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Strategic implication of counterdrug operations in the Indian Ocean

Introduction

There is little doubt that drugs create insecurity around the world. It funds criminal activities, sponsors terrorism, corrupts national institutions such as police forces and political systems and furthermore kills annually more than half a million people worldwide while around 35 million people suffer from drug use disorders according to the [UNODC](#).

For decades, Africa was a transit continent for drug smugglers of different kinds. Heroin is smuggled through Africa to Europe and North America while West Africa serves as a transit area for cocaine on its way to Europe.

However, with drug trafficking comes drug abusers. The use of heroin in countries like [Kenya](#), [Tanzania](#), [Mozambique](#) and [South Africa](#) has substantially increased. One [report](#) suggests the number of drug abusers within the East African Community (EAC) to be around a quarter of a million. While such numbers are extremely difficult to estimate, other indicators might give an insight into the drug challenges in the region. An [ENACT report](#) suggests that criminal groups related to drug smuggling today have a certain level of political influence in both Kenya and Mozambique.

In [West and Central Africa](#), cocaine and heroin addiction are also increasing. While the number of heroin users is uncertain, the [UNODC estimates](#) there to be 1.8 million cocaine abusers and 34

million cannabis abusers in West and Central Africa. Africa could have up to 20 million drug abusers (opiates and opioids) by 2040.

Drugs are an increasing concern for many African countries. Drugs not only corrupt national institutions, but their sales even sponsor terror groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) that profit from protecting smugglers crossing the Sahara Desert. Drugs ignite and reinforce political, military and social threats as it spreads and is therefore of common interest to all states to fight drug smuggling.

What we can learn from the Americas

From a European/North American approach, only a limited effort is done to prevent drug smugglers to reach their goal. While the EU and UN have initiated [different projects](#) in areas like the Sahel region, operating and having an effect is difficult due to corruption and insecurity. In a sense, it seems that lessons learned from counterdrug operations in the Americas are not applied in the counterdrug trade from Asia to Europe/America passing through Africa. Some important lessons that were learned include:

- As long as there is a demand, smugglers will get through. So, any counterdrug operation should be about reducing the bad effects of drugs and not about eradicating it.
- The supply chain should be hit as early as possible. The longer it travels the more drugs are spread through the distribution networks.
- To involve institutions that have not yet been involved in counterdrug operations and are therefore not corrupted. In Columbia it was the Special Forces and the Columbian Navy.
- To burn cultivation fields is not effective and promotes social instability.
- Close international cooperation and agreements are crucial.

The aforementioned lessons have applications in areas like the Indian Ocean with significant strategic effects to prohibit the overall drug flow and their eventual negative impacts.

How can counterdrug operations in the Indian Ocean have a strategic effect?

A significant part of heroin smuggled from Afghanistan to Europe and North America follows the so-called southern route. The southern route starts in the Makran Coast in Pakistan, from where the

drugs are then mainly transported by dhows to Eastern and Southern Africa, and further via West Africa to its final destination in Europe and North America.

[Combined Task Force 150](#), (CTF 150) under the command of Combined Maritime Forces in Bahrain, has for years conducted counterdrug operations in the Indian Ocean. The main purpose of CTF 150 is counterterrorism and their operations are aimed at reducing the income of terror groups in mainly Afghanistan. In 2018, the CTF 150 sieged narcotics worth \$530 million dollars that consisted mainly of hashish and heroin. A single confiscation comprised of 530 kg pure heroin (\$120 million dollars) and amounted to approximately ten percent of the total heroin (4.3 tons) seizure within the European Union in 2018.

The above-mentioned counterdrug operations were successful for different reasons. While the Indian Ocean is a large maritime domain for any state deploying naval units, the same is true for drug smugglers using these ocean stretches. Smugglers travel over vast distances which leave them exposed. The threat of detection increases the further they proceed south as the density of dhow traffic decreases over such vast distances. The overlap between the traditional trading routes and the drug routes also decreases the further south the dhows move. This is exemplified by CTF 150 as it has some of its largest seizures in the southwestern part of the Indian Ocean. In addition, the heroin seized in the Indian Ocean is of a very high purity. Purity combined with the large amounts intercepted means that one drug seizure has a significant economic impact over a wider number of business principles underpinning the cost-effectiveness of the drug trade, while another positive implication is the reduction of corruption in Eastern Africa. If the drugs do not arrive, criminal or terror organizations dependent upon drug trading lose their income and thus their influence. Furthermore, the Afghan farmers whose life depends on the production of opium are not directly harmed as the opium is traded multiple times before reaching the Indian Ocean.

The strategic effect of countering drug flows in the Indian Ocean cannot be overlooked, yet many naval states seem reluctant to contribute. Such reluctance stems from different challenges. First, maritime counterdrug operations are more successful in the southwestern part of the Indian Ocean. This places special requirements on naval operations, but due to the vast distance, it is only possible to operate with a fully equipped task group that include a maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) and logistic support ships. Few naval states from Africa can do so. Second, there is little understanding of the

strategic implications. CTF 150's mandate focuses on counterterrorism, however, they uncover drug smuggling as well. Unfortunately, too few other counterdrug institutions have good knowledge or a deliberate focus on the maritime part of heroin smuggling as well. As such, there is an element of institutional sea blindness at play. Finally, there is [not sufficient intelligence and jurisdictional corporation](#) between the coastal and non-coastal states in this African region that is similar to the co-operation in the [Caribbean](#) for example.

Summary

Future counterdrug operations in the Indian Ocean call for better co-operation in the region. Europe and North America also have to understand that an effective counterdrug operation in the Indian Ocean is beneficial far beyond hard counterterrorism campaigns in Asia. African states must also realise that drug flows down the Western Indian Ocean increase instability and insecurity in African states when it comes to human and national security. Closer co-operation in the region combined with available maritime resources could well force heroin smugglers to look at alternative solutions and eventually to avoid southern and eastern Africa routes.

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