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Obstacle in Bid to Curb Afghan Trade in Narcotics

By [THOM SHANKER](#)

KANDAHAR, [Afghanistan](#) — A drive by the [NATO](#) alliance to disrupt Afghanistan's drug trade has been hobbled by new objections from member nations that say their laws do not permit soldiers to carry out such operations, according to senior commanders here.

The objections are being raised despite an agreement two months ago that the alliance's campaign in Afghanistan would be broadened to include attacks on narcotics facilities, traffickers, middlemen and drug lords whose profits help to finance insurgent groups.

During a recent visit here, Gen. John Craddock, NATO's supreme allied commander, expressed surprise upon learning of what he described as a gap between the decision by alliance defense ministers to authorize aggressive counternarcotics missions and the lack of follow-through because of objections from several of the countries that make up the NATO force in Afghanistan.

As the United States and its allies strive to devise a better strategy to stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan, American policy makers and military officers say it is critical to choke off the drug money that sustains the insurgency, much as they are working with Pakistan to halt the use of its tribal areas as a haven by the [Taliban](#) and other antigovernment forces just across the border from Afghanistan.

Seven years after the rout of [Al Qaeda](#) and the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, disagreements over how aggressively NATO forces should go after the insurgency's chief source of revenue are only the latest hurdle in a campaign that has been troubled by disputes between the United States and some of its allies about what role NATO soldiers should play in a mission cast as "security assistance."

The disagreements also present a major challenge for President-elect [Barack Obama](#) as he tries to fulfill a campaign pledge to shift the focus of the American military toward Afghanistan, where the United States remains much more dependent on foreign nations than it does in the Iraq war, which is largely an American conflict.

The counternarcotics debate is a reminder of how unwieldy the alliance's military operations can be. [United Nations](#) figures show that Afghan insurgents reap at least \$100 million a year from the drug trade, although some estimates put the figure at five times as much.

In an interview, General Craddock said profit from the narcotics trade "buys the bomb makers and the bombs, the bullets and the trigger-pullers that are killing our soldiers and marines and airmen, and we have to stop them."

NATO officials in Brussels declined to list the nations that have opposed widening the alliance mandate to

include attacks on drug networks, and no nation has volunteered that it has legal objections.

But a number of NATO members have in broad terms described their reluctance publicly, including Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain. Their leaders have cited domestic policies that make counternarcotics a law enforcement matter — not a job for their militaries — and expressed concern that domestic lawsuits could be filed if their soldiers carried out attacks to kill noncombatants, even if the victims were involved in the drug industry in Afghanistan.

As has been the case in a whole range of combat operations mounted by NATO forces in Afghanistan, each country is allowed to state its reservations and opt out of missions that are viewed as too risky, either politically or militarily. Those “caveats” have been a source of enormous frustration to American commanders.

That system of caveats was never intended to halt NATO operations; missions objectionable to one nation can be taken over by another nation’s forces. But commanders say that legal objections to counternarcotics operations have prevented the international mix of troops across poppy-rich regions of southern Afghanistan from carrying out the new responsibilities.

The NATO-led mission in Afghanistan has more than 51,000 troops, including 14,000 Americans. In a parallel mission, the United States has deployed 17,000 additional troops for a separate combat, counterterrorism and training operation.

During a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Budapest in October, Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) and General Craddock successfully lobbied the alliance to give troops operating in Afghanistan official permission to mount attacks on narcotics “facilities and facilitators supporting the insurgency.”

Gen. [David D. McKiernan](#), the senior American commander in Afghanistan, acknowledged that “some of the precise language still needs to be worked out” with allies that objected to taking on counternarcotics missions.

In an interview, General McKiernan stressed that the goal remained to approve rules of engagement that “give us greater freedom of action to treat narco-figures and facilities as military objectives.”

Halting the flow of drug money to the insurgency is just one of the challenges facing the [Obama administration](#). Others include the 30 percent increase in insurgent violence over the past year, and the painfully slow growth and continued incompetence of the Afghan police.

But General Craddock cited bright spots in the mission of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force, including a growing number of people from other United States government agencies who are stepping in to help with economic and political development. He also noted the increasing size and professionalism of the Afghan National Army, which Afghans trust more than they do the office of the presidency.

General McKiernan was put in charge of both the NATO and American operations this year, in an effort to provide more unity of command over the two missions. During a visit to Afghanistan last weekend, Adm. [Mike Mullen](#), chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), said the Pentagon expected to provide 20,000 to 30,000

more troops to General McKiernan, with a significant portion of that increase arriving by next summer.

Including the debate on how to battle the drug trade, much of the discussion about the way ahead in Afghanistan is similar to policy debates over the past seven years: the need to generate economic growth and build democratic institutions to inspire confidence among Afghans in their government.

Although combat power alone will not defeat the insurgency and its allies in the drug trade in Afghanistan, military analysts say, a problem for years has been that Afghanistan has had too few resources because of the war in Iraq.

“What we need are more troops in Afghanistan because we need security, and eventually we will get a strategy,” said Roger D. Carstens, a former Army Special Forces officer who now is a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security in Washington, which has provided a number of its analysts to the Obama transition team at the Pentagon.

“If the military cannot secure the population, then political development, economic growth and good government will not take place,” Mr. Carstens added.

Eric Schmitt contributed reporting from Washington.

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