



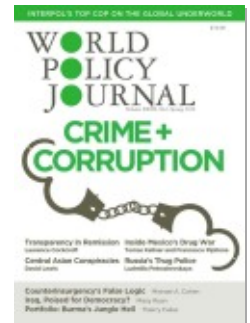
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## High Times on the Silk Road: The Central Asian Paradox

David Lewis

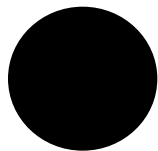
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# High Times on the Silk Road

## The Central Asian Paradox

David Lewis

In medieval times, traders carried jewels, spices, perfumes, and fabulous fabrics along the legendary Silk Route through Central Asia. Today, the goods are just as valuable, but infinitely more dangerous. Weapons and equipment for American troops in Afghanistan travel from west to east, along the vital lifeline of the Northern Supply Route. In the other direction, an unadvertised, but no less deadly product travels along the same roads, generating billions of dollars in illicit profits. As much as 25 percent of Afghanistan's heroin production is exported through the former Soviet states of Central Asia, and the UN's drug experts express grave concerns. Antonio Maria Costa, head of the UN's Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), claims that the "Silk Route, turned into a heroin route, is carving out a path of death and violence through one of the world's most strategic, yet volatile regions." A report from his office asserts that there is a "perfect storm spiraling into Central Asia" with drug trafficking funding terrorist groups and insurgency, fostering instability and conflict, and leaving a host of health problems behind. This should be a wake-up call to Central Asian governments. Yet, oddly, nobody seems to care very much.

In theory, the United Nations is right to be worried. At first glance, drug trafficking

seems like a major threat to the region, since it is so inextricably linked to violent crime and political instability in many other parts of the world. More people died in Mexican drug violence in 2009 than in Iraq. In Brazil, the government admits about 23,000 drug-related homicides each year—some ten times the number of civilians killed in the war in Afghanistan. And it's not just Latin America that suffers. On Afghanistan's border with Iran, there are regular clashes between Iranian counter-narcotics units and drug smugglers. Hundreds of border guards have been killed over the past decade in fights with heroin and opium traffickers.

But Central Asia's drug trade looks rather different. A closer look reveals a murky world of corruption and official protection, with three strange and paradoxical outcomes.

### *Three Paradoxes*

A Taliban prohibition on heroin production in 2000 was remarkably successful, reducing exports from the Afghan territories they controlled in 2001 to almost zero. But after the U.S.-led invasion, the Taliban gave up their apparently principled stance against drugs, and reverted to an earlier position—demanding a tax from both farmers and

traffickers, and sometimes providing logistical support and protection for cross-border smuggling, under the profitable rationale that it was non-believers who used the drugs. Production rocketed again, and exports through Central Asia also shot up. The United Nations and other experts expected an accompanying rise in drug-related violence, but the reality was far different. There are no drug-related shoot-outs on the leafy streets of Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent. Drug gangs in Tajikistan do not shoot down police helicopters, as they did recently in Rio. In fact, as the volume and value of heroin transported through the region has risen, the level of drug-related crime has fallen.

In Tajikistan, drug-related crime (covering everything from low-level possession to trafficking) plummeted after 2001, from 1,949 cases to a remarkably low 726 cases in 2006. This left UN experts puzzled. "Given Tajikistan's position as the drug gateway to Central Asia," they wrote in a recent report, "it is peculiar that drug-related crime and convictions are the lowest in Central Asia." But these declines post-2001 are not confined to Tajikistan. The same hold true across all Central Asian states. Even where low-level drug crimes are uncovered, major trafficking figures are almost never arrested or charged. This suggests the first paradox. The more drugs are trafficked through Central Asia, the lower the level of drug-related crime.

The available statistics also point to a second paradox. While opium and heroin production in Afghanistan has increased markedly since the mid-1990s, and export through Central Asia has probably increased proportionately more than production, drug seizures of opium by the police in Central Asian states has actually fallen (by about one-third) in the period from 1996 to 2007. Heroin seizures have also fallen, although not by as much. According to the Interna-

tional Narcotics Control Board, in 2007, only about 3.3 percent of an estimated 128 tons of heroin trafficked through Central Asia was intercepted by authorities, a decline from a peak in seizures back in 2004. That's still better than in Afghanistan (where only a trifling 1 percent is seized), but well below Iran and Pakistan, which average the interdiction of more than 15 percent of drugs that are produced or transit through these countries. The decline in seizure rates has occurred despite an influx of millions of dollars of aid from the United States and other Western countries to the border and law enforcement agencies of Central Asia over the past decade. Hence the second paradox: the more that's spent to end the problem, the deeper the problem becomes.

Central Asia offers one further paradox that derails the official narrative. The accepted wisdom on drug trafficking suggests that it undermines political stability and fuels anti-government insurgency. Again, according to the United Nations: "drugs are funding insurgency in Central Asia, where the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Party of Turkmenistan, the East Turkistan Liberation Organization, and other extremist groups are also profiting from the trade." In reality, however, there is no ongoing armed insurgency in Central Asia. Today, all the extremist groups listed by the United Nations are only marginally active inside Central Asian states. In fact, the Islamic Party of Turkmenistan does not even exist.

### *The Bad Old Days*

How do we explain these paradoxes in the shadowy world of Central Asian drug trafficking? To do so, we have to return to the 1990s, when these new states were just emerging onto the international scene, after decades of isolation from their southern neighbor. During much of the Soviet period,



On the Tajik-Afghan border, the finest security money can buy.

the border with Afghanistan was closely guarded, with almost no cross-border trade or travel. The first period of renewed interaction came in the 1980s, when Soviet troops were fighting a desperate war against the mujahidin in Afghanistan. Some Soviet veterans also brought back, however, a taste for opium—widely used historically in the region as a traditional medicinal and recreational drug. Its refined form, heroin, was much less known, but much more potent. At first, small amounts were brought back by war veterans, but quickly the potential for making quick profits from the drug trade became clear, and criminal gangs took over.

At first, drug trafficking along this northern route was fairly ad hoc. Most Afghan opium producers used the tradi-

tional smuggling routes through Iran and Pakistan that had flourished for decades. To the north, however, once the Soviet Union imploded, arrangements became much more chaotic. Former Communist Party bosses were still trying to work out how to run independent countries and stay in power. Their nations' economies had virtually collapsed, security forces often did not get paid, and border guards were left to their own devices. Not surprisingly, some turned to smuggling drugs. Initially, local security personnel, border guards, and enterprising villagers along the frontier dominated a fairly small-scale trade. But local criminals soon made international connections. Turkish drug gangs linked into a route through Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and the Balkans. Russian criminal groups benefited

from a route that passed through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan (where Russian troops controlled the border until 2003), Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.

To be fair, the UN assessment about the connection between drugs and violence was right, at least for a time in the 1990s. A growing trade in narcotics combined with the inability of weak central governments to exercise power over restive regions fueled instability. In Tajikistan, rivalry over resources led to a vicious civil war from 1992–97; drugs played an important role in prolonging the conflict. Warlords linked to both sides used trafficking revenues to supply their forces with arms and ammunition. In the late 1990s, drugs began to fund Islamic militants in the region. Insurgent groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) held territory in northern Tajikistan and conducted raids into southern Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Although they claimed to be engaged in a jihad against the Uzbek government, there was a more pragmatic aim—the control of a lucrative drug route from Afghanistan to the southern Kyrgyz town of Osh.

Gradually, however, things began to change, and the pattern of contested control over the drug trade started to fade, replaced by much more direct authority by agents of the state. In Tajikistan, for example, the IMU was forced out in 2001, leaving for northern Afghanistan and eventually winding up with Al Qaeda in Waziristan. With their departure, Tajikistan gradually stabilized after years of civil war. But surprisingly, although these Islamic insurgent groups departed and the warlords were sidelined, the drug trade did not slow.

### *Niyazov's Narco-state*

Turkmenistan was perhaps the first nation to wrest control from the small criminal groups and individuals running drugs across its borders. Ruled by the bizarre and ruth-

less Saparmurad Niyazov, Turkmenistan had become a closed dictatorship by the mid-1990s. Niyazov pulled billions of dollars from Turkmenistan's massive gas fields, but wasted much of it building rotating gold statues of himself, and paying for his own book of philosophy, the *Rubnama*, to be launched into space. But the gas income was clearly not enough. According to a former chairman of the Turkmen Central Bank who later fled the country, millions of dollars worth of Afghan heroin was being stored in Niyazov's personal vault. Other dissidents reported that there were stashes of drugs stowed deep in the presidential palace. As usual in Turkmenistan, information is hard to verify. But these revelations and others suggest the degree to which the state was involved in protecting a criminal business network.

The few who chose to report the truth about the government's collusion with traffickers paid a heavy price. Indeed, in the case of Maj. Vitaly Usachev, who appeared to have been simply trying to do his job, even innocents were sacrificed. In 1997, this senior officer in the Turkmenistan Border Guards was checking cargo transiting through Ashgabat airport. Searching an ordinary looking cargo container, he discovered 400 kg of heroin, and reported it to his superiors. It would have been a sensational seizure, larger than the biggest shipment ever captured in the United Kingdom. Once it reached the heroin addicts of Glasgow, Antwerp, and Hamburg it would be worth at least \$40 million. Major Usachev probably expected at least a commendation. Instead, it quickly became clear that powerful government officials were not only aware, but actually in charge of the drug shipment, and were livid at Usachev for nearly exposing their criminal conspiracy. Usachev already knew too much. The same day he reported the discovery, he was placed under arrest and charged with narcotics traffick-

ing. He was quickly found guilty, sentenced to death, and executed.

According to the former foreign minister, Boris Shikhmuradov, in 1998 a similar story unfolded on the Turkmen-Afghan border. A vigilant border guard unit stumbled upon a convoy of what they believed to be drug traffickers. They pursued the convoy, radioing for back-up. A Turkmen air force helicopter duly arrived and began firing—but on the pursuing border guards, not the drug convoy. The guards were all killed.

When the story broke, the border guards were construed to be the traffickers and the strike was presented as another example of government vigilance against the drug trade. Both the real traffickers and the drugs they were hauling, of course, disappeared.

These kinds of stories have mostly emerged from former Turkmen officials who have defected to Russia or the West, and they cannot be verified. Turkmenistan has no independent press, and seldom allows international journalists or researchers to visit. But the anecdotal reports have become too numerous over the years to be dismissed. And, in 2003, there was a rare, official confirmation of the involvement of state officials in the drug trade. The nation's chief prosecutor, Kurbanbibi Atajanova, was briefly arrested, apparently for covering up a family-run drug-smuggling ring. However, no charges were brought, and Atajanova kept her job, at least temporarily. (She was eventually imprisoned in 2006, after being found guilty of embezzling state property, including, strangely, 30,000 buckets.)

The stories coming out of Turkmenistan suggest that the official international narrative of weak states in Central Asia battling unsuccessfully against powerful drug gangs is wrong. Instead, since the late 1990s,

there has been increasing evidence from Turkmenistan that the state itself—both through its security structures and a variety of powerful political figures—has been directly involved in trafficking heroin across its borders. Moreover, for many years, the state showed no interest in participating in international attempts to clamp down on

“In Turkmenistan, Afghan heroin was stored in the president's vault in the Central Bank.”

drug trafficking. For a long time, Turkmenistan did not even provide any data to the United Nations drug program, took part in no regional counter-narcotics initiatives, and was oblivious to UN requests to discuss the smuggling of drug precursors (the key chemicals that must be imported into Afghanistan to turn opium into heroin), many of which pass through Central Asia.

Niyazov's attitude towards drugs was always sharply at odds with visiting experts from international organizations. He denied the country faced any problem with heroin trafficking and once claimed that opium “helps relations with women.” After his unlamented death in December 2006, seven years after proclaiming himself “president for life,” there developed at least some more openness to engage with international counter-narcotics organizations. Niyazov's successor, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, promised a clamp-down and set up a new State Service for Drugs to combat illegal narcotics trafficking. Initially, reported seizures of heroin increased substantially in 2007, but it is not clear if such improvements are part of a long-term trend. Drug addiction—including heroin use—among young people remains widespread, and so

far, there have been no reports of arrests of major traffickers under the new regime.

### *Not So Gently Goes Tajikistan*

If Turkmenistan is the starkest and most blatant example of state control over narcotics smuggling, then Tajikistan is representative of a more complex and violent history. Drugs had been one of the dynamics in a multifaceted and brutal civil war that ended in 1997. Combine proximity to and close ties with the Afghan Northern Alliance in the 1990s, and Tajikistan emerged as a key conduit for heroin exports, particularly after the Taliban banned production in 2001. Several former warlords from the period of the civil war had control over key trafficking routes through the mountains.

Gradually, President Emomali Rahmon (1992–present) started to purge some of the warlords from both his own side and the opposition. He clawed back control over outlying districts, getting rid of opponents in fairly unceremonious fashion. In August 2001, government troops—backed by artillery and attack helicopters—killed Rahmon Sanginov, a warlord known to his few friends and many enemies by his charming nickname, “Hitler.” Others, such as the influential head of the presidential guard, Ghaffor Mirzoyev, were more problematic. So, even as president, Rahmon had to use greater caution. Mirzoyev was finally jailed for life in 2006 on a host of charges, including tax evasion, corruption, coup-plotting, and murder.

These political changes left a consolidated Tajik political and security elite in control of most of the country’s territory for the first time. Corrupt officials began to enforce a monopoly over the drug trade, forcing out political rivals who had maintained alternate smuggling routes, while using border guards and counter-narcotics agencies—such as the internationally funded Drug Control Agency (DCA)—to keep control

over rival groups and local, independent trafficking initiatives. As political power became increasingly centralized, and alternative trafficking networks were quashed, the volume of drug seizures in Tajikistan plummeted. In 2003, Tajikistan seized 5.6 metric tons of heroin; in 2008, that figure had fallen to just 1.6 tons. (This did not reflect any drop in supply, however. Heroin production in Afghanistan almost doubled over the same period.)

Nevertheless, compared to its neighbors, Tajikistan could be considered a bright spot—it has the highest level of drug interdiction in Central Asia and the DCA is one of the most professional law enforcement outfits in the region. But, according to the Brussels-based think tank International Crisis Group (ICG), “an active anti-drug control program has failed either to tighten up control on the border or slow the drug flow. While Tajikistan has a high rate of drug seizures, specialists and diplomats say that the pattern of drug operations suggests the couriers are being caught, while large shipments slip through the net. Diplomats feel there is high-level government involvement in the drug trade.” In a later report, the ICG noted the catch of a bigger fish. In 2008, counter-narcotics operatives in Tajikistan arrested a senior official. He was eventually released. Worse, the counter-narcotics officers who made the arrest were allegedly imprisoned in his stead.

### *Unruly Uzbekistan*

While there has always been at least a certain openness about the problems of drugs in Tajikistan—and a willingness to seek international assistance—in neighboring Uzbekistan, the situation remains opaque. The UN drug program runs its regional counter-narcotics office out of the capital, Tashkent, but has achieved little success in persuading the government to take more serious action against drug trafficking. The

government claims it has the problem under control, which it explains by the muddled logic of historically low seizure rates. But what evidence exists suggests high-level involvement in a major drug trafficking operation by powerful figures in the political and security elite. In 2003, Internet reports of alleged connections between senior officials and drug trafficking began to emerge, most notoriously in a series of postings by someone who claimed to be a disaffected officer from the powerful Uzbek secret service. These reports claimed that significant amounts of drugs passed through the country with the connivance of senior political and security figures. Unfortunately, none of this has been independently confirmed. Much like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan has almost no independent journalism, and there are few dissidents who have fled abroad with intimate knowledge of the security services. One source who has spoken up is the former British ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, who has claimed that there was a major drug trafficking operation from territory controlled by ethnic Uzbeks in Afghanistan across the frontier into Uzbekistan. Murray claims that convoys of vehicles, which he saw crossing the so-called Friendship Bridge (Uzbekistan's only land link with Afghanistan) in 2003, were transporting heroin and chemicals on an almost daily basis. None of them appeared to be checked by border officials.

Since 2001, trafficking has probably increased through Uzbekistan, as in the rest of Central Asia, although as usual the information is scarce or unreliable. What is clear is the significant decline in the seizures of opiates by Uzbek law enforcement in the post-Taliban era, which likely reflects the changing structure of control over the drug trade inside Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Total seizures of opiates fell from a peak of

3,617 kg in 1999 to only 1,298 kg in 2006, while heroin seizures have stayed roughly constant. Many of these shipments are nabbed on the eastern Tajik-Uzbek border, suggesting that this is the main area for "independent" trafficking initiatives.

Occasional drug busts are trumpeted by the local media, but drug-related convictions remain low, and usually refer to arrests for possession or small-scale dealing. Successful prosecutions of major traffickers are

“Drug arrests have been used to frame local dissidents or intimidate unsanctioned religious groups.”

extremely rare. Some of the drug arrests have been attempts to frame local dissidents or intimidate unsanctioned religious groups. Recently, Baptists in Uzbekistan have been singled out. In February 2010, Tohar Haydarov was arrested on drugs charges, but his fellow worshippers claim that the narcotics were planted on him by the police to punish him for his religious beliefs. Whatever the case, the amount of drugs authorities claimed he possessed was minimal. Meanwhile, major drug traffickers remain apparently untouchable.

### *Crushed in Kyrgyzstan*

Kyrgyzstan has always been a much more open political environment than neighboring Uzbekistan, but the dynamics and personalities of drug trafficking nevertheless remain a taboo subject. Figures such as Bayaman Erkinbaev, who was alleged to control a key drug trafficking route in the south through the city of Osh, were elected to parliament, and could be seen happily dining in the capital's hotels with senior political figures. Erkinbaev was a colorful

leader from the south of the country, who combined political ambition with dubious business interests. He won his parliamentary seat with 95 percent of the vote. Nobody dared stand against him.

When Kyrgyz protesters overthrew President Askar Akaev in 2005, in what was subsequently dubbed the “Tulip revolution,” some of the demonstrators were telegenic English-speaking democratic activists from American-funded relief and monitoring organizations. But they were quickly marginalized by powerful clan leaders and drug kingpins like Erkinbaev, who dispatched a dangerous-looking group of martial arts students from his personal karate school to storm the presidential palace. A bitter President Akaev subsequently blamed his overthrow on what he called “a conspiracy of drug dealers and extremists.” In fact, his fall from power was at least partially the result of popular disgust at the corruption that had become endemic in his government. Still, there is little doubt that organized crime leaders quickly took advantage of the rising chaos.

The Kyrgyz revolution shook up local dictators, worried they would be the next target of popular anger. It also appears to have temporarily upset the dynamics of the regional drug trade, with different criminal leaders and political elites battling to reassert control over the various drug routes that passed through Kyrgyzstan. As the dust settled from the political turmoil, a series of killings underscored a fight for control over criminal businesses. Several gang leaders were the victims of assassinations in the mid-2000s, including Erkinbaev himself, shot dead in late 2005.

The political changes in Bishkek appear to have had little impact on the volume of drugs passing through the country. Heroin seizures remain very low, even by regional standards, at just under 300 kg in 2008, although that was a small increase from

previous years. But even these few interdictions were clearly too much for authorities who stood to profit from the trade. In October 2009, the UN-funded Drug Control Agency’s local office in Bishkek was quietly closed by the government. Even when drugs are seized, some residents claim that much of it ends up on the local heroin market. According to a survey of 250 drug users by Right to Life, a Bishkek civic group that supports local addicts, some 36 percent of heroin users get their supply directly from the police.

### *Connive and Support*

These examples from Central Asia suggest that, unlike Mexico, the bulk of drug trafficking is not carried out by violent, heavily armed, organized criminal gangs battling each other and an array of state agencies. Instead, it is conducted with the active connivance and support of state institutions, controlled by senior security officers, government officials, and parliamentarians who have effectively nationalized drug transit through the region. They have brokered lucrative deals with Turkish and Russian criminal groups and with Afghan suppliers, many of whom also benefit from close relations with state structures in their countries.

There are still arrests of traffickers and seizures of drugs by police and specialized agencies in Central Asia, but these are for the most part either artificial devices to meet internal quotas (and present a picture of serious counter-narcotics strategy to the outside world) or simply a way of maintaining a monopoly over the trade by suppressing unofficial rivals. State control over trafficking, paradoxically, ensures the stability of the regime itself. Well-funded insurgencies can flourish in conditions of poverty and oppression, and drugs offer a way for regional or political opponents to fund rebel movements. Consolidating the drug trade under the control of the state prevents po-

tentially violent political rivals from gaining access to funding and weapons.

Rather than resulting in conflict, it is arguable that the trade in narcotics has instead strengthened regimes, providing them with a way to manage political challenges by centralizing power and buying off disaffected groups. Dividing up the drug trade is just part of a much bigger political process in each country, as resources are parceled out among the powerful and well connected.

Such funding also provides an easy way for cash-strapped governments to ensure the loyalty of security services.

Underfunded police forces operate by means of a pyramid of corruption, involving almost all levels. Low-ranking officers accept bribes to top up their salaries, but must also pass along a percentage to their bosses. Money trickles up the pyramid to the very top officials, many of whom are required to pay large sums to secure their appointments. Senior officers in the pay of narcotics traffickers are both well rewarded and quite vulnerable, a perfect combination in these neo-patrimonial systems, where corruption is the lubricant that makes the political system work. Although much of the income from drugs is transferred out of the country to offshore bank accounts, or to buy property in the Middle East or Europe, enough remains to have a discernible impact on key industries, such as construction. In both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan there is considerable evidence linking luxury construction projects to the cash surpluses of drugs trafficking. Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, abounds in luxury mansions, and property prices have shot up to European levels.

### *Turning a Blind Eye*

Yet, the idea that drug trafficking allows corrupt and authoritarian regimes to

strengthen their positions and pursue a relatively resilient process of short-term stabilization is not recognized in official reports. Instead, most international organizations focus on the way insurgent or extremist groups benefit from drug trafficking. There is, of course, a worrying link between the trade in drugs and armed insurgent groups in other parts of the world, but in Central Asia there is a much more complex relationship between government, organized crime,

“State control over trafficking, paradoxically, ensures the stability of the regime itself.”

radical extremist groups, and drug smuggling than this kind of analysis suggests.

For the most part, wittingly or not, the international community is happy to ignore these paradoxical dynamics of the Central Asian drug trade. A series of initiatives, often coordinated by the United Nations, and predominantly funded by the United States and the European Union, have tried to stem the flow of narcotics through the region. They have all been unsuccessful. A major EU-funded program, the Border Management Program for Central Asia, has helped Central Asian states tighten frontiers and clamp down on small-scale narcotics smuggling, but has done nothing to tackle bulk drugs transit or high-level connivance in the trade. The UN approach has focused on persuading states to cooperate with its own data-gathering techniques, training programs for law enforcement, and a string of regional conferences.

The most ambitious UNODC initiatives have been the establishment of drug control agencies in Tajikistan and (until 2009) Kyrgyzstan, where the United Nations has controlled the selection process for security personnel (designed to weed out any corrupt

officers). The United States and others have provided funding for training, better equipment, and access to international expertise. Another UN regional initiative is the Central Asia Regional Information and Coordination Center, a clearing house for regional intelligence among five Central Asian states and Russia. The United Nations drug program has always been publicly optimistic about such regional initiatives, but official protection of major drug traffickers makes these efforts less than effective. At best, such programs are building up the capacity for a more robust counter-narcotics policy by Central Asian governments in the future. At worst, they are simply helping the biggest drug traffickers get rid of any competition, while also reinforcing the repressive power of the law enforcement agencies and the state.

The United States has also offered its own bilateral initiatives. It has funded new border posts for Turkmenistan, with the latest equipment for detecting drugs, and offered assistance to poorly-trained Tajik border guards as well as other law enforcement agencies in the region. Likewise, the Chinese government has become increasingly concerned about the supply of drugs from Central Asia to its growing domestic market, and has provided equipment and training to police and border guards in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

All of these programs tend to be disparate and poorly coordinated (and sometimes overlaid with other geopolitical aims and priorities), but what they all have in common is that none of them have achieved any discernible impact on the actual quantity of drugs travelling through Central Asia.

### *What's to Be Done?*

These dynamics pose significant problems for law enforcement officers engaged in devising any kind of effective counter-

narcotics strategy. International efforts to strengthen the state and its law enforcement agencies simply boost the ability of the political elite to control the drug trafficking networks and routes that pass through their territory, and eliminate rival groups and small-scale amateurs and individual traffickers. At the same time, such support also tends to increase state capabilities against dissidents, cross-border traders, even political rivals. By strengthening border regimes, for example, the European boundaries program has done little to tackle narcotics smuggling, but has made it easy for border guards to crack down on informal cross-border trade, a lifeline for many poor frontier communities.

The best case for international support for state counter-narcotics institutions is that gradually, over a matter of years, Central Asian regimes will be forced to relinquish control over some criminal activities, and will slowly start to mount a serious operation to interdict criminal groups. The danger, as Mexican authorities have discovered, is that a more assertive policy towards drug gangs tends to result in massive violence and inter-group warfare, and few political leaders are likely to countenance such a shift in policy in the much more potentially unstable environment of Central Asia. After all, if senior officials and security officers in Tajikistan really started to clamp down on the trafficking of heroin, they would first have to arrest other powerful political figures. This would almost certainly spark serious violence and possibly re-ignite civil war.

An alternative approach would be to recognize the reality of state-sponsored drug trafficking and start to put pressure on the political elites through financial sanctions or downgraded diplomatic relationships. There are already UN sanctions against drug traffickers who fund the Taliban or Al Qaeda. Expanding the list to include suspected

state-protected drug traffickers could have a significant impact. However, such an approach would likely run counter to American security and political goals, which support a range of pro-Western regimes in Central Asia and in Afghanistan, with only limited regard to their behavior in other areas, be it human rights or narcotics smuggling. In 2001 in Afghanistan, for example, the United States allied closely with Northern Alliance warlords who were closely involved in drug trafficking, and ongoing counter-terrorist campaigns run by U.S. intelligence and military agencies involve uncomfortably close relationships with well-known drug barons.

That is the real long-term problem of the drug trade. Genuine attempts to clamp down on trafficking provoke extreme violence and require huge resource investments in law enforcement agencies. Giving up on interdiction, on the other hand, leaves

fragile countries run by narco-elites, which makes progressive political change much more difficult, and much needed economic and institutional reform almost impossible. Meanwhile, along these drug routes, drug-related illnesses such as HIV continue to blight lives.

While the West continues to rely on law enforcement and interdiction in the battle against drugs, this unhappy choice—violence and instability, on the one hand, or an uneasy mafia peace on the other—will remain. The old Silk Road will continue to be a conduit for tanks and guns going into Afghanistan, and drugs coming out. Any alternative policy would require a fundamental rethink of the “war on drugs,” with far-reaching political consequences. At the very least, it would require the UN and others to be far more honest about the murky realities of today’s Central Asian drug trade. ●