

The Interaction of Narcotics and Conflict*

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The link between armed conflict and the production and trafficking of illicit drugs has been frequently noted in the popular literature. Recent academic research on the matter has taken place mainly within the framework of studies of the role of natural resources in civil wars. These have tended to lump drugs together with other 'lootable' resources such as diamonds. The results have been mixed, with the main contribution so far being to show that drugs are not linked to the onset of conflict but appear to be linked to the duration of conflict. Yet, the specific dynamics and, in particular, the causal mechanisms of the linkage between narcotics and conflict remain poorly understood. Nevertheless, recent literature on terrorism and its link with organized crime provides important insights that are applicable to the relationship between narcotics and conflict. This review essay combines the economics and conflict literature with the crime-terror nexus, which provides useful insights as to the causal mechanism linking narcotics and conflict. Empirical cases indicate that where a pre-existing drug production exists, the conditions of armed conflict boost narcotics production and enable insurgents to become involved in the drug trade to finance their struggle, thereby increasing their capabilities and the challenge they pose to states. In some cases, involvement in the drug trade also seems to affect the motivational structures of insurgent groups, creating an economic function of war and vested interests in the continuation of armed conflict.

Introduction

The interaction between civil war and the cultivation of narcotics has become increasingly observable in areas of the world as varied as Latin America, Southwest Asia and Southeast Asia. This is particularly the case regarding coca and opium, the crops from which cocaine and heroin, the most potent and profit-bringing psychotropic substances, are derived. The bulk of the global cultivation of these crops is presently taking place in conflict zones. Yet, in the 1960s, countries such as Turkey, Iran and Bolivia produced

much of the world's opium and coca, without experiencing armed conflict. Afghanistan, Burma, Colombia and Peru form the chief cultivation areas of opium poppy and coca and have been areas of prolonged armed conflict.

A link between narcotics and conflict, much noted in popular literature and in case studies, has also been borne out by recent comparative research suggesting that narcotics extend the duration of conflict (Ross, 2003, 2004a,b; Fearon, 2004). These findings raise a number of important questions regarding the dynamics whereby narcotics and conflict interact, which are presently not well understood. The question of why narcotics are linked to conflict duration has not been convincingly

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addressed. Indeed, the link could be spurious; the same conditions, for example state weakness, could be the cause of both armed conflict and the production of narcotics. Even should this be the case, however, the possible interaction between them in conditions of state weakness and its consequences deserves study.

This article reviews research on economic incentives in armed conflict and, specifically, the link between natural resources and intrastate conflict, seeking to complement it by a second emerging body of research, the so-called 'crime-terror nexus' theory concerning the interaction between violent non-state actors and transnational organized crime. The article suggests the advantages of combining the lessons of these two bodies of literature. Adapted to the study of civil war, the crime-rebellion nexus provides a useful explanatory framework for the study of the link between conflict and narcotics.

Economic Factors in Civil War

Literature on economic incentives in civil war has challenged established notions of the driving forces in intrastate conflict (Keen, 1998; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Berdal & Malone, 2000a; Ballentine & Sherman, 2003). Berdal & Malone (2000: 1) note that 'comparatively little *systematic* attention has been given [in . . . the recent literature on conflict] to the precise role of economically motivated actions and processes in generating and sustaining contemporary civil conflicts'. Indeed, a tendency has existed to portray war as a result of an irrational decision due to, for example, 'information failure', reflecting an underlying assumption that war benefits no one and must, therefore, be an outcome that actors seek to avoid.

Greed and Grievance

Collier & Hoeffler (2004), Grossman (1999) and others have argued that more

civil wars are caused by economic than sociopolitical factors and that loot-seeking (greed) is more important than justice-seeking (grievance). The economic approach to understanding civil war differs from political science approaches by focusing on a different motivation for violence (greed), as well as a different explanation for the outbreak of war (atypical opportunities). As Keen (2000: 22) has observed, war is not simply the breakdown of order, economy and social organization, but 'the emergence of an alternative system of profit, power, and even protection'. Insecurity and unpredictability, coupled with the weakening of law and order, imply the turn to a more opportunistic society; an increase in criminality; the disruption of markets; and opportunities for what Collier (2000: 102) calls 'rent-seeking predation'. While this is immensely detrimental for society at large, it provides opportunities for armed groups to benefit economically. Collier & Hoeffler (2004: 587-588) argue that 'a model [of initiation of civil war] that focuses on the opportunities for rebellion performs well, whereas objective indicators of grievance add little explanatory power'.

Yet, the greed theory has been criticized as simplistic, corresponding poorly with reality. Empirical studies have found that incentives for self-enrichment were neither the primary nor the sole cause of numerous conflicts (Ballentine & Nitzschke, 2003: 1). Ross (2004a: 337-338) concludes that 'there appears to be little agreement on the validity of the resources-civil war correlation'. Largely because of differing methodologies and differing data, there is strong disagreement on whether natural resources at all increase the risk of war or extend the duration of war.

Natural Resources

Dividing resources into smaller categories, especially lootable and non-lootable

resources (Le Billon, 2001), generates more interesting results. Ross (2003) argues that the degree to which a commodity is linked to conflict depends on its lootability, obstructability and legality. Drugs, like alluvial diamonds, are easy for a limited number of individuals to appropriate and transport to markets, as opposed to oil, gas, timber or minerals. Given their high value-to-size ratio, they are not easily obstructable, unlike oil, minerals and timber, which require much more time and complicated enterprises to be looted. Finally, the illegality of drugs makes them benefit insurgents, who are less susceptible to influence by international prohibition regimes, unless governments are willing to endure international sanctions.

Ross (2004a: 344–345) indicates that ‘most evidence thus far suggests that gemstones and narcotics are linked to the duration of conflict, but surprisingly not to the initiation of conflict’. Diamonds, however, are different in their effect, depending on their lootability. Primary diamonds are generally not lootable and seem unrelated to conflict onset, whereas alluvial, or secondary, diamonds have been statistically linked with the onset of civil war in the post-Cold War period (Lujala, Gleditsch & Gilmore, 2005). No such finding has been made for drugs. Fearon notes a link between ‘valuable contraband’, including drugs, and conflict duration. Moreover, conflicts where rebels relied extensively on contraband financing had a mean duration of 48.2 years, compared to just 8.8 years for other conflicts (Fearon, 2004: 283–284).

These studies indicate that the presence of narcotics is unlikely to play a role in the initiation of conflict, but that conflict duration is increased by the presence of narcotics. It does not, however, explain convincingly why this would be the case. It does suggest that the capabilities of insurgents are increased by the presence of narcotics. But is

this the entire story? If increased capabilities mean a balance between belligerents, this could imply a greater possibility for a negotiated solution (Zartman, 2000).

The Crime–Rebellion Nexus

An emerging body of literature on the modes of interactions between non-state violent actors and organized crime has important implications for understanding the causal mechanism of the interaction of narcotics and conflict.

The End of the Cold War and Insurgency Financing

The increasing linkage between violent non-state actors and organized crime has been noted since the end of the Cold War (Makarenko, 2003). This linkage was counter-intuitive, as the ideal-type violent movement strives for a self-defined higher cause and is disinterested in (or opposed to) the pursuit of profit through crime. Conversely, the ideal-type organized criminal network is motivated simply by the pursuit of monetary profit, power and status (Williams, 1994: 96). As Hoffman (1998: 43) notes, ‘the terrorist is fundamentally an altruist: he believes he is serving a “good” cause designed to achieve a greater good for a wider constituency [whereas] the criminal serves no cause at all, just his own personal aggrandizement and material satiation’. Crime is perceived as a domestic problem, and ‘law enforcement and national security are based on very different philosophies, organizational structures and legal frameworks’ (Williams, 1994: 96). As a result, transnational organized crime has not been viewed as a national, let alone international, security issue. Yet, this depiction no longer holds up to closer scrutiny, as ‘many of today’s terrorist groups have not only lost some of their more comprehensible ideals, but are increasingly turning to smuggling

and other criminal activities to fund their operations' (Thachuk, 2001: 51).

The end of the Cold War drastically reduced the availability of state financing for terrorist and insurgent movements (Labrousse, 2004a: 72). With the bipolar confrontation gone, simply being in opposition to a communist or non-communist regime no longer translated into financial support from one of the superpowers or their proxies (Makarenko, 2005). The need for alternative funding made organized crime attractive to many groups. The international efforts to combat terrorism financing after 11 September 2001 are further pushing non-state violent actors toward organized criminal financing (Sanderson, 2004). This move is facilitated by the rapidly developing processes of globalization, simplifying transportation and communications (Harriss-White, 2002; Williams, 2000; Levitsky, 2003; Cornell, 2004).

Operational Involvement and Motivational Change

The construct of a security continuum placing organized crime and pure ideological groups at opposite ends of a spectrum clarifies the blurring picture between criminal and political groups (Makarenko, 2002). Between these extremes lies a 'grey area' with different variations and combinations of the two: cooperation between a criminal and an ideological group; involvement of an ideological group in crime; and involvement of a criminal group in political violence. Research has shown that cooperation between groups at opposing ends of the spectrum tends to give way to self-involvement; that is, ideological groups tend to engage directly in criminal operations (Dishman, 2001). The growth of a narcotics industry in a conflict zone is likely to disproportionately benefit the non-state actor (typically the weaker actor) in financial terms. This enables it to pay fighters, acquire weapons and, potentially,

even buy legitimacy with the local population. Such increased capabilities make insurgent groups more dangerous adversaries to governments. Crime and drugs are, hence, instrumental in enabling a group to threaten the state's monopoly of the use of force and control over territory, as well as the security of individuals (Ballentine, 2003: 262).

Criminal involvement implies, at first, the operational use of crime to raise capabilities to further original goals but, potentially, affects the motivational structures of groups. Occasionally, it is difficult to assert whether a violent group's actions are motivated by ideological or criminal aims; that is, 'organized crime and terrorism are indistinguishable from one another' (Makarenko, 2002; see also Brown, 1999; Cornell, 2005a). Criminal involvement seems to affect the motivational structures of some originally ideologically motivated groups. Such insurgent or terrorist groups have either adopted a predominantly criminal nature or acquired a criminal purpose at the side of their ideological purpose (Makarenko, 2004; Schweitzer, 2002: 287–289).

Implications

The idea of a crime–rebellion nexus complements the literature on economics and conflict. In particular, it furthers understanding of the mechanisms whereby narcotics and conflict have become linked. As state financing declined, non-state violent actors gradually overcame their aversion to financing from organized crime. Some discovered the enormous potential arising from involvement in narcotics production and smuggling. This provided a financial base to strengthen the organization, resist government onslaught and, indeed, to deny governments control of significant parts of their territories for extended periods of time. This helps to explain why narcotics seem linked to conflict duration but not to onset.

Further, most research on economic

incentives in civil war takes a 'snapshot', implicitly assuming that motivational structures are static: rebels are fully motivated by either greed or grievance from the beginning and engage in crime only for operational purposes. The crime–rebellion nexus model suggests that the opportunity of economic profit may mutate the motivations of originally ideologically motivated insurgents. Indeed, the possibility that rebel motivational structures may change over time has substantial implications for understanding the evolution of a conflict.

If this is empirically corroborated, it would have profound implications for conflict resolution. The narcotics industry inherently makes conflicts harder to resolve, as it reduces rebel incentives for a negotiated solution. International mediation seeking to find a compromise on the publicly stated incompatibility of a conflict may simply be missing the point. If rebels have become less interested in justice than in money, offering them justice is unlikely to end a war. As the drug trade is inherently illicit in the present international system, it is infeasible to offer rebels a negotiated solution whereby they would be allowed to retain control over the drug trade. Herein lies a main difference between drugs and other natural resources. Theoretically, understanding the change in motivations could be used by negotiators to offer the insurgents an 'exit' option, for instance by keeping their money. But, precisely because this aspect of conflicts is as yet poorly understood, there is little empirical experience to indicate whether this is a workable proposition.

Narcotics and Conflict: Empirical Experience

Few of the world's conflict zones experience drug production. But drug cultivation is increasingly likely to occur in a conflict zone. The 9 states out of 190 (4.7%) that

produced opium or coca in significant quantities accounted for 15 of the 109 intrastate armed conflicts (13.7%) recorded by the Uppsala Conflict Data Project (UCDP) in the period 1990–2003.¹ Among the nine drug producers (Afghanistan, Bolivia, Burma, Colombia, Laos, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru and Thailand), only Bolivia and Thailand did not experience armed conflict.

In Afghanistan, Burma, Colombia and Peru, the four major drug-producing countries in the past 15 years, traditional and minor production of opium or coca existed long before the conflicts.² However, the large-scale industrial production of drugs developed *after* the initiation of conflict. Among mid-level and minor producers of drugs, there is no clear pattern. Bolivia and Thailand experienced no armed conflict; Mexico and Pakistan experienced minor conflicts unrelated geographically to the drug industry; and Laos had a low-intensity conflict involving an opium-producing ethnic minority. Large-scale drug production seems closely related to armed conflict, while minor production is not.

Insurgent Involvement

The empirical experience indicates a strong link between insurgent groups and drug production. Only one insurgent group in the drug-producing countries, Mexico's Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, decidedly avoided involvement in the drug trade. The EZLN received significant external funding in the form of donations etc. and may have anticipated that involvement in the drug trade would jeopardize its significant international goodwill and lead to increased counter-insurgency assistance from the USA to the Mexican government (Dishman,

¹ Data on drug production are unavailable for many countries prior to this period, making a larger historical sample difficult.

² Major producers are understood to be producing over one-third of the global supply of the drug over several years.

2001: 47). In Pakistan, the Mohajir nationalist Mohajir Quami movement was active in Karachi and had no specific link to opium production, though parts of the group engaged in various urban criminal activities. Laos's Hmong minority, inhabiting the country's opium-producing hill areas, has been waging a low-intensity conflict against the communist government since it took power in 1975 (Johnson, 1993; McCoy, 1991). Opium production in Laos peaked in 1989–90, coinciding with the peak of the insurgency, the only two years that it was actually registered in the UCDP data (US Department of State, 1998).

In the four major drug-producing countries, all major non-state actors have been strongly involved in the drug trade. In Afghanistan, this includes Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezbe-Islami (HI) since the 1980s (McCoy, 1991; Cooley, 2002; Griffin, 2001). After the Soviet withdrawal and US disengagement, HI increasingly relied on the drug trade (Rupert & Coll, 1990; Haq, 1996; Ahmad, 2004: 41). Today, HI is again a leading actor in the insurgency and remains deeply involved in the opium trade (Ghafour, 2004a,b; IRIN, 2004; Ahmed, 2004). The Shura-i-Nazar and Jumbush-i-Millli factions of the Northern Alliance have also benefited from taxing or supervising opium production and trade (Goodhand, 2000; US Department of State, 2002). The Taliban movement taxed the opium trade while in opposition and in government, before banning it in 2001 (Cornell, 2005b). Foreign organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, have also been connected with the drug trade in Afghanistan (Makarenko, 2002; Cornell, 2005a).

Tribal independence movements among the hill tribes of eastern Burma after the end of the Second World War increasingly came to be financed through heroin, enabling otherwise impoverished tribal areas to finance armed struggles against the Burmese

state (DEA, 2002: 2; Chouvy, 2002: 78–84; Dupont, 1999: 442). From the 1970s onwards, the heroin industry grew heavily under the control of various warlords, including Luo Xinghan's Kokang Self-Defense Forces and Khun Sa's Shan United Army (Chouvy, 2002: 118; Dupont, 1999: 442; Brown, 1999). After the 1989 splintering of the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) and Khun Sa's surrender in 1996, the drug trade was fragmented as splinter groups took on a greater role, especially the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and splinter Shan nationalist groups (DEA, 2002: 5; Chouvy, 2002: 120).

In Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Army of National Liberation (ELN), as well as right-wing paramilitary forces (AUC), have become heavily involved in the drug trade through alliance and self-involvement (Chalk & Rabasa, 2001). Colombia was first a transit and processing area for Bolivian and Peruvian coca (Craig, 1989: 44). By the early 1980s, coca cultivation spread to Colombia, mainly to FARC-controlled areas, where 80% of Colombia's coca was grown (Labrousse, 2004b: 32–39; Chalk & Rabasa, 2001; Lee, 1988: 99). A recent study found that 47% of coca-growing communities had FARC activity, whereas a control group had only 28%. Likewise, municipalities with coca cultivation experienced an average of 4.2 incidents involving FARC, while the control group had only 1.3 (Díaz & Sánchez, 2004: 53). The ELN long refrained from large-scale involvement in the drug industry, but this restrained policy changed with a succession of leadership in the organization (Chalk & Rabasa, 2001: 33). As for the AUC, its leader Castaño admitted in 2000 that 70% of AUC funding was drug-related (*Economist*, 2000). Colombia provides a clear example of the way in which non-state violent actors have exploited the narcotics industry through protection, taxation and direct involvement to

increase their capabilities and extend the territories under their control.

In Peru, the Maoist guerrilla Sendero Luminoso (SL) launched its insurgency immediately following a process of democratization, largely owing to fear of electoral marginalization (Ron, 2001). The drug trade provided SL with growing military capabilities, enabling it to pose a formidable challenge to the state for a decade. SL moved into the coca-cultivating Upper Huallaga valley area by 1984, established itself as a middleman, charging landing fees for aircraft transporting drugs to Colombia for processing and trafficking northward (Kay, 1999: 102; Tarazona-Sevillano & Reuter, 1990; Palmer, 1992: 70). The normally highly dogmatic Sendero adopted a more flexible and moderate course in its relations with the local population in coca-producing areas (Kay, 1999: 104). As the conflict receded in the 1990s, coca production declined concomitantly. By 1999, it stood at under 40,000 ha, compared to over 100,000 ha in 1992–95.

Motivational Changes: An Unclear Picture

Particularly in Afghanistan and Burma, many non-state violent groups have repeatedly switched allegiances, siding with or against government forces and other non-state actors. Maintenance of organizational autonomy, finances and control over territory seem to have become the major motivational factors for such groups, including those in Colombia. By contrast, Peru's Sendero Luminoso stands out as a continuously ideologically motivated group.

The literature does not allow any straightforward conclusion regarding the drug industry's effect on insurgent motivational structures. Burma is the clearest case of ideological movements losing much of their original purpose (Brown, 1999). The leaderships of many Burmese groups appear to have been increasingly motivated by profit.

On the other hand, no such motivation change can be observed in Peru's SL, Afghanistan's HI, SN and the Taliban, among others, taxed opium production and supervised heroin processing. Changing alliances and allegiances among factions indicates motivations increasingly focused on the pursuit of power rather than ideology, with the possible exception of the Taliban. But no single faction can readily be classified as mainly greedy. The FARC, ELN and AUC in Colombia are closer to the convergence scenario, having entered into alliances with drug cartels, protected and taxed coca cultivation and, over time, increasingly involved themselves in the trade. FARC's involvement with drugs and in abducting people for ransom tends to indicate a gradual change of motivation. That said, parts of the organization may very well remain motivated by ideology.

Conclusions

The link between narcotics and conflict is treated in two separate strains of the theoretical literature: economics and conflict, and the 'crime–terror nexus'. The former has helped establish the existence of a link between conflict and narcotics (as well as other lootable resources); the latter provides important insights into the complex causal mechanisms linking the two. The overwhelming conclusion in the literature is that conditions of armed conflict boost, exacerbate, transform and occasionally shift pre-existing patterns of narcotics production. Where narcotics production exists, armed conflict is likely to fundamentally alter its dynamics – and to be fundamentally altered itself. Where the opportunity of involvement in narcotics arises, most insurgent groupings in prolonged armed conflict seem to seize that opportunity. This expands their capabilities and compounds the challenge they pose to states.

Perhaps the most dangerous impact of the link between narcotics and conflict is the potential for changing motivational structures within insurgent groups arising from involvement in the drug trade. Increasing drug production in situations of civil war creates economic functions of violence for actors on both sides of the conflict and, hence, incentives for the continuation of conflict. Motivational changes do not occur in all cases but have important implications, as they fundamentally change the dynamics of conflict. The interaction between narcotics and armed conflict is more complex than it seems at first glance, but it has important implications for strategies of conflict resolution as well as for counter-narcotics efforts.

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