

AFGHANISTAN, THE RISE OF A NARCO-TERRORIST STATE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

India's anxieties over ungoverned spaces and lawless Afghanistan turning into a significant source of internal security threat are gradually turning into reality. According to a report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), opium production in Afghanistan has crossed 6,000 tonnes for the fifth consecutive year. The reported rise in global opium prices has resulted in the exponential production of opiates increasing by 8%. The Taliban, cash-strapped and still looking to establish a semblance of order in the country they captured in August 2021, could indeed be looking to generate revenue from the illegal cash crop, as cases of smuggling and seizures of large consignments of drugs in India have started increasing, indicating a turn towards this trend.

For the past several decades, Afghan opiates have entered India through circuitous routes, sea as well as air, involving Pakistan, Sri Lanka, African countries such as Mozambique and South Africa, and Qatar. Carriers of drugs, individuals arrested in various airports in the country with small quantities, as well as the massive recoveries made in various States of western India, have only been the proverbial tip of the iceberg. The huge recoveries of heroin in Gujarat alone — 3,000 kilograms in September and 120 kilograms in October — bear testament to the fact that the fall of Kabul and its capture by the Taliban may have initiated free-for-all narcotic smuggling waves, which unless checked, have the potential of destabilising India's security.

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The fact that, under the Taliban, opium production would increase in Afghanistan was a foregone conclusion notwithstanding the initial statements by the Taliban leadership to gain international recognition. Over the years, the Taliban have minted money from this sector, by promoting its production, taxing it and also by overseeing its smuggling either into Pakistan or Iran, thereby building a mammoth illicit economy with strengthening linkages to terrorist groups as witnessed in the cases of the Organization of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Hezbollah and others.

According to United Nations officials, the group likely earned more than \$400 million between 2018-19 from the drug trade. The trend appears to have remained unchanged as in May 2021, a report by the United States Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) estimated that the Taliban derive up to 60% of their annual revenue from illicit narcotics. Notwithstanding the handful of European States where the domestic narcotics trade is well regulated, accompanied by official policies that consider access to narcotics as a matter of individual right, there is a global consensus that narcotics itself can devastate societies and money derived from the narco-trade can fuel organised crime and terror activities.

However, in today's Afghanistan, the Taliban seem to be taking advantage of the vacuum and detached attitude of the international community. This could partly be rooted in the global failure in adopting an appropriate counternarcotic policy to rein in the narco-trade originating from Afghanistan between 2001 and 2020. The rise of a narco-terrorist state will have serious consequences for the U.S., Europe and the region.

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The UNODC's achievement in this regard was limited to ensuring a minor dip in the area under poppy cultivation and production of opium. Promotion of alternate livelihood programmes and pushing farmers to grow other cash crops largely failed due to a variety of reasons. These included the limited reach of the central government in Kabul and a punitive policy advocated by the international community which sought the use of force to destroy standing opium crops without adequately compensating the farmers or providing them with alternative livelihoods. As a result, not only did the narco-infrastructure in Afghanistan remain largely intact but it also flourished by having developed a symbiotic nexus and indigenous facilities to produce methamphetamine pills. As the United States and the international community gradually sought to extricate themselves from the Afghan quagmire, production shot up and is projected to spike in the coming years.

Ensure Afghan soil is not used for terror, U.S., India tell Taliban

Organised crime develops its own survival and thriving dynamics. Countries with the best of intentions and abilities fail to turn the tide, which is fuelled by such an unholy nexus. Afghanistan, where neither the intention nor the ability to disrupt the trade exist, is emerging as a major narco-empire. Some of the members of the Taliban regime, particularly the Haqqani network, share well-documented connections with the organised crime network. Whether the global community in general and countries such as India in particular afford to take a detached view towards the enveloping situation remains a critical question. From New Delhi's perspective, its efforts to curb terror finance at home would achieve only limited results if anti-India groups such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammed, now yet again operating in Afghanistan, manage to tap into the money from such narco-trade.

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The antidote to this phenomenon is a legitimate, responsible, empowered, and inclusive government in Kabul. Economic collapse of the Afghan state and the evolving humanitarian crisis must be prevented. Reaching out to the Afghans and amplifying their voices in having a government that is legitimate and acceptable to them would be a first step in the right direction. While the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan (November 10, 2021) did try to reach out to the regional countries, India should look for new alliances in Central, West, and South Asia to stitch a coalition of the willing. It is time for New Delhi to step up and reach out to the larger sections of Afghan society including women and civil society groups, political leaders and business groups, who are looking for assistance in having a legitimate, representative and inclusive leadership in their country. A failed state in the neighbourhood combined with narco-terrorism cannot be ignored and will have serious consequences for India's security in the days to come.

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