demand a paradigm shift towards harm reduction.

Harm reduction

In the debate over possible alternatives, a minority argues in favor of legalizing drugs. Indeed, it can be expected that the resulting drop in prices would lead to a collapse of black markets and a decrease in violence and corruption. However, it is likely that drug consumption would increase. Proponents of legalizing the "hard" drugs heroin and cocaine are therefore largely politically marginalized today.

Most reformers instead support the principle of harm reduction. It aims to reduce the damage caused by the narcotics industry as well as by the countermeasures. Harm reduction is not necessarily inconsistent with repression. However, it brings repressive force to bear against dealer rings and corrupt state officials, rather than farmers and consumers. Furthermore, it emphasizes non-repressive measures.

The discussion over harm reduction is mainly centered on demand-oriented strategies. For example, by dispensing methadone or even heroin and cocaine under state-sanctioned medical supervision, long-term addicts can be reintegrated into society, fatal overdoses can be prevented, and crimes associated with the procurement of narcotics can be reduced. There is also discussion about decriminalizing the consumption and sale of small amounts of cannabis in order to separate the markets for "soft" and "hard" drugs. This would allow the police and the justice system to focus on those pulling the strings behind the scenes. Harm reduction can also be brought to bear on the supply side. Alternative development projects offer farmers a sustainable alternative to growing coca, poppies, and cannabis by fostering the cultivation of legal agricultural produce.

In countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany, the principle of harm reduction is supported at the national level. In other states, such as the US, measures towards harm reduction are criticized by the government, but applied at the level of federal states and communities.

Is the debate escalating?

In view of the current disagreements over counter-narcotics policies, the question is how future international drug policies will be configured. Based on a UN initiative of 1998, the international community plans to take stock of progress in the campaign against drugs in the years 2008 and 2009. The goals formulated at the time in terms of reducing drug production and consumption have not been reached. Reform-oriented countries therefore feel that their approach has been vindicated, and demand that a paradigm shift be introduced at the multilateral level as well. However, the US

and other states that favor repression, as well as some international organizations, reject such demands. For example, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), whose policies – like those of UNDOC – are largely aligned with the US position, argues that measures such as controlled dispensing of heroin would violate international conventions.

Concerning the future course of the drug policy debate, three scenarios are conceivable. First of all, reform-oriented states could avoid a fundamental debate and continue to pursue their policy of harm reduction as before. However, in this case, the existing conflict would only be protracted. Also, this option would make an effective multilateral approach, which is indispensable for reducing the supply and demand of drugs, more difficult. Secondly, it is conceivable that the pending process of stock-taking concerning counter-narcotics policies would end without a result, and that the reformist countries would form an alliance ignoring the existing international conventions. Such an escalation scenario is not yet in the offing at this point in time. It would herald the end of the international drug control regime and would be counterproductive not least because, like the first scenario, it does not take into account the need for a common international policy. Under the third scenario, finally, the two camps would agree in the next few years on a compromise and pursue an at least partial realignment of international drug policy that is in line with a holistic approach. This is the only option that would satisfy the requirements of a more effective counter-narcotics strategy.

A holistic approach

In addition to targeted repressive measures, a holistic approach would require improvements and expansion of the principle of harm reduction. Experience shows that this principle, too, has its weaknesses. For example, in Switzerland and Germany, controlled dispensing of heroin has reduced the number of drug deaths and lowered the occurrence of drug procurement crimes, but has not caused a significant decline in drug consumption. On the supply side, alternative development projects are useful for many farmers, but successes are usually limited to local achievements.

The high profit rates of the drug economy, the flexibility of drug dealers, and demand for drugs impose limitations on the successes of all these strategies, irrespective

Swiss drug policy

Consumption

- ▮ 28.2 per cent of the population below age 40 have used illegal drugs at least once in their lifetime, mainly cannabis.
- ▮ There are 26,000 heroin consumers

Political strategy: The Swiss four-pillar model

- ▮ Prevention: avoiding initiation to drug consumption
- ▮ Therapy: facilitates efforts to end consumption, e.g. through substitution therapy
- ▮ Harm reduction: alleviates the negative effects of drug use by favoring consumption that is less problematic for the individual and society at large
- ▮ Repression: diminishes the negative effects of drug use through regulative measures for enforcing prohibition

Costs

- ▮ Estimated total direct costs of drug consumption and of the four-pillar policy in the year 2000 were over CHF 1.4 billion (including approximately CHF 800 million for repressive measures)

of whether they are aligned with repressive or cooperative approaches. In general, there is no clear correlation between drug policies and consumption; in Europe, for example, some countries with strict drug policies have a higher drug use prevalence than other countries with liberal policies.

Nevertheless, most narcotics experts agree that harm reduction has less negative side-effects than repression and is generally more effective. Harm reduction should therefore be anchored more securely within institutional and political structures. This means, among other things, adapting international narcotics conventions to current conditions (the 1961 convention, for example, was enacted before the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic). Furthermore, institutions such as the WHO should be involved to a greater extent. Finally, the industrialized nations could extend much more support to alternative development by increasingly opening their markets for agricultural produce from drug-producing countries and promoting debt relief initiatives.

The role of Switzerland

Switzerland has a pioneering role on the international stage in terms of its drug policies. In public referenda, voters have given majority support to the four-pillar model, developed in the 1990s (see information box above), while simultaneously rejecting the radical options of either legalization or a zero-tolerance policy. However, controversy remains regarding the balance to be struck between various strategy elements. The debate over cannabis, for example, reveals disagreement over the degree of harm reduction efforts. Municipalities and communities, cantons, and the various actors at the federal level have sometimes

divergent preferences concerning counter-narcotics strategies.

Drug policy is an occasion for Switzerland to export an innovative political approach. Drug experts in many countries point to the successes of the Swiss model. Even if the Swiss reform approach occasionally invites criticism from international drug control authorities, during the upcoming round of assessment Switzerland should stand up for the methods it has developed.

To complement Switzerland's domestic drug policies with a more active foreign drug policy would be completely in line with the comprehensive Swiss approach. Switzerland contributes to combating the international drug trade through its participation in international police cooperation, its efforts to combat money-laundering, and other measures. In particular, there is scope for further-reaching engagement in non-repressive supply-reduction measures abroad, especially in the field of alternative development.

-
- ▮ Author: Cornelius Friesendorf
friesendorf@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
 - ▮ Responsible editor: Daniel Möckli
analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
 - ▮ Translated from German: Christopher Findlay
 - ▮ Other CSS Analyses / Mailinglist: www.isn.ethz.ch
 - ▮ German and French versions: www.ssn.ethz.ch