

Looking for the Reset Button in Afghan Opium Fields

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Amid all of the tensions in U.S.-Russian relations, there is one potential bright spot on the horizon found in a most unexpected place: the opium fields of Afghanistan. The Afghan opium trade offers the U.S. and Russia not only a practical reset button but the possibility of concrete cooperation between the two nations.

Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of opium, accounting for about 75 percent of the world's heroin supply. Despite counter-narcotics efforts, that figure is expected to rise to 90 percent this year, ensuring that opium will be Afghanistan's major economic activity after foreign military forces depart in 2014.

After 12 years of war in Afghanistan, the U.S. has a stake in ensuring the viability of a lawful Afghan nation. Drug trade, by its very nature, thrives in areas of instability, threatening to dismantle safety, security and legitimate government. Afghanistan is no exception. Opium provides the Taliban with a significant portion of its revenues according to the State

Department's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs bureau.

Afghan opium production has flourished in regions of instability and insurgency. The United Nations 2013 Afghanistan Opium Risk Assessment reports that almost all Afghan villages with poor security are cultivating poppy. Preventing Afghanistan from becoming a "narco-state" should be a U.S. regional priority.

Russia's concern over the Afghan drug trade is more direct. Russia has three million drug addicts, and it is estimated that 90 percent of them use Afghan-sourced heroin. Heroin kills 80 Russians each day, or 30,000 people per year.

In a poll conducted by Associated Press-GfK, 87 percent of Russians cited drug abuse as Russia's top problem, above systematic corruption. The Kremlin agrees. As Russian heroin use primarily affects those between the ages of 18 and 39, many believe that the opium trade is producing a lost generation.

Amid this stark reality, the Afghan opium trade presents one shining moment where both U.S. and Russian interests are aligned. Joint cooperation between the nations could not only help stem the tide of heroin trafficking but also stabilize the Afghan government and provide greater security within the region.

While both Russia and the U.S. acknowledge that Afghanistan will need to decide on its own how to combat drug trafficking after the U.S. military pulls out, the combined efforts of the three nations are essential to a long-term solution.

The government of Afghanistan has developed a comprehensive counter-narcotics strategy that includes governor-led poppy eradication, agricultural development, law enforcement and interdiction, demand reduction and treatment, criminal justice reform, public education and regional cooperation. The U.S. and Russia should support those efforts and should use these last few months before a military pullout to further cement the Afghan counter-narcotics strategy.

Eradication works as a deterrent, but for eradication to be a sustainable solution it must be combined with agricultural development and the possibility of other economic activity.

If eradication takes away the ability of a farmer to earn \$203 per kilogram of opium, there must be an economic alternative greater than earning 43 cents per kilogram for wheat. These internal economic and development policies should be buttressed with external international activity focusing on eliminating demand, border patrol and interdiction.

The laws of the market will continue to operate if nations cannot work together to both mitigate heroin demand and increase the costs of engaging in heroin production. The coordinated efforts of this multinational strategy are essential to suppressing the Afghan drug trade.

The time for multilateral international collaboration is now. Last week's U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission's working group meeting on counter-narcotics in Miami needs to ensure this holistic vision is met with a concomitant level of resources.

Similarly, the Senate's International Narcotic Control Caucus' hearing to be held Dec. 11,

chaired by Senators Diane Feinstein and Chuck Grassley, should elicit testimony on developing multinational concrete economic programs with Afghanistan to normalize economic relations and provide infrastructure.

Coordinated cooperative efforts between the U.S. and Russia offer the promise of a more stable and secure Afghanistan. Should that cooperation spark a continuing dialogue on other issues, it offers the promise of a more stable and secure world.

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