

Future Engagement with the Taliban on Drug Control and Organised Crime – mapping the Taliban’s views, international options and alternative approaches¹

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Summary

With the Taliban capturing control of Afghanistan, what the new regime will mean for illicit economies in the country, the region and the global community more broadly, and how they may evolve in the future, is the subject of this analysis. As Afghanistan’s cooperation at a regional level to prevent drug trafficking and other illicit flows will have major implications for regional crime and security policies and, by extension, geopolitical stability, it is vital to map what potential scenarios and options member states and multilateral bodies have for engagement with the new Taliban regime. This briefing note will highlight a number of key points. First, analysis of Afghanistan’s future engagement with the UN drug control and anti-organised crime systems requires a greater awareness and understanding of its historical role within these multilateral frameworks.

1 For the full research report, see Collins, J & Tennant, I (2022). *Evaluating Afghanistan’s past, present and future engagement with multilateral drug control*. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 6, Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.

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Second, that civil society development, alongside a more sensitive global approach to illicit economies in Afghanistan, is key for better outcomes. Third, that Afghanistan is in many ways beholden to broader changes within global drug markets and that these may prove as, if not more, consequential for its future role within the global illicit economy. Fourth, that the international community needs to seek pragmatic engagement with the new regime where possible if it is to have any hope of achieving complementary policy goals, and indeed needs to try and shape the behaviour of the new regime in areas such as human rights. Fifth, political obstacles remain a key impediment to achieving western policy goals and may result in a frozen diplomatic conflict.

Background

With the fall of Kabul in August 2021 the Taliban swept back to power with almost shocking speed and coherence, following two decades of intervention and state-building efforts by NATO powers which sought to forestall precisely this outcome. With the failure of a direct intervention strategy, questions quickly re-emerged over what the shape of Afghanistan's drug policies would be and how it would possibly engage with multilateral forums such as the United Nations. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) had been a key entry point for an otherwise pariah state during the late 1990s as the Taliban sought legitimacy through drug control. The alignment between Sharia Law's views on drugs and the international community's century-long effort to restrict and prohibit drugs such as opium caused a confluence of events which had led to the outright ban on opium cultivation in 2000, which produced a rapid collapse in cultivation but only lasted until the regime's toppling by NATO in late 2001 following the September 11 attacks. Questions about the motives and sustainability of the Taliban's approach thereby remain. In particular, commentators have questioned whether it was simply an effort to drive up prices while canvassing the international community for economic assistance.⁶

Following two decades of broadly failed state-building efforts and an explosion of opium cultivation even under direct NATO occupation, questions about the possibility of reducing Afghanistan's enormous reliance on the opium trade loom as large today as they did in the 1990s. Billions of dollars have been spent on counter-narcotics efforts, running the full gambit of strict enforcement, crop destruction, development support and 'alternative development' programmes, specifically aimed at enabling communities to shift away from a reliance on opium cultivation. In Afghanistan, none of these seemed to offer long-term sustainable results during the NATO occupation of 2001-21.

Following the NATO withdrawal, Afghanistan's potential engagement with multilateral drug control remains unclear. The same impediments to UN engagement and international legitimacy, which saw its office in New York closed in February 2001,⁷ remain forefront. Not least, its abysmal record on women's and girls' rights which make engagement with the regime particularly unpalatable for western liberal governments. Alongside this, the question of whether it has learned its lesson from the hosting of terrorist organisations in the 1990s up to 2001 remains to be answered.

Despite these well-known issues, however, the reality of Afghanistan's linchpin status within the global drugs trade remains. It is the

6 Collins, J & Tennant, I (2022). *Evaluating Afghanistan's past, present and future engagement with multilateral drug control*. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 6, Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.

7 Reuters (2001). 'U.S. Tells Taliban to Close New York Office'. *The New York Times*, 10 February 2001, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/10/world/us-tells-taliban-to-close-new-york-office.html>.

epicentre of organic heroin production and some, controversially, suggest an increasing role in the global methamphetamine market.⁸ Whether, how and with what leverage, Afghanistan and UN member states can find a way to discuss, manage, cooperate, or continue conflict over the country's drug policies is an inescapable problem for the UN drug control system and anti-organised crime treaty frameworks. The April 2022 announcement of the reintroduction of an opium production ban by the Taliban has raised as many questions as it has answered and leaves the key enquiry of the early 2000s in place: is this a sustainable and sincere government policy, or an opportunistic or impossible intervention? Answering these questions and examining how these scenarios could play out is the focus of this policy briefing note.

Key findings

1: Historical revisions

Contemporary policy analyses and literature reviews continue to portray Afghanistan as a passive client state, oscillating between different regulatory approaches depending on international sticks and carrots. The question of Afghanistan's role within the international drug control system is one that is widely ignored by existing literature and policy analyses or treated as beginning in the 1990s. In reality, international drug control is a century-old endeavour and Afghanistan's relation to international drug diplomacy was not just a dialectic between national and international; Afghanistan was also a triangulating force, a by-product of strategic posturing among other states and at times an active spoiler in that posturing. Afghanistan's position as a spoiler in global regulatory efforts, with both its sporadic desire to be recognised as a licit producer and its repeated and ultimately explosive role as a centre of illicit production, derived from the same basic regulatory paradox – Afghanistan, with very minimal

exceptions, such as 2000-01, lacked the state capacity to enforce either regulation or prohibition of its opium markets over the past century.⁹

2: Civil society

As discussions begin on trying to restart some of the old UN-Afghanistan drugs processes, such as the Paris Pact; regional UNODC work; or monitoring mechanisms involving law enforcement, we must recognise that under the current UN terms of engagement in Afghanistan, they take place without a real voice for the recipient government, or indeed local people. And even when direct capacity building and technical assistance can start, UNODC must consider human rights issues around training the Taliban networks on drugs enforcement, or helping them monitor farms, or bringing them funding for technology to aid enforcement. There is a need to engage broader society voices in discussions, to ensure more continuity is built into the system – as relationships built with the old regime have collapsed. International engagement and capacity building should be predicated on a re-centring towards community-based approaches, not just law enforcement and traditional 'alternative development' programmes, both of which have been shown to be lacking in effective outcomes. Further, human rights risks have been widely associated with old enforcement-focused activities, and this undermines the legitimacy and long-term efficacy of western interventions and policy goals.

3. Sustainable development and macro-market adjustments

One consistent theme that was highlighted in interviews was that of the macro trends in the global drug economy beyond the Taliban's control. The research suggests that a significant, and perhaps under-appreciated, challenge faced by the Afghan drug economy is the modernisation of

8 GSP-GI-TOC SOC ACE Afghanistan Paper.

9 Collins, J (2021). *Legalising the Drug Wars: A Regulatory History of UN Drug Control* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/legalising-the-drug-wars/2FDCC2BD70C3AF8E209C0B0ED20269A8>.

drug markets.¹⁰ With the shift towards fentanyl and other synthetic drugs in western markets, analysts are increasingly questioning the future sustainability of organic drug economies, particular ones based on opium. If the global opioid economy continues to shift in a synthetic direction, the importance of government policy and state enforcement could collapse in the face of market changes which destroy the economic fundamentals of Afghanistan's drugs trade.

This remains a big 'if', however. Others question whether Afghanistan's ephedra-derived methamphetamines can become a significant part of global markets. We encountered diverging opinions on this during interviews. Some point to the emergence of 'Afghan meth' in far-flung markets such as the African continent. Others suggest such an outcome unlikely, pointing to Afghan meth's inferior quality and inability to compete with South East Asian supply chains with their plentiful supply of high-quality precursor chemicals. Again, governments and multilateral bodies will probably need to serve as spectators in a macro-market trend beyond much of their control. Whether, and in which direction, both forces may serve as a driver towards member state engagement with the Taliban regime also remains to be seen.

4: Finding scope for pragmatic engagement

Whatever the intentions behind the Taliban's April 2022 announcement, the economic and social realities, and the prospect of a rapid financial collapse of Afghanistan may challenge this declaration of intention very soon. The abrupt interruption of international assistance reinforces and accelerates this dependence on the illegal economy.

Over the last two decades the business model of the Taliban has been based on a narcotic economy. Taxing drug cultivation, production and trafficking was its major source of income. Revenues from drugs have paid for patronage and weapons, corrupted all levels of government,

and benefited the Taliban's rural constituency. Western governments ultimately have to choose between an absolute policy of non-recognition or finding some pragmatic ways to engage with and thereby influence the Taliban's behaviour.

A number of people interviewed for the research highlighted the belief that the Taliban had evolved over the past two decades and represented a broader constituency of interests than the regime of the 1990s. Indeed, some indicated that the key threat for the new regime came not from modernising forces within the country, but reactionary views which perceived the regime as entertaining too liberal a worldview. This suggests a potential entry point for western governments to operate financial and diplomatic sticks and carrots in a way that draws out preferred behaviour and actively dissuades the Taliban from its worst impulses.

5: Political obstacles will be key

A repeated theme of discussions with western-based experts interviewed for this work was the view that a lack of political will in the West risked the emergence of a frozen diplomatic conflict. For example, dynamics in the US, a key actor in any potential diplomatic détente, would mitigate any such cooling. Republicans in the US maintain a political incentive to use the botched withdrawal as a foreign policy stick against the current administration, while having no incentive towards engaging with the new regime. Meanwhile, Democrats face a challenge from their progressive wing if they seek to engage a regime with such abhorrent approaches to women's and LGBTQ rights among others. Moreover, both parties are united in their collective desire to move beyond the US' two decades-long effort with state building, costing thousands of US lives and hundreds of billions of dollars in treasure.

European Union governments and the UK, meanwhile, remain torn between various competing agendas, including the overarching concern for human rights, but also recognising their geographic proximity to the Afghan drug

¹⁰ Interview with Vanda Felbab-Brown, 22 February 2022.

trade and the impacts this will have on security and health policies in their cities and regional neighbourhoods. Moreover, Afghanistan's potential relationship with Russia is a complicating factor and it remains unclear as to which direction it can take. Would it encourage the West to overlook its human rights concerns out of deference to preventing Russia developing too strong a foothold? Or would Afghanistan be drawn towards the Russian sphere of influence and become entwined with the new sanctions regime? Lastly, will the West, given the continued emergence of a clear multipolar order, be willing to leave Afghanistan to Russian and/or Chinese influence? This raises the important question of how far western norms will continue to outweigh realpolitik in an era of multipolarity.

Implications

According to UNODC, the overall income generated by domestic consumption, production, and exports of opiates within Afghanistan in 2019 was worth \$1.2 to \$2.1 billion. The profits are even bigger for revenue from trafficking downstream, through Central Asia into Russia or via Iran and Turkey through the Western Balkans and into Western Europe. Considering this, it seems unlikely that the new regime will be able to shift rapidly from an unlawful economic dynamic to a 'virtuous' one. On the contrary, we are likely to see the continuation and perpetuation of a system based on the production and trade of narcotics. For the Taliban this economical model has proven its efficiency (a high demand-high income perspective for a low risk-low investment consequence); it has deeply shaped the local social fabric, and patronage networks around the country; and is closely integrated into a network of international criminal actors.

The opium and methamphetamine dilemmas are therefore unlikely to be structurally resolved in the immediate term. While we await the

implementation and outcomes of a new Taliban poppy ban, history suggests the results are likely to be short-lived and establish centrifugal forces which may ultimately weaken the ban or see it fall into disfavour. Precious few examples exist of successful opium prohibitions. Most of what occurred happened under totalitarian regimes, and the results proved transient. The most successful long-term intervention, that of Thailand's sustainable development interventions in its golden triangle region, were the result of decades of investment, state building and population support.¹¹ In so many ways one cannot expect a similar outcome for Afghanistan within any realistic timeline.

Alongside the changes within Afghanistan, so too the international drug control and anti-organised crime regimes have evolved tremendously. The century-old treaty system is undergoing a significant period of fragmentation and, arguably, evolution towards a drug regime complex.¹² Among key protagonists, such as the US and European governments, decades of experience with deeply ineffectual counter-narcotics and alternative development policies within Afghanistan have seriously altered the appetite for direct drug policy intervention. As such, a range of potential future policy scenarios can be envisioned. Simultaneously, the legalisation of cannabis in North, Central and South America and now within Europe, raises significant questions about the evolution of the global drug control system and its application to pariah states like Afghanistan.

For the UN drug control and anti-organised crime systems, the relationships built up over many years with the old regime are now worthless, and Taliban perspectives on international assistance and the multilateral order mean it is unlikely to readily lend itself to restarting old approaches. The West cannot expect them to engage with the old programmes as the previous regime did. Moreover, western governments can hardly be sanguine about the efficacy or outcomes

11 Collins J et al. (2021). 'From Illicit to Value Added: The Lessons of Community and Institutional Change in Northern Thailand's Opium Growing Regions', *LSE Public Policy Review*, 1(3) (5 March 2021): 5, <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.18>.

12 Collins, J (2022). *Legalising the Drug Wars: A Regulatory History of UN Drug Control*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

of so many of these western and UN-backed programmes. At the same time, the Taliban cannot be engaged in the same way as Mexico or Colombia, as prominent producer countries which possess clear political aims on drug policy and an ability and willingness to articulate these aims in international forums and shape international policy responses based on them. As such, we are embarking on a new era of international drug control with the new Taliban regime in place.

History has many important lessons to teach us about what we potentially can and cannot expect from this, but provides precious few answers as to what the outcomes will be. Member states will need to be vigilant about changes within Afghanistan's drug markets as well as in looking for mechanisms to positively influence the situation on the ground for affected communities.

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