Afghanistan’s loya jirga - grand assembly - meets this month to discuss the country's future. The key issues will be constitutional and include the creation of a new, permanent state to replace the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan. But these gatherings are as important for their off-table discussions, and a prime issue will be how to tackle the country’s continuing role as a global supplier of opiates. Caught up in worldwide supply routes, Russia and Central Asian states will be watching closely.
WHILE THE AMERICAN LED INVASION OF 2001 WAS triggered by the desire to rout Osama Bin Laden and his Taliban allies, there was also an implicit hope that it would allow a genuine and long-term campaign against opium production.

The Taliban briefly cracked down on it in 2001, but this did little more than create a temporary shortage. Few expected that it would be sustained, especially given the extent to which effective power remained in the hands of the tribal chieftains, many of whom enjoyed lucrative profits from trafficking. After all, production had doubled through the 1990s until Afghanistan had become the source of three-quarters of the world’s opium. The industry had also grown more sophisticated, moving from simply producing raw opium base to processing it into heroin.

UNCOMFORTABLE READING

The latest Afghanistan Opium Survey released at the end of October by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime makes uncomfortable reading. Not only in the country, but the source of seventy-five percent of global opium supplies — and ninety percent of all that reaching Europe — but the area under opium poppy cultivation has increased by eight percent, up from seventy-four thousand hectares in 2002 to eighty-three thousand. Opium production has grown almost as much, up six percent to three thousand six hundred hectares.

This is a potential challenge to the new constitutional order. President Hamid Karzai’s government has taken important and useful steps, banning the cultivation and trafficking in opium, adopting a ten-year National Drug Control Strategy and forming a new Counter-Narcotics Directorate. There have been some positive developments on the ground, notably a reduction in opium cultivation in southern provinces, not least thanks to high-profile campaigns to destroy the poppy crop.

However, the overall situation is worsening. Cultivation is shifting to regions where government control is weaker, especially in the northeast, and the total number of provinces in which opium is grown has increased from sixteen to thirty-two in 1996 to twenty-eight this year. Perhaps the last vestiges of the absurdity of opium are in the way that, despite benanent demand, the price of fresh opium has fallen by nineteen percent this year, to $283 per kilo.

ADICTED TO OPiates

In a considerable extent, the Afghan body politic can be said to be addicted to opium. Even with this year’s lower farm gate price, the total value of the harvest was over $8 billion — almost a quarter of the country’s gross domestic product. Factor in the profits earned by traders, processors and the warlords and gangsters who fund the process, and according to UN figures the total income from opium-related activities might amount to twice that.

This money not only hardens the excesses of local tribal and criminal chieftains, it is central to their authority, providing them with the resources to raise their own armed militias to maintain order, charity to fill some of the gaping holes in the state’s social provision, and gifts to retain the loyalty of lesser chieftains, who might otherwise turn to banditry or rebellion. So many have seen the revenue from opium as something that the state could not, or not, collect the tax on it.

The chieftain who chooses to turn against the opium industry risks being supplanted by others with fewer sceptres, banded together by the drug traffickers. For example, in one case this year a northern warlord who tried unadvisably to increase the levy on opium traffickers was threatened with a $4 million price on his head unless he abandoned the idea.

By contrast, the total budget of the Counter-Narcotics Directorate is $3 million, half of which has still not been disbursed. The economic impact on being ruined for rural families: the 1.7 million people involved in the opium trade — seven percent of the total population — earn anything up to at least five times the average annual income.

NEW MARKETS

It is also a problem for Afghanistan’s neighbours, especially to the north. In the first six months of this year, Russian border troops intercepted 2.5 metric tonnes of narcotics, half of it heroin. In August they made their largest seizure of the year, more than three hundred and thirty kilograms of heroin, while the Russian police made their biggest drug bust, finding four hundred and twenty kilograms of heroin in a truck just outside Moscow.

Together these two loads were worth $33 million at street levels. The coincidence of such hauls supports what Russian police have been warning for some time, that not only is the country becoming an increasingly important market for narcotics, but it is also an over more significant route for Afghan drugs.

Russia now has more as many as six and a half million drug users — four and a half percent of the total population — of whom two million are addicts. Not only is the number of users growing, the proportion using serious drugs such as heroin and also considered addicts are both rising. Heroin consumption is estimated to have grown by two thousand three hundred percent between 1980 and last year.

Official alarm is such that in March, President Vladimir Putin created a new State Committee for Combating the Illegal Trade in Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances under Viktor Chekuev, one of his most trusted security officers. Charged with direct law enforcement, it also leads and coordinates the struggle against the narcotics trade.

Growing trade routes supply not only Russia’s own gauge and addictions but continue across Europe and the rest of the world. As traditional transit points in the Middle East and Turkey come under pressure, Russia offers an increasingly attractive alternative.

This is causing growing friction with Moscow’s Central Asian neighbours, through which the drug flow most travel through Tajikistan on their way to Russia via Kazakhstan. Moscow is becoming increasingly open in its irritation at the country’s seeming inability — some Kazakh sources say unwillingness — to contain the problem. In August, Cherkasov visited Dushanbe and, while praising bilateral cooperation, he also used his meeting with Tajik President Emomali Rahmonov to express his growing exasperation.

CULTURAL CHANGE

The experience of Afghanistan also throws up some serious questions about the effectiveness of intervention and regime change, and just how states can be reconstituted effectively. In particular, the extent to which those who are occupiers, and often contradictory processes. After all, there is much about the new Afghanistan which is commendable and encouraging, but this coexists with the country’s continued role as the world’s source of opium and heroin.

To some, the threat is that Afghanistan will become a failed state dominated by local warlords, drug cartels and narco-terrorists. However, this apocalyptic scenario misses the point that the country has never had an effective central government. Prior to the communist coup of 1978 and the subsequent Soviet invasion, Kabul had largely prided over a confederation of autonomous local polities. Even during the Taliban era, its grip on much of the country was tenuous.
The real dilemma is that Afghanistan needs a change not of central regime but of its entire political culture. This is by no means irreversible, but must be taken slowly and at the pace the Afghans themselves choose. The more pressure applied from outside to concentrate on narcotics—which, after all, are at the heart of much of political and economic life—then the more this process of state building will seem an alien and intrusive one, and much of its legitimacy will be lost. Given that legitimacy is one of the few effective weapons the state can employ against a narcotics industry that can operate, out-spend and out-gun it, this would be a terrible loss.

What may well be a gain for international order that the Taliban regime has been ousted—and it is undoubtedly welcomed by many Afghans—this has had little, if any, immediate effect on the country’s greatest and most corrosive contribution to global society, its production of opium. Indeed, not only does the flow of narcotics undermine the authority of whatever new regime emerges from the Loya Jirga, it is also causing domestic and international problems in post-Soviet Eurasia and raising uncomfortable questions about how effective the tools of information and regime change really are. Regional change, after all, is easy; state building is hard.

On Patrol

The safest way to fight
is to step out of reach of your enemy, but this proved easier for coalition forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom than in the reconstruction phase.

Like most recent coalition operations, the mission to topple Saddam Hussein was conducted from a distance, using long-range precision-guided munitions from aircraft, ships and ground vehicles. There were fears that Bagdad itself and other key cities might involve fierce street-to-street fighting, but a combination of sophisticated US technology and Iraqi ineptitude meant that the coalition fought the sort of war it wanted unchallenged.

BEYOND MESSY CONFLICT

The strategy was explicitly based on the transformational capabilities of sophisticated technology. American Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld argued that the equipment and practices associated with information technology could cut the US military out of the industrial age and, by extension, away from the messy conflicts of the past. Transformation meant that operations were based on concepts such as shock and awe, network-centric warfare, and predictive battlepace awareness. Lighter troops could be used, it was argued, to enable the coalition to achieve a relatively smooth transition between war, stabilization and reconstruction.

Before the war in Iraq it was argued that sophisticated technology was transforming conflict, allowing fighting at a distance with lighter forces. But in the post-war phase, old-fashioned patrolling is making a comeback in the struggle to restore security, calling into question the whole high-tech approach.