



## Policy analysis

## States simply do not care: The failure of international securitisation of drug control in Afghanistan



Jorrit Kamminga\*

Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, Clingendael 7, 2597 VH The Hague, the Netherlands

## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Illicit drugs  
Afghanistan  
Securitisation  
Security  
Drug prohibition  
International regime  
'War on Drugs'

## ABSTRACT

The link between the world drug problem and securitisation has been predominantly established to argue that an existential threat discourse reinforces the international prohibitionist regime and makes it harder for alternative policy models to arise. This analysis is problematic for three main reasons. Firstly, it overestimates the current strength of the international drug control regime as a normative and regulatory system that prescribes state behaviour. Secondly, the current international regime does not inhibit policy reforms. While the international treaty system proves resistant to change, it is at the national and local levels where new drug policies arise. Moreover, these are generally not the draconian or emergency measures that successful securitisation would predict. Thirdly, the analysis so far misinterprets criminalisation or militarisation as evidence of securitisation. As the case of Afghanistan shows, securitisation attempts, such as those linking the Taliban and the illicit opium economy, may have reinforced the militarisation of drug control in Afghanistan, but did not elevate the illicit drug economy as an external threat or a top priority. While there have been short-lived spikes of attention and provincial level campaigns to eradicate poppy cultivation, these have never translated into a sustained structural effort to combat illicit drugs in Afghanistan. Even the latest push for militarisation, the US-led campaign of airstrikes on drug processing laboratories since November 2017, represents more a shift in counter-insurgency strategy than successful securitisation. While Afghanistan's illicit drug economy has been politicised for several reasons, states are not convinced that this economy somehow represents an existential threat to their survival.

## Introduction

Several attempts have been made in recent years to link securitisation specifically with the world drug problem (Buxton, 2015; Crick, 2012; Fukumi, 2008; Herschinger, 2011; Kushlick, 2011). This can be considered as part of a wider trend to broaden the scope of security studies, that especially started after the Cold War. Fukumi (2008, p. 22) writes: "As communism as a threat disappeared from political and security spheres, there have been movements to include unconventional issues into the security sphere, such as the environment, organised crime, and migration."

Securitisation was defined by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998, pp. 23–25) as presenting an issue as an existential threat, creating the need for the adoption of emergency measures and actions that go beyond the normal boundaries of political options states have at their disposal. The existential threat to the state (or a group of states) might not be real, but it is presented in this way. Successful securitisation is achieved when a securitising actor (not necessarily a state actor) presents an issue as an existential threat (the "securitising move") and

convinces an audience that the issue indeed presents such a threat.

Using more traditional terms, what securitisation essentially does, is turn an issue from 'low politics' into 'high politics'; a useful but admittedly somewhat arbitrary division (Hanrieder, 1991, pp. 149–151). High politics can be considered to refer to issues that directly or indirectly deal with the survival of the state (e.g. security and military concerns). These lead to 'Hobbesian' types of behaviour that allow states to pursue their national interest. In contrast, low politics generally includes areas that are not essential to the state's survival (e.g. economic and cultural issues). Successful securitisation would essentially move the world drug problem from low to high politics if audiences are convinced that the existential threat to the state is real.

## The weakness of the international drug control regime

The global drug control regime can be considered as an international regime in the definition of Krasner (Krasner, 1995, p. 2; Bewley-Taylor, 2012, p. 4; Kamminga, 2001). While the regime does not determine specific outcomes, it channels political action and structures

\* Correspondence to: Bontweverij 108, 7511 RK Enschede, the Netherlands.  
E-mail address: [jkamminga@clingendael.org](mailto:jkamminga@clingendael.org).

ongoing processes of coordination, cooperation and policy coherence. The instrumental framework of the regime, and particularly the underlying treaty system, still get official backing from most member states of the United Nations. This means most countries at the international level still generally agree on the need to control certain substances and their trade. Yet, as [Jelsma \(2013\)](#) explains, there are serious “cracks in the Viennese Consensus”, which is understood as the international treaty system that is coordinated by international institutions in Vienna. These cracks are caused by deviating local and national policies including those for cannabis in states like Colorado and Washington ([Walsh, 2013](#)), new regulatory models in Bolivia ([Farthing & Ledebur, 2015](#)) and Uruguay ([Walsh & Ramsey, 2016](#)), various harm reduction practices such as the cannabis clubs in Spain ([Murkin, 2015](#)), and the emergence of new thinking about drug control at international fora such as the [Global Commission on Drug Policy \(2011\)](#) and the Organisation of American States ([Insulza, 2013](#)).

While these deviations are still mostly limited to cannabis, harm reduction policies and to traditional use of coca leaves, it is exemplary for the weakness of the international drug control regime in terms of coordinating (or even prescribing) state behaviour. While one of the basic functions of the international regime is to coordinate state behaviour, drug policies increasingly vary significantly from country to country, from region to region, and from city to city. Therefore, instead of the reinforcement of drug control as an *idée fixe* at the international level, it is more likely that, in the future, more deviation from the international treaties will take place at the local and national level. This has also been shown comprehensively by [Bewley-Taylor \(2003, 2012\)](#) who identifies a trend of ‘soft deviation’ from the treaties and predicts more pragmatic approaches to drug use, which will either lead to more changes within the regime or result in more defections from it.

Such developments could lead to a new type of consensus at the international level, and could result in new or modified treaties. If it leads to a new set of shared international principles and norms, it will result in a new international regime ([Krasner, 1995, p. 4](#)). Based on the principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention, the treaties in themselves are and were never binding, which means that the current drug control regime does not involve obligations of states, but rather only commitments. There may be moral obligations involved, but these reflect more the principles and norms of the international regime, and not necessarily rules that states should follow or actions they should take.

### Securitisation and drug control

[Crick \(2012\)](#) has analysed how the issue of drugs has been securitised at the national and international level. Her three case studies were the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the US National Security Directive 221 and Russia’s 2009 ‘Rainbow-2’ plan targeting opium production in Afghanistan as a “threat to global peace and security”. She concludes (p. 414) that the securitisation of the issue of drugs functions as a mechanism to increase states’ adherence to the global drug control framework and reconfirm their allegiance to the prohibitionist character of this international regime: “Instead of looking at how to desecuritize drugs, the international community has introduced new securitisations each time a new threat is identified. It seems the international community continues to be hooked on the ‘drugs as a threat’ discourse.” However, for her analysis to work, it requires a) a very strong international regime in terms of its normative powers; b) no or few deviations from the international regime and c) international consensus on the international policy framework. The international community should show a high degree of consensus that goes beyond merely agreeing to control certain substances.

[Herschinger \(2011, pp. 33–59\)](#) has analysed how the political discourse of the ‘War on Drugs’ and the ‘War on Terror’ has been constructed, how both discourses relate to each other, and how their construction has led to a certain type of policy at the international level.

In her view, it is the construction of the political discourse of the ‘war’ that has turned both issues into international threats to national state security. Her analysis describes how ‘hegemonic orders’ are established in the form of internationally accepted, dominant political discourse on the challenges of terrorism and drug use that translate into an authoritative, common understanding of these international problems and a legitimisation of certain policies to address them at the international level. [Herschinger’s](#) analysis is valid when it comes to portraying the international drug control framework as an international regime, but even if this regime produces a common understanding of certain challenges, it does not automatically mean that it is strong enough to dictate policy responses that favour extraordinary measures to tackle the illegal drugs economy.

[Buxton \(2015, p. 15\)](#) connects securitisation with militarisation and describes the US ‘war on drugs’ as “an escalation of military-based ‘at source’ responses overseas.” According to her, securitisation institutionalised the influence of the US security and defence sectors in planning and implementing counter-narcotics policy overseas (p. 16). What she effectively describes, however, is the massive militarisation of drug policy and not securitisation. As the analysis of the case of Afghanistan will show further below, militarisation of counter-narcotics efforts has indeed taken place and continues today. However, the illicit drug economy was never among the primary targets of the international military, and the role of the latter in counter-narcotics has continued to be mostly indirect.

Nevertheless, states may have successfully presented the drug problem as a threat because of the violence related to drugs ([Williams, 2011, p. 268](#)) or other concerns, but it is unlikely that they have presented it successfully as an existential threat to the survival or functioning ([Williams, 2011, p. 267](#)) of the state. Admittedly, it depends from audience to audience to judge whether some degree of securitisation may have been successful. For example, when the US Congress approved certain drug policy measures, whether inside or outside of the US, it (or some members) may have been convinced by those presenting the drug problem as an existential threat.

With such, more limited audiences, a certain degree of securitisation may temporarily have been successful, but not at a broader regional or global level. Arguing, as [Kushlick \(2011\)](#) does, that ‘mankind’ (as a referent object) was successfully securitised by the 1961 Convention because it presented the ‘evil’ of drug addiction as an existential threat, may sound convincing as a theoretical form of ‘meta-securitisation’ in which global prohibition of illicit drugs then is presented as the extraordinary measure jointly taken by all states. Yet, this argument is only valid if all states would be equally convinced that prohibition is necessary because of an existential threat to their survival. In reality, probably none are, as it would result in a very strong international drug control regime that would effectively prevent alternative policies from emerging. Prohibition or criminalisation, in the sense of turning illicit drug cultivation or production into a crime, by themselves do not constitute securitisation.

Certain types of political discourse have undoubtedly resulted in the promotion of specific drug control policies and perhaps also in the reinforcement of the current international drug control regime. It is highly doubtful, however, that this represents successful securitisation. Extreme policies have been carried out, including, for example, the execution of drug traffickers in countries such as China, Iran and Saudi Arabia ([Gallahue et al., 2012](#)) the widespread use of SWAT teams in low-level drug raids in the US ([American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\), 2014](#)), the use of the Afghan military in manually eradicating opium poppy ([Spiller, 2017](#)) and the massive spraying of drug crops in Colombia ([Eventon & Bewley-Taylor, 2016](#)).

Such policies can undoubtedly be considered as outside the boundaries of regular public policies and they have serious human rights implications. Yet instead of aiming at protecting the state from collapse, these policies rather seem to be extreme or militarised answers (ineffective, disproportionate or counterproductive as they may be) to

the continued criminalisation of drugs and the huge illegal economy that this criminalisation has helped to sustain. If the illegal drug economy would indeed be perceived as a serious threat to the survival of the state, one would expect countries to go even further, and especially also in their foreign policies towards countries where illicit drugs are produced, such as Afghanistan.

### Securitisation attempts in Afghanistan

Afghanistan offers an example of international attempts to securitise the opium industry through the political rhetoric of linking illicit drugs with insurgency and terrorism. While this political rhetoric existed, hardly any drastic or emergency measures were taken by the Afghan government or the international community beyond the above-mentioned involvement of the military in manual eradication and the limited, indirect involvement of NATO forces in interdiction efforts.

Adopted before 9/11, [UN Security Council Resolution 1333 \(2000\)](#) seems to portray tackling the illicit drug economy as high politics. It called on member states to engage in a diplomatic and economic boycott of the Taliban regime as long as it did not halt its “illegal drugs activities and work to virtually eliminate the illicit cultivation of opium poppy, the proceeds of which finance Taliban terrorist activities.” However, the resolution also accused the Taliban of support to international terrorism, and the violation of human rights and international humanitarian law, which shows how unique this situation was. The political sanctions would probably never have been called for if Afghanistan had only violated international drug treaties. Nevertheless, the resolution is one of the first international political statements that clearly establishes the link between opium and terror.

Following 9/11, the Bonn Conference in December 2001 proclaimed counter-narcotics assistance as one of the key priorities for the international community in Afghanistan ([United Nations, 2001](#)). The United Kingdom was appointed lead nation for international counter-narcotics assistance and policy in Afghanistan. By the time NATO took the lead over the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in 2003, the Afghan (interim) government had declared a ban on opium, and started implementing a counter-narcotics strategy, relying mostly on (rather limited) crop eradication campaigns, interdiction and alternative livelihood projects. One could argue that this shows the strength of the international drug control regime as Afghanistan’s drug control strategy quickly fitted the mould of the so-called balanced approach of demand and supply reduction, with the latter having components of development, law enforcement and interdiction. Given the unequal relationship of financial and technical dependence, however, Afghanistan also had few opportunities to design its own counter-narcotics policies outside of the international regime.

But despite financial commitments and political rhetoric, the Afghan opium problem was initially largely under-prioritised by the international community given the more urgent concerns about how to transition from the Taliban regime towards a new stable political arrangement ([Kamminga & Hussain, 2012](#), p. 99). This did not change when the security situation started to deteriorate, especially between 2005 and 2006 ([Jones, 2008](#)). Towards the end of the security transition process in Afghanistan (2011–2014), counter-narcotics had further decreased on the ladder of priorities ([Sopko, 2014](#)). Despite general agreement that the Afghan opium economy was a key driver of conflict and source of instability ([Blanchard, 2009](#)), the US military, NATO and the ISAF mission did not really get involved in counter-narcotics policy, which would have been a clear indication of successful securitisation.

The military’s contribution generally did not go beyond a relatively small and indirect support role, consisting mainly of intelligence gathering, technical assistance and coordination of logistical operations ([Kamminga & Hussain, 2012](#), p. 92). The general directive of ISAF initially was that its mandate did not include any direct military action against narcotics targets such as traffickers and laboratories. Even this modest support role came with clear limits: “While ISAF must perform

these duties, NATO-led forces must also avoid becoming so entangled in counter-narcotics activities that their ability to implement key tasks is undermined” ([Mikhos, 2006](#)). This meant the international military could use part of its on-the-ground capabilities and intelligence to support the Afghan government’s counter-narcotics endeavours, but without getting heavily involved ([Kamminga & Hussain, 2012](#), p. 102).

One consistent attempt to securitise the Afghan opium economy came from UNODC’s former Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa ([Chouvy, 2009](#), p. 59). His preface to *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006* ([United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC, 2006](#), p. iii) addressed the issue of insurgents reaping the profits of the illegal opium economy and in the following years, he reinforced this narrative of linking opium to terror. Costa highlighted the “symbiotic relationship” ([Costa, 2007](#)) between drug traffickers, insurgents and terrorist groups such as the Taliban and Al Qaeda. He directly called on NATO to support counter-narcotics efforts as “(...) drug trafficking and insurgency live off of each other” ([UNODC, 2007](#), p. iv). On the military side, General Dan McNeill, commander of ISAF between February 2007 and June 2008, actively raised these concerns as well and, within the limits of the ISAF mandate, pushed for more military engagement on counter-narcotics policy. He *inter alia* remarked: “when I see a poppy field, I see it turning into money and then into IEDs [improvised explosive devices] and Kalashnikovs” ([UNODC, 2008a, 2008b](#)) and “illegal narcotics is the insurgency” ([NATO, May 2008](#)).

### Spikes of attention for counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan

The securitisation moves of Costa and General McNeill did not lead to securitisation but got stuck at the level of politicisation: As such, they can nonetheless be considered as influential as they helped to put or keep illicit drugs on the political agenda in Afghanistan. While it never became a top priority, it must be said that counter-narcotics policy did lead to various spikes of attention and to the implementation of serious counter-narcotics activities and campaigns across the country.

One of these spikes occurred after 2004, when UNODC reported a 64 per cent increase in poppy cultivation to 131,000 ha ([United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC, 2004](#), p. 1). This rise triggered much more international commitment, especially in the US, but also resulted in the Afghan government giving counter-narcotics policy a higher priority ([Mansfield, 2016](#), pp. 148–151). An important increase in funding from the US resulted in more support for (provincial level) eradication efforts ([US Government Accountability Office, 2006](#), p. 3). One of the most tangible results was an opium ban in the eastern province of Nangarhar in 2015, which managed to reduce poppy cultivation by 96 per cent ([United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC, 2005](#), p. 29). Although the temporary success of the ban seems to have been especially the result of favourable domestic political, economic and agricultural factors ([Mansfield, 2016](#), pp. 152, 153), the higher prioritisation found at the international level also played an important role, for example, in the form of development assistance as a lever for reductions at the local level ([Mansfield & Pain, 2008](#), p. 8). For a second opium ban during the 2007/2008 growing season, domestic conditions again seemed to have been leading, but international factors did play a bigger role, especially in the form of an increased US military presence in the province ([Mansfield, 2016](#), p. 161).

On a few occasions, the higher prioritisation of counter-narcotics efforts was embodied into ambitious programmes. One clear example is the Helmand Food Zone programme that started in 2008 with vast funding from the UK and the US. It consisted of a comprehensive series of internationally supported interventions that intended to transition an area of the province from an opium poppy-based economy to a licit agricultural economy. The spike of investment in rural development that backed this programme, however, cannot be separated from the broader surge of counter-insurgency operations and the arrival of more UK troops to Helmand province in previous years. The Food Zone

programme was successful in temporarily decreasing poppy cultivation, but these decreases were offset by increases in areas outside of the programme area and the programme failed to fundamentally change the socioeconomic and institutional conditions in the province (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2005, p. 100). In fact, the programme may have had some serious unintentional consequences that could have increased the province's capacity to cultivate opium poppy (Mansfield, 2017, pp. 40–42).

Spikes of attention and prioritisation produced temporarily gains. For example, in 2006 and 2007 significantly higher levels of poppy eradication were reported but these again dropped in 2008 (UNODC, 2008a, 2008b, p. 74). However, in Afghanistan these spikes have so far never produced sustainable reductions in levels of illicit poppy cultivation, neither at provincial nor at the aggregate national level. Although reductions of hectares of poppy cultivation should not be used as the only measure of performance (Mansfield & Pain, 2008, p. 3) it is precisely the indicator most used at the international political level where commitment and strategic prioritisation are determined from year to year. Spikes of attention have generally not lasted longer than a few years and have been mostly related to provincial or regional efforts in the broader context of counter-insurgency campaigns. Despite often huge increases in funding and operational capacity on the ground, these spikes did not build up to a sustained effort and never turned counter-narcotics policy into a top political priority.

### Militarisation of drug control in Afghanistan

Early in the international intervention in Afghanistan there were signs of militarisation of counter-narcotics efforts. From 2003 onwards, support from the UK and the US helped establish Task Force-333, a specialised paramilitary unit responsible for destroying heroin laboratories (SIGAR, 2018, p. 41). Following a change of the US military guidelines in March 2005, there was an increase in militarisation, as US forces were enabled to provide support for counter-narcotics operations (Felbab-Brown, 2010, p. 141). Between 2005 and 2013, the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) also ran its Foreign-Deployed Advisory and Support Team (FAST), which involved DEA agents participating in raids with Afghan or US special forces (SIGAR, 2018, p. 48).

In October 2008, an Informal Meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in Budapest broadened the directive of NATO's role in counter-narcotics assistance to allow a more pro-active involvement, including the possibility to take military action against insurgency-linked narcotics targets (Belkin and Morelli, p. 15). Despite the fact that this resulted in some more action, including the confiscation of opium, and the identification and dismantling of heroin laboratories (NATO, 2009), it did not produce a watershed moment as the support policies remained indirect and within the existing operational plan (NATO, October 2008).

In 2008, the US National Security Council established the Afghan Threat Finance Cell (ATFC) to target the financial flows related to terrorism, the illicit drug economy and corruption (SIGAR, 2018, p. 50). Run by the DEA and with support of the US Treasury and Department of Defense, the ATFC was the result of increasing concerns about the links between the insurgency and illicit drug economy (SIGAR, 2018, p. 70).

In turn, ISAF created the Combined Joint Interagency Task Force (CJIATF) Shafafiyat in August 2010 to address corruption. This Task Force included a sub-unit, CJIATF-Nexus, to coordinate military and civilian efforts to combat drug trafficking related to the insurgency and corruption (SIGAR, 2018, p. 73).

While the increased role for the military in support of counter-narcotics policies may have temporarily resulted in more drug seizures (SIGAR, 2018, p. 73), the overall impact of these interdiction efforts remain rather limited given the size and scope of the Afghan opium economy (Nopens, 2010).

### What successful securitisation would have looked like in Afghanistan

If securitisation would have been successful in Afghanistan, the counter-narcotics support policy of the international community would have received a much higher priority since 2001. It would have been a separate strategic objective of the highest political and military priority instead of merely being subordinated within broader development, state building or counter-insurgency objectives. As part of these broader strategies, the attention given to counter-narcotics was inherently limited and the international support role was kept mostly indirect and restricted. For example, as part of counter-insurgency strategy, counter-narcotics did not receive the full backing of the international military as participation in eradication efforts could alienate the population and lose the community support that was so essential for the success of that strategy (Felbab-Brown, 2010, pp. 141, 142). Similarly, much of the state building efforts depended on establishing alliances with regional and local power holders, actors that are crucial for the success of any eradication campaign (Mansfield, 2016, p. 283-5), but whose broader interests and priorities also had to be taken into account for the success of other development programmes.

Successful securitisation would have enabled both civilian and military actors to go beyond their mostly indirect and restricted support role. Despite the limited international militarisation of counter-narcotics efforts mentioned above, it is telling that not even the military troop surge under president Obama resulted in a more direct and structural support strategy. Sending in an additional 30,000 American soldiers, and mostly to the southern provinces where most poppies are cultivated, could have been considered a "(...) golden opportunity to address the opium problem" (Aikins, 2014). However, as the evaluation of counter-narcotics efforts conducted by SIGAR shows, there was temporarily more alignment between the DEA and the Department of Defense after 2010, which resulted in significantly more interdiction (SIGAR, 2018, p. 53). Nevertheless, as the same evaluation shows, the drawdown of international forces from 2011 onwards put counter-narcotics efforts again on the backburner (pp. 54, 55) until the more recent increase from 2017 onwards.

Successful securitisation would probably also have resulted in the implementation of one of the most draconian drug policies, the aerial spraying of opium poppies. This strategy is a classic example of what critics (Jelsma, 2001) call the militarisation of drug policy or simply the 'war on drugs'. Despite a push from the US to implement spraying in Afghanistan, there was no international consensus on this policy (Chouvy, 2009, pp. 113, 114) and the Afghan government disagreed with it (Cook, 2012, p. 166; Mansfield, 2016, p. 149).

Instead of spraying or further militarization, the US in fact abandoned support for large-scale eradication efforts altogether in 2009 (Felbab-Brown, 2010, p. 155). With only limited manual eradication and interdiction measures, Afghanistan's counter-narcotics strategy since 2003 never produced a sustainable reduction of illicit opium cultivation (Kamminga & Hussain, 2012, p. 95). Analysing the annual opium surveys of UNODC, in each consecutive year after 2012, crop eradication was never more than 3.5 per cent of the nett poppy cultivation levels encountered. Similarly, overall interdiction efforts have had only very limited impact despite large investments (Byrd, 2008, p. 19; SIGAR, 2017b, p. 193).

The other strategy, alternative development, also did not produce structural impact beyond a relatively small number of projects with limited numbers of beneficiaries (Felbab-Brown, 2016). Overall, this strategy is also receiving very little funding. Between 2002 and 2013, alternative development-related disbursements of countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) accounted for \$245 million per year, the equivalent of just 0.2 per cent of global development assistance (Me & Kamminga, 2018, p. 5). Because of the very limited impact of eradication, interdiction and alternative development, the illegal opium economy was able to grow

to record levels of both poppy cultivation and opium production that are much higher than the pre-2001 period.

Expenditure on counter-narcotics has been substantial. According to the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR, 2017a, p. 186), the US alone, spent on average roughly \$566 million per year between 2002 and 2016. Political rhetoric has also constantly stressed the importance of tackling Afghanistan's illegal opium economy. But despite continued political and financial commitments, there does not seem to be a robust international support policy. In contrast, in recent years, there seems to be a disengagement from counter-narcotics policy in Afghanistan, in parallel with the withdrawal of international forces and civilian personnel from 2011 onwards (Byrd, 2013; Kamminga, 2013; Sopko, 2014).

Lastly, what about Russia's Rainbow-2 plan for Afghanistan, mentioned by Crick as evidence of successful securitisation? This plan, in 2014 succeeded by Rainbow-3, in fact clearly shows the failure of securitisation. It unsuccessfully called for more eradication of poppy cultivation, more attention to Afghanistan's opium economy in the UN Security Council, a huge job creation programme and the inclusion within the mandate of ISAF of the "competence and obligation to eradicate opium poppy crops."

What we have seen instead is *laissez faire*: In 2017, illicit poppy cultivation increased by 63 percent to an astonishing 328,000 ha, while the potential opium production increased 87 percent to an estimated 9,000 metric tonnes (UNODC, 2017). The number of poppy-free provinces decreased to 10 (out of 34) and the level of crop eradication stood at a record low of 0.2 percent. As the 2018 evaluation of SIGAR confirms: "Since 2002, stemming opium poppy cultivation and drug production in Afghanistan has been an important, though not primary, goal for the United States, its coalition partners, and the Afghan government." (SIGAR, 2018, p. vii). Successful securitisation would have made it a primary objective, even for only a limited amount of time.

The military campaign to bomb opium processing laboratories in November 2017 – according to some a rather late, feeble and ineffective attempt to respond to unprecedented levels of illicit cultivation and production (Mansfield, 2018) – seemed to break with this trend. It is the most significant direct international military action against drug laboratories since 2001 (SIGAR, 2018, p. 57). With 75 air strikes conducted by April 2018 (SIGAR, 2018, p. 56), the US presents these strikes as part of a sustained air interdiction campaign, but it is still doubtful whether this offensive to disrupt the funding of the Taliban will be effective or sustainable, and how political developments such as peace negotiations with the Taliban will influence the campaign. In fact, the only two air strikes that took place during the last quarter of 2018, seemed to have marked the end of the campaign (Hennigan, 2019).

## Conclusions

So far, analyses linking securitisation and the international drug control regime have tended to conclude that securitisation somehow leads to certain, mostly repressive policies and prevents the current international regime from changing. Despite high expectations for change around the United Nations General Assembly Session (UNGASS) in 2016, it is true that the international treaty system has so far been resistant to reforms, but this is not caused by securitisation. The analysis overestimates the strength of the international regime as a vehicle to determine state policies and behaviour. Moreover, it misinterprets acts of prohibition, criminalisation and militarisation of drug control with successful securitisation.

If securitisation happened at all beyond political rhetoric, it has had very limited impact in increasing the priority of drug policies at the international level. In fact, in most cases, drug-related issues were probably not securitised but rather politicised (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 23). Even if politicisation occurred, it is important not to confuse the diplomatic consensus about appropriate language with international agreement about norms and principles or with the inevitability of

certain state behaviour.

Scholars such as Crick and Herschinger are right to point out that some kind of political discourse of 'drugs as an existential threat' exists at the local, national or international level. In other words, securitisation moves occur frequently. But this political discourse does not mean that local, national or international drug policies will necessarily be determined or influenced by it. Even if political rhetoric influences policies, this does not automatically lead to draconian, emergency or overly repressive type of policies, which is clearly shown by the example of Afghanistan. Similarly, the existing militarisation of drug policy interventions may be harmful, ineffective and probably even counter-productive, but it does not show that successful securitisation has taken place.

In Afghanistan, the principles and norms of the international drug control regime may have resulted in certain strategies or a certain choice of resource allocation. However, the international drive for specific policies was not the result of successful securitisation, despite an emerging political discourse that strongly linked drugs to terrorism and insurgency to increase the priority of drug control in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding these securitisation moves, the huge opium economy was basically allowed to grow since 2001 and was apparently not perceived as an existential threat or major security concern for the international coalition of fifty-plus countries supporting the country. *Laissez-faire* seems to have trumped a robust counter-narcotics support strategy. The reason is that, as referent objects, neither Afghanistan nor the foreign countries or societies affected by its illicit opium economy were ever seen as existentially threatened by Afghanistan's part of the world drug problem. The human costs are huge, especially in terms of high levels of drug addiction in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, but these costs are not high enough to warrant more robust policies. Following 2014, the drawdown of international troops and the decrease of international presence in several of the major poppy growing provinces, have further deprioritised counter-narcotics support to Afghanistan.

Self-interest of states remains the key driving factor behind collaboration and cooperation through the international drug control regime. This self-interest, however, also means that states are often 'not very interested' in more policy convergence or more intense cooperation, which would have been different if successful securitisation would have occurred. In practice, it seems concerns about the world drug problem have never really left the realm of low politics. Not even the huge flows of opium and heroin to the Russian Federation and Europe have convinced policy makers of the need to do more to tackle the illegal opium economy in Afghanistan. In general, there is a lack of common interests that could produce more policy coherence and convergence. Instead, there is a clear trend towards an ever more diverse policy landscape in which states and local authorities constantly develop and test new approaches to the world drug problem, alternatives that generally tend to move away from strict prohibition. The common denominator of these policies is that they tend to be pragmatic, focusing on what works instead of strictly applying a normative approach.

Treaty reform is probably inevitable. There are good arguments for reforming a system that is primarily based on a treaty of 1961 (United Nations, 1961). The pragmatic efforts at national and local levels show that governments need different and more effective policy options that better respond to the social, environmental and health-related problems related to drugs. It is not yet clear whether this will eventually produce changes within the current international drug control regime or whether it will result in an entirely new regime. Securitisation, however, does not play a role in this process.

For the international community at large, as well as for those countries directly supporting Afghanistan, the Afghan illegal opium economy is no top priority and it never was since 2001. Spikes of attention did produce big budgets and vast counter-narcotics programming but failed to create sustained effort and sustainable impact. Securitisation moves failed to change this reality. Instead of rallying

states around common action through securitisation efforts, it is more the other way around: failed securitisation confirms that states do not consider international drug control a top priority, let alone an existential threat.

## References

- Aikins, M. (2014). *Afghanistan: The making of a Narco state*. Rolling Stone (4 December).
- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (2014). *War comes home: The excessive militarization of American policing*. New York: ACLU Foundation.
- Bewley-Taylor, D. R. (2003). Challenging the UN drug control conventions: Problems and possibilities. *The International Journal of Drug Policy*, 14(2), 171–179.
- Bewley-Taylor, D. R. (2012). *International drug control: Consensus fractured*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blanchard, C. M. (2009). 'Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. policy', congressional research service report for congress August.
- Buxton, J. (2015). *Drugs and development: The great disconnect. Global drug policy observatory policy report, number 2*. Swansea: Swansea University.
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A new framework for analysis*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Byrd, W. A. (2008). *Responding to Afghanistan's opium economy challenge: Lessons and policy implications from a development perspective. The world bank policy research working paper, number 4545* March.
- Byrd, W. A. (2013). *Afghanistan and the international drug control regime: Can the "Tail" wag the "Dog"?* United Institute of Peace Peacebrief Number 143, April.
- Chouvy, P.-A. (2009). *Opium: Uncovering the politics of the poppy*. New York: I.B. Taurus.
- Cook, J. L. (2012). *Afghanistan: The perfect failure*. Xlibris.
- Costa, A. M. (2007). *An opium market mystery*. The Washington Post April.
- Crick, E. (2012). Drugs as an existential threat: An Analysis of the international securitization of drugs. *The International Journal of Drug Policy*, 23(September (5)), 407–414.
- Eventon, R., & Bewley-Taylor, D. R. (2016). *Above the law, under the radar: A history of private contractors and aerial fumigation in Colombia. Global drug policy observatory policy report, number 4*. Swansea: Swansea University.
- Farthing, L. C., & Ledebur, K. (2015). *Habeas coca: Bolivia's community coca control*. New York: Open Society Foundations.
- Felbab-Brown, V. (2010). *Shooting up: Counterinsurgency and the war on drugs*. Washington: The Brookings Institution.
- Felbab-Brown, V. (2016). *No easy exit: Drugs and counternarcotics policies in Afghanistan. Improving global drug policy: Comparative perspectives and UNGASS 2016 paper*. Washington: The Brookings Institution.
- Fukumi, S. (2008). *Cocaine trafficking in Latin America: EU and US policy responses*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Gallahue, P., Gunawan, R., Rahman, F., El, K., Mufti, N. U., & Din, R. F. (2012). *The death penalty for drug offences: Global overview 2012: Tipping the scales for abolition*. London: Harm Reduction International.
- Global Commission on Drug Policy (2011). *War on drugs. Report of the global commission on drug policy*. Geneva: Global Commission on Drug Policy.
- Hanrieder, W. F. (1991). Dissolving international politics: Reflections on the nation-state. In R. Little, & M. Smith (Eds.). *Perspectives on world politics*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hennigan, W. J. (2019). *The U.S. sent its most advanced fighter jets to blow up cheap opium labs. Now it's canceling the program*. Time. February 21, Retrieved from <http://time.com/5534783/iron-tempest-afghanistan-opium/>.
- Herschinger, E. (2011). *Constructing global enemies: Hegemony and identity in international discourses on terrorism and drug prohibition*. New York: Routledge.
- Insulza, J. M. (2013). *The OAS drug report: 16 months of debates and consensus* Washington: Organization of American States.
- Jelsma, M. (2001). *Vicious circle: The chemical and biological 'War on drugs'*. Amsterdam: TNI March.
- Jelsma, M. (2013). De wankele 'Weense consensus' over drugsbeleid'. *Internationale Spectator*, 67(April (4)).
- Jones, S. G. (2008). The rise of Afghanistan's insurgency: State failure and jihad. *International Security*, 32(Spring (4)), 7–40.
- Kamminga, J. (2001). *Het mondiale drugsprobleem. De verenigde naties en internationale regimevorming. Multinationale ondernemingen, Nationale Overheden en internationale organisaties*. The Netherlands: Honours' course thesis within the Masters Degree of International Relations, State University of Groningen November.
- Kamminga, J. (2013). *Between elephant in the room and political hot potato: The afghan opium problem*. The Huffington Post November.
- Kamminga, J., & Hussain, N. (2012). *From disengagement to regional opium war? Towards a counter-narcotics surge in Afghanistan and Pakistan. UNISCI discussion papers, N° 29* May.
- Krasner, S. D. (Ed.). (1995). *International regimes*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Kushlick, D. (2011). *International security and the global war on drugs: The tragic irony of drug securitisation*. OpenDemocracy August.
- Mansfield, D. (2016). *A state built on sand: How opium undermined Afghanistan*. London: Hurst.
- Mansfield, D. (2017). *Truly Unprecedented: How the Helmand Food Zone supported an increase in the province's capacity to produce opium*. AREU publication October.
- Mansfield, D. (2018). *Bombing heroin labs in Afghanistan: The latest act in The Theatre of counternarcotics. LSE international drug policy unit paper*. London: LSE.
- Mansfield, D., & Pain, A. (2008). *Counter-narcotics in Afghanistan: The failure of Success? AREU briefing paper* December.
- Me, A., & Kamminga, J. (2018). *Editorial: The way forward for alternative development. Bulletin on narcotics, Volume LXI*. New York: United Nations.
- Mikhos, A. (2006). *Afghanistan's drugs challenge*. NATO review. Spring.
- Murkin, G. (2015). *Cannabis social clubs in Spain: legalisation without commercialisation. Policy paper*. Bristol: Transform.
- NATO (2008). *NATO steps up counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan*. News brief October.
- NATO (2009). *ISAF counter-narcotics activities – The facts*. Shape blog March.
- Nopen, P. F. P. (2010). *Countering Afghan narcotics: a litmus test for effective NATO and Russia cooperation? Security Policy Brief, No. 14*. Brussels: Egmont.
- Sopko, J. F. (2014). *Future U.S. counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan', statement of John F. Sopko. Special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, testimony before the senate caucus on international narcotics control* January.
- Spiller, H. (2017). *The Afghanistan poppy eradication campaign: Accounts from the black hawk counter-narcotics infantry kandak team in Helmand Province*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company.
- United Nations (1961). *Single convention on narcotics drugs, as amended by the 1972 protocol amending the single convention on narcotic drugs*.
- United Nations (2001). *Agreement on provisional arrangements in Afghanistan pending the Re-Establishment of permanent government institutions (the 'Bonn agreement')*, document S/2001/1154. December.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2004). *Afghanistan opium survey 2004*. Vienna: UNODC November.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2005). *Afghanistan opium survey 2005*. Vienna: UNODC November.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2006). *Afghanistan opium survey 2006*. Vienna: UNODC October.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2007). *Afghanistan opium survey 2007*. Vienna: UNODC October.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2008a). *'Drugs and Insecurity in Afghanistan: No Quick Fix', Speech of UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International GLOBSEC Conference*.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2008b). *Afghanistan opium survey 2008*. Vienna: UNODC November.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2017). *Afghanistan opium survey 2017*. Vienna: UNODC November.
- United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1333 (2008). 19 December Adopted by the Security Council at its 4251st meeting.
- Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) (2017a). *Quarterly report to the United States congress* January.
- Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) (2017b). *Quarterly report to the United States congress* July.
- Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) (2018). *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*. June.
- United States Government Accountability Office (2006). *Afghanistan drug control: Despite improved efforts, deteriorating security threatens Success of U.S. Goals. Report to congressional committees* November.
- Walsh, J. (2013). *Q&A: Legal marijuana in Colorado and Washington. Washington office on Latin America (WOLA) and governance studies report*. Washington: The Brookings Institution.
- Walsh, J., & Ramsey, G. (2016). *Uruguay's drug policy: Major innovations, Major challenges. Improving global drug policy: Comparative perspectives and UNGASS 2016 paper*. Washington: The Brookings Institution.
- Williams, P. (2011). *Transnational crime and security*. In Y. M. Lai, & C. W. Hughes (Eds.). *Security studies: A reader* (pp. 265–270). New York: Routledge.