
RESEARCH

Searching for Significance among Drug Lords and Death Squads: The Covert Netherworld as Invisible Incubator for Illicit Commerce

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In a search for appropriate theory, this essay inserts drug trafficking, the world's largest illicit economic activity, within a wider analytical frame called the 'covert netherworld.' Through the convergence of three factors—covert operations, illicit commerce, and social milieu—such netherworlds can form at regional, national, and international levels, thereby transforming social margins of crime and illicit commerce into potent sources of political change. By deftly playing upon this netherworld's politics and illicit commerce along the Burma-Thai borderlands, a regional 'drug lord' amassed sufficient local power to dominate the global heroin trade for over a decade and simultaneously sustain an ethnic revolt for nearly 15 years. In the Philippines, the illicit traffic in synthetic drugs developed a parallel power to influence the character of national politics, compromising three presidential administrations and shaping the moral economy of political life. For the past 40 years in Afghanistan, an illicit commodity, opium, has shaped the fate of military intervention by the world's sole superpower, allowing it an initial success and later contributing to its ongoing failure. Through the sum of these cases, the essay concludes that the covert netherworld can serve as invisible incubator for a range of extralegal activities and has thereby attained sufficient autonomy to be treated as a significant factor in international politics.

Keywords: drug trafficking; illicit activity; covert netherworld; netherworld; covert operations; illicit commerce; social milieu; borderlands; Burma; Thailand; Afghanistan

During the half-century that drug trafficking in Asia has been a matter of public concern, analysts of all descriptions—academics, journalists, and policy makers—have generally focused on the elusive, ever-changing details and thus failed to frame a broad model capable of probing the underlying character of these illicit commodities and the deeper implications of their proliferation and persistence. After decades of writing about an endless parade of drug lords, death squads, and covert operations devoid any deeper meaning, this writer came rather tardily to the realization that we need an adequate analytical frame to probe the invisible interstice between the formal and informal sectors where these illicit activities seem to survive and thrive. (McCoy 2017: 9–15).

Absent a literature equal to this daunting task, where might we find some insight to inform our search for a model to encompass this shadowy realm of criminal syndicates and covert operations? Rome's reputed Mafia boss, Massimo Carminati, recently described this clandestine milieu in words infused with analytical insight. 'As they say, the living are above, and the dead are below,' he said before adding some telling words. 'And we [the mafia] are in the middle' (Povoledo 2014).

By juxtaposing the classical conception of the 'netherworld,' where those dead lie below, with the contemporary term 'covert,' signifying state security, we can coin the concept of a 'covert netherworld' and deploy it to explore this shadowy domain beneath society's visible surface that informs and indeed transforms political life worldwide. As the cases discussed below will illustrate, merging these seemingly separate realms—overt and covert, licit and illicit, legal and illegal—allows us a fuller, three-dimensional view

of weak states, world powers, and the international politics that encompasses both. Moreover, journalists and scholars have produced some close-grained studies of covert netherworlds (Bayart 1995; Bouquet 2017), their warlords (Reno 1998), crime syndicates (Lupsha 1991; Correa-Cabrera 2017), state capture (Watt and Zepeda 2012; Flores Pérez 2013; Valdés Castellanos 2013), and illicit traffics (Nordstrom 2007; Gootenberg 2008). By recounting events within particular regions or by detailing specific aspects of this shadowy realm, this growing literature invites an attempt to draw together these disparate cases, asking what they have in common and articulating a more comprehensive framework for their analysis.

A covert netherworld takes form when three critical components—social milieu, covert operations, and illicit commerce—converge in a particular and potent array. At its core, this netherworld is an invisible interstice inhabited by criminal and clandestine actors who are practitioners of what famed intelligence operative Lucien Conein once called ‘the clandestine arts’—that is, the skill of conducting complex operations beyond the bounds of civil society (Conein 1971). Offering some sense of the scale of this *social milieu*, in 1997 the United Nations (UN) reported that transnational crime syndicates had 3.3 million members worldwide who traffic in drugs, arms, humans, and endangered species (United Nations 1997: 132).

Analysis of the criminal portion of this social milieu, as shown in several cases below, must be mindful of strategic roles: that of law in setting the parameters of the illicit market; security services, both uniformed police and undercover operatives, in influencing the volume and level of syndication within this vice sector through collusion, corruption, incompetence, or a combination of all three; political leadership in either abetting or attacking such collusion; and criminal syndicates in exploiting, as entrepreneurs of vice and violence, both *de facto* legal immunities and market opportunities. Indeed, throughout much of the twentieth century, there were recurring instances of affinity and alliance between state and criminal actors that inhabit this clandestine political space.

During the Cold War, all the major powers—Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States (US)—deployed expanded, empowered clandestine services worldwide, making our second factor, *covert operations*, a central facet of geopolitical power. In his eight years in office during the 1950s, President Dwight Eisenhower’s administration authorized 170 clandestine operations in 48 nations, thereby shifting the US exercise of global power from the conventional into the covert realm (Weiner 2008: 87).

For over a century now, states and empires have used their growing coercive capacities to tax, regulate, or restrict economic activity, forcing targeted goods and services into an *illicit commerce* that can sometimes achieve sufficient scale to sustain covert netherworlds. Moral prohibition campaigns have effectively transferred alcohol, drugs, and gambling to growing criminal milieu; routine taxation can foster a contraband commerce in ordinary goods, as happened with cigarettes in both France and the Philippines after World War II; post-Cold War conflicts created an illicit commerce in ‘blood diamonds’ and ‘blood ivory’ in Africa or bootleg oil in Iraq and Syria; and immigration restrictions have fostered human trafficking worldwide.

But most importantly, for over two centuries the major world powers have enforced a succession of contradictory policies towards narcotics that became the necessary precondition for the most lucrative of all illicit traffics. The conjuncture, nay collision, of these global policy regimes—first free trade, then prohibition—has transformed opium and coca from folk pharmacopeia into major commodities whose high profits have, for the past 70 years, sustained covert netherworlds on five continents.

The free trade in narcotic drugs parallels the rise of capital and the expansion of European empires over the span of four centuries. From 1500 to 1900, each successive stage—merchant capital, mercantilism, and high imperialism—fostered a marked increase in the scale, scope, and sophistication of the world’s opium commerce. During the first two centuries of merchant capital, Portuguese captains pioneered the profitable trade in carrying Indian opium to southern China, and the Dutch East India Company (VOC), based on Java, subsequently expanded the commerce, increasing its shipments of Indian opium from 617 kilograms in 1660 to 87 metric tons by 1699 (Prakash 1988: pp. 145–57).

During the eighteenth century, as European states fused state coercion and commercial monopoly into mercantilism for hyper profits, all the rising empires in Asia traded drugs in some form. The Dutch VOC, starting in 1720, controlled all exports of Java’s coffee to Europe and America. The Spanish financed their rule over the Philippines after 1782 largely from a monopoly on the cultivation and sale of tobacco. And the British East India Company imposed a similar monopoly over Bengal’s opium in 1773, using its exports to southern China, capped at 280 tons annually, to finance the purchase of tea for shipment to Europe and North America (Strachey 1903: 133–42; Richards 1981: 64–65). By the 1820s, these opium exports had become the catalyst for one of the world’s most profitable and balanced trade triangles—with £21.2 million in opium and cotton shipped from India to China; £19.6 million in Chinese tea sent to the United Kingdom; and £23.9 million worth of British textiles and machinery imported into India (Tan Chung 1974: 426–27).

In the succeeding phase that married high imperialism to industrial capitalism, opium became a major global commodity. After its imports from British India peaked at 6,700 tons around 1880, China's domestic opium cultivation grew rapidly to a massive 35,000 tons by 1906, sustaining some 13.5 million opium smokers (Rowntree 1905: 286–87; International Opium Commission 1909: II, 44–66). By the end of the nineteenth century, every Southeast Asian state, from Burma to the Philippines, had either an opium monopoly or a lucrative licensed franchise. Even as late as 1930, Southeast Asia had 6,441 government opium dens that served 272 tons of opium annually to 542,100 registered smokers (League of Nations 1937: Vol. XI.5, 72–75). In the West, moreover, the fusion of industrial chemistry with commercial marketing created a modern pharmaceutical industry that raised British sales of patent medicines, most of them opium-based, almost seven-fold between 1850 and 1905; while American opium consumption grew four-fold, with the number of addicts peaking at 313,000 in 1896 and legal imports of opium reaching 298 tons in 1907 (Musto 1973: 5; Courtwright 1982: 9–28). By 1900, opium was fully integrated into the commerce and consumer cultures of Asia and the West.

At the start of the twentieth century, however, the world's great powers reversed this free-trade policy, replacing it with a relentless prohibition. By then, opium was so inextricably intertwined with the global economy that this imperfect suppression simply forced its trade into an invisible interstice where the now-illicit commerce would endure and even expand.

In 1909, the United States launched modern drug diplomacy at the Shanghai International Opium Convention that led, by 1925, to prohibition of the non-medical trade in narcotics by the League of Nations. By the end of the twentieth century, the United Nations had prohibited 245 natural and synthetic drugs under multiple anti-drug conventions and formed its Office of Drugs and Crime to enforce these bans (United Nations 1997: 162–64). In a parallel prohibition effort, the United States banned domestic narcotics use in 1914, and then, starting in 1970, waged a 'war on drugs' against opium trafficking in Asia and coca cultivation in the Andes (US Office of National Drug Control 1998; US Cabinet Committee 1972; McCoy 2004: 46–50, 55–58).

Yet by 1997, the global illicit drug traffic had become, according to the UN, a \$400 billion industry, equivalent to 8 percent of world trade, that supplied 180 million users or 4.2 percent of the world's adult population (United Nations 1997: 123–24; United Nations 2000: 69–70). A decade later, the UN reported that drugs were 'the single most profitable sector of transnational criminality' with an annual value of \$322 billion, far larger than the next illicit activity, human trafficking at \$32 billion, or the illegal firearms trade at only \$1 billion (United Nations 2007a: 170).

Although the near-perfect coercion synonymous with colonialism in Asia and later communist rule over China could reduce or repress much of the traffic, this illicit commerce would revive time and again via the invisible tendrils that entwine illegal drugs, after these four centuries of legal commerce, within world trade—through seed stocks from global proliferation, incipient consumer demand, and chemistry's recurring formulation of new synthetics or natural derivatives. Starting with the commercial development of morphine, cocaine, and heroin in the nineteenth century, the number of banned drugs, largely developed by the pharmaceutical industry, would rise from just 17 in 1931 to 245 by 1995. Whether in United States since the late 1970s or the Burma-Thai borderlands after 2000, synthetics such as oxycontin or methamphetamines would fulfill unmet demand whenever suppression impeded supply of natural narcotics. Moreover, by repressing local narcotics cultivation while global drug demand remained unchecked, the powerful US-UN prohibition effort served as stimulus for a ten-fold increase in world illicit opium production—from 1,200 tons in 1971 to 10,500 tons by 2017 (US Cabinet Committee 1972: 11; UN 2018: 8).

Looking back on this century of failed prohibition, the US and UN effort has succeeded only in stimulating the profitability and proliferation of narcotics. Through this distortion in the global political economy, drugs became the economic foundation for covert netherworlds that served as invisible incubators to sustain, for nearly a century, a range of extralegal activities—including syndicate criminality, armed insurgency, and covert operations (Gutierrez 2018).

Reviewing three major cases of drug trafficking from across Asia—drug lords in Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle, death squads in the Philippines, and covert warfare in Afghanistan—reveals how our model's three components can converge to form covert netherworlds at regional, national, and international levels, transforming social margins of crime and illicit commerce into potent sources of political change within these wider realms. Apart from illustrating a distinct aspect of the covert netherworld's political dynamics, these cases will lead us, in their sum, to assess the character of this clandestine domain as an autonomous element within world politics—that is, impervious to the actions of individuals no matter how innovative or influential, resistant to repression by national or transnational agencies, and capable of influencing the course of military operations, whether by weak states or the world's sole superpower.

Golden Triangle Drug Lord

As narcotics surged into the United States during the late 1980s, Washington declared war on the world's leading 'drug lords'—notably, General Manuel Noriega of Panama, Colombian cartel leaders like Pablo Escobar, and an unknown Burmese warlord named Khun Sa. In March 1990, the head of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) branded Khun Sa the 'king of opium,' and the US Attorney General called him the 'prince of death' while indicting him for smuggling over a ton of heroin into New York City (Cox 1996: 47–50; McCoy 1999: 301). Six years later, however, the defeat of this powerful drug lord had surprisingly little impact on Southeast Asia's opium trade, indicating that this illicit traffic was part of a domain with sufficient autonomy to defeat Washington's drug war.

Indeed, when the Cold War came to Asia in the 1950s, a convergence of our three components formed a covert netherworld along the Burma-Thai border in an area called the 'Golden Triangle.' For nearly a quarter century, from 1950 to 1972, the CIA used the Burma-Thai borderlands to mount a succession of covert operations as part of its Cold War containment of China. After Mao Zedong's Red Army pushed 14,000 Nationalist troops across the border into Burma's Shan States in 1949, Washington, seeking a second front to blunt Beijing's involvement in the Korean War, ordered the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to mobilize these stragglers for several clandestine invasions of southern China (Leary 2006: 129–33).

By accident of British colonial conquest in the late 1880s, the Tai-speaking Shan States had been incorporated into the Province of Burma as an autonomous region, creating ethnic tensions still unresolved a century later. After Yangon broke its promises of regional autonomy in the mid-1950s, the Shan minority launched a secessionist revolt that would persist for another 40 years, sustained by rebel involvement in the region's growing opium traffic (Smith 1994: 24–25, 58–63; McCoy 1999: 304).

Through convergence of Nationalist Chinese trafficking and the Shan revolt, both fostered by CIA covert operations, opium production in the Shan States became the economic foundation for a covert netherworld along the Burma-Thai border. By forcing local hill tribes to produce the drug and then managing its export, these Chinese troops presided over a massive increase of poppy cultivation on the Shan Plateau—from some 18 tons in 1958 to an estimated 400 to 600 tons in 1970 (Yawnghwe 1987: 57). After the Burma Army attacked in 1961, these Nationalist Chinese irregulars retreated into Thailand, where they continued to control the cross-border opium traffic through an informal alliance with the Thai military (McCoy 2003: 349–55).

During its half-century of operation, the Golden Triangle's covert netherworld transformed a Shan rebel called Khun Sa from boy soldier into the world's most powerful drug lord. Then, at the peak of his 40-year career, these clandestine dynamics quietly crushed him, leaving little trace of his once-formidable influence. At the outset of this chaos on the Burma-China border, Khun Sa launched his military career in 1950 at age 16 when he formed a local militia in his home area (Khun Sa: 47; Yawnghwe 1995: 25). Ever the deft opportunist, Khun Sa would switch sides over the next 30 years between the Nationalist Chinese, Yangon government, and Shan rebels, winning arms, supplies, and concessions with every shift. By 1967, Khun Sa had become powerful enough to challenge Nationalist Chinese control over the Thai-Burma border by setting out from the Shan hills with a massive, 16-ton opium caravan of 500 soldiers and 300 mules—an ill-fated bid that ended when the commander of the Royal Lao Army, himself a major opium dealer, dispatched aircraft to bomb Khun Sa's caravan (McCoy 2003: 333–34, 356–61).

With the support the Thai military, Khun Sa's fortunes soon revived and by the mid-1970s he was operating a major heroin refinery in northern Thailand astride the caravan routes from Burma, using his illicit profits to help finance the election of the country's prime minister, General Kriangsak Chamanand. In the 1976–77 crop year, for example, his force of 3,500 militia hauled 70 tons of raw opium across the border in 12 caravans with an average of 116 mules and 335 guards each (McCoy 1999: 309). But after some flamboyant interviews with the Thai tabloids in 1980–81 promising to stop the heroin traffic in exchange for diplomatic recognition of a separatist Shan state, Thai commandos attacked his rebel redoubt and drove Khun Sa's forces across the border into Burma. There atop a highland massif between the Salween River's deep gorges and the Thai border, he built a new capital city at Homong, protected by 20,000 well-armed troops, for both his rebel Shan State and global heroin commerce (McCoy 2003: 416–19, 427–39).

In March 1984, a truck drove up the driveway of the Nationalist Chinese headquarters at Chiangmai in northern Thailand, detonating a ton of explosives with a devastating thunderclap that marked the eclipse of the Chinese commander and the ascent of his long-time rival Khun Sa as the Golden Triangle's 'king of heroin' (Tomlin 1989; McCoy 2003: 430; Lintner 1994: 264–65). In part through his efforts, Burma's opium production soared from 550 tons in 1981 to 2,430 tons by 1989, sending pure, low-cost heroin into the US market that made 'China White' the drug of choice for rock bands and ramp models. By the late 1980s, Khun Sa controlled

over 80 percent of Burma's opium production and over 50 percent of the world's heroin supply—making him a drug lord of unprecedented power (US State Department 1990: 271–79, 286; US State Department 1997; United Nations 2001b: 32–33, 49–51; McCoy 1999: 301–02, 312). Using his profits from these illicit operations, Khun Sa unified the fragmented Shan nationalist movement by assassinating any commander who rebuffed his leadership, including a half-dozen leaders of the more idealistic Shan State Army, thereby creating a serious secessionist threat that roused a lethal response from Yangon (Lintner 1994: 264).

Starting in early 1994, two Burma Army divisions unleashed a giant pincers movement against Khun Sa's highland bastion. As Yangon shifted control of the heroin trade to its allies, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) joined the fight against Khun Sa in August 1995, thereby winning protection for its own heroin shipments. Then, in one of those bold moves so characteristic of his career, in January 1996 Khun Sa led 1,700 of his rebel soldiers in a dramatic surrender ceremony before cameras from Yangon's TV Myanmar Network, promising contritely that 'we will work together to ... eradicate the opium and narcotic drugs, which endanger the entire humanity of our country.' Despite strong pressure from Washington, Yangon granted him what the State Department called 'immunity from prosecution ... or rendition,' encouraging him 'to sanitize past illicit proceeds' through legitimate investments since 'narcotics profits laundered elsewhere are significant factors in the overall Burmese economy' (New Light of Myanmar 1996: 9–10; US State Department 2000; McCoy 1999: 316–20). In the aftermath of his surrender, the Shan secessionist movement largely collapsed after 40 years of struggle—with the Burma army occupying the rebel zone, surviving insurgent factions eventually negotiating with Yangon, and most of the remaining 15,000 Shan fighters quitting, many fleeing to a half-dozen refugee camps inside Thailand (Ferguson 2010: 54–57; Pederson 2008: 63–64; Wansai 2018).

Surprisingly, however, the surrender of Burma's heroin king had little impact on the flow of heroin out of the Golden Triangle. Within a year, Burma's opium production had increased by 10 percent from 2,340 to 2,560 tons. In response to international criticism, however, Yangon announced a 15-year program for eradication of all narcotics in 1999 and pressed ethnic militia for 'opium-free' pledges (US State Department 2000; U.S. State Department 2002; United Nations 2002: 7).

After a careful cost-benefit analysis of the two drugs, the United Wa State Army accepted UN support for opium eradication and reportedly shifted its assets into methamphetamines manufacture, earning enormous profits from the traffic (Kramer 2007: 21–28, 53–57, 72–73; Ferguson 2010: 57–60). By 2002, Burma had become, in the words of the US State Department, 'the primary source of amphetamine-type stimulants in Asia' with production of 800 million tablets annually. As some 700 million of these tablets flooded across its northern border almost unchecked, synthetics supplanted opiates for most of Thailand's 2.5 million drug users, thereby fostering mass amphetamines use far more serious than the limited heroin addiction of earlier years (US State Department 2002). Combined with a parallel illicit flow from south China, whose massive scale was indicated by a three-ton seizure at criminal labs near Shantou in 2014, this burgeoning traffic in methamphetamines soon became the bane of poor communities across East and Southeast Asia, with an estimated 20 million users by 2010 (Lau 2014; UN 2010: 214).

As Khun Sa's career demonstrates quite clearly, the United States had, in effect, declared war on an illicit commodity so resilient that not even the capture of its most influential entrepreneur could change the course of this vast global commerce. To put it simply, the UN-US prohibition regime could capture a drug lord but it could not contain the illicit commerce that was the source of his extraordinary power.

Philippine Netherworld

Over the past century in the Philippines, the continuity of vice prohibition policies from colonial to national governments has fostered the three requisite components for a covert netherworld—a social milieu of vice entrepreneurs, state security in the form of corrupt or compromised police, and an illicit economic base from illegal drugs and gambling.

Between 1906 and 1908, the U.S. colonial regime, with the support of Filipino reformers, banned opium and most forms of gambling, creating the regulatory preconditions for a thriving vice economy. After independence in 1946, a conservative Filipino moral consensus preserved these prohibitions, thereby making illegal gambling a significant source of campaign funds under the postwar Republic (McCoy 2009: 148–57). Apart from a periodic recurrence of illegal drugs—heroin in the 1960s and amphetamines since the 1980s—illegal gambling dominated the vice economy for several decades through its resilience, sheer size, and political articulation.

A 1999 survey found that 28 percent of all adult Filipinos bet on illegal lotteries called *jueteng* or *masiao* (Social Weather Stations 1999). A parallel legislative study estimated the annual gross of all *jueteng* syndicates on the main Philippine island of Luzon at US \$918 million and bribes to police and politicians

at \$ 180 million (Reotutar 1999: 113–17). If we add this \$ 1 billion in illegal gambling to the \$5 billion from illicit drug sales, then their total was a vast underground economy whose revenues equaled nearly half the government's annual budget. (National Statistical Coordination Board 2000: Tables 15.2, 15.4, 15.5; US Department of State 2002: VIII–50).

In the last days of the twentieth century, the Philippine Congress impeached President Joseph Estrada for taking bribes from syndicates that managed the illegal jueteng lottery. When his televised trial before the Senate failed on procedural grounds, a quarter-million protesters took to the streets for days of demonstrations that soon forced the president from the palace into prison and replaced him with a putative reformer, President Gloria Arroyo. (McCoy 2009: 471–97) As this controversy indicates, illegal gambling had emerged from the country's slums to sustain a costly electoral system otherwise unsustainable in such an impoverished society.

Illustrating the state's power to favor individual vice entrepreneurs within a covert netherworld, during the 1980s the Marcos dictatorship presided over the rise of a powerful drug lord who sparked a major change in Manila's illicit economy. With the protection of the regime's security chief, General Fabian Ver, a petty smuggler named Jose 'Don Pepe' Oyson took control of the illegal importation of a methamphetamine called *shabu*, whose pricing and pharmacology would soon make it a pandemic in the country's sprawling slums and make Don Pepe a powerful crime boss who could buy protection from Manila's police command (Sidel 1999: 70–90). But in March 1990, four years after the fall of the Marcos regime, the National Bureau of Investigation seized 44 pounds of heroin at Manila airport and dispatched the drug lord with two bullets to the head while his security detail looked on helplessly (Drogin 1990).

Despite the death of Manila's most powerful drug lord, methamphetamine use continued to spread unchecked through the city's slums to reach 1.2 million users by 1998 (United Nations 2000a: 15). Driven by rising amphetamine use during the 1990s, drug trafficking superseded jueteng's comparatively benign corruption and brought new, disconcerting dimensions to the Philippine netherworld—notably, kidnapping, cold-blooded rubouts, and active police participation in the illicit traffic.

The exemplar of this trend was Panfilo 'Ping' Lacson whose elite Police Anti-Organized Crime Task Force (PAOCTF) reportedly became a lethal criminal syndicate—maximizing profits by kidnapping overseas Chinese suppliers, draining their bank accounts, and dumping their bodies. In 2001, after Lacson became a senator and rising political star, President Gloria Arroyo's security services alleged that his police squad had kidnapped 21 Chinese drug traffickers and executed six after collecting hefty ransoms (McCoy 2009: 454–66, 502–06). Senator Lacson countered the president's charges by accusing her of running corrupt campaigns financed, ultimately, by the country's top jueteng boss—producing a sordid spectacle that dominated the 2004 presidential contest when Arroyo ran for reelection against Lacson's insurgent candidacy (McCoy 2009: 506–10).

In retrospect, this political feud between President Arroyo and Senator Lacson was a bellwether for longer-term changes in the moral economy of Philippine politics. Though it has been illegal for nearly a century, jueteng still enjoys a certain legitimacy within Filipino popular culture, funding both mass electoral participation and an informal social welfare system that binds a disaffected mass to the Philippine polity. By contrast, drug use is universally condemned, its traffic is marked by lurid violence, and its corruption lacks any socially redeeming legitimacy.

By the late 1990s, as noted above, illegal drug sales were five times higher than the illicit income from jueteng, indicating that drugs were superseding gambling as the dominant element in the country's vice economy. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, it seemed that drug trafficking's displacement of jueteng within the country's covert netherworld could corrode the moral economy of Philippine politics, introducing a more brutal violence, amoral actors, and escalating police brutality.

Duterte's Drug War

Indeed, the deeper implications of this shift within the illicit economy were soon manifest in the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte. During his 21 years as mayor of Davao City from 1988 to 2016, Duterte had presided over 1,424 extrajudicial killings, most done by his Davao Death Squad that marked their victims' bodies with signature brown packing tape (Reyes 2016: 114–15, 124; Chen 2016; Quimpo 2017: 152–56).

At the start of the presidential campaign in early 2016, Duterte emerged from provincial obscurity through his violent populist rhetoric, threatening death to both drug dealers and users. Although the Philippine economy had sustained a 6 percent annual growth from 2010 to 2016, a staggering 26 million Filipino poor still struggled to survive on a dollar a day, most of them packed into service-deprived slums whose misery was amplified by widespread drug use (Sicat 2016; Yap 2016). At the start of his presidential campaign, Duterte promised publicly: 'If by chance that God will place me there, watch out because the 1,000 [executed in

Davao City] will become 100,000. You will see the fish in Manila Bay getting fat. That is where I will dump you' (Human Rights Watch 2017: 4). Apart from a 'populist logic of painting a "dangerous other,"' Duterte's tough talk, says sociologist Nicole Curato, offered a 'promise of justice' and 'stability' for the poor troubled by disorder, petty crime, and rampant addiction (Curato 2016: 101–02).

Thus, on President Duterte's first day in office in June 2016, his handpicked police director, Roland dela Rosa, ordered an attack on drug trafficking, producing, over the next 12 months, 1.3 million surrenders by dealers and users; 86,000 drug arrests; and some 8,000 bodies dumped on city streets, many wrapped in the signature brown packing tape (Dalizon 2017; Reuters 2017). Despite public outrage surrounding police kidnap-killing of a Korean businessman in January 2017 and the shooting of two innocent teenagers in August–September, the drug war continued, after short suspensions, with the number of dead reaching 12,000 by the end of the year (Human Rights Watch 2017a: 429; Villamor 2017; Human Rights Watch 2017b).

Although Human Rights Watch declared his drug war a 'calamity,' a resounding 85 percent of Filipinos surveyed were initially 'satisfied' with the policy (Reuters 2017a; Human Rights Watch 2017c). If we move beyond the logical realm of policy to the emotions of performative politics, each bullet-ridden body left sprawled on a city street seemed an evocative testament to the president's promises of order. Significantly, US President Donald Trump, instead of joining the rising international condemnation of the Duterte administration's human rights violations, cited the success of this Philippine drug war, in March 2018, to urge the death penalty for American drug dealers (Zezima and Dawsey 2018).

The demoralized debate surrounding the 2004 Philippine elections, as well as the sordid spectacle of the current president and his national police participating openly in mass extrajudicial killings, illustrates the power of Manila's netherworld to influence the country's political culture at the highest level.

Intervention in Afghanistan

Throughout the three decades of US intervention in Afghanistan since 1979, its military operations, conventional or covert, succeeded when they coincided with Central Asia's opium traffic and suffered when they failed to complement it. Moreover, between 1979 and 1992 this intervention fostered the three critical components for formation of a covert netherworld along the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands—covert operations by Pakistani and US security services, a social matrix of Islamic militants to sustain surrogate warfare in the Afghan countryside, and a relentless expansion of illicit opiates trafficking.

During its clandestine campaign against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, the CIA worked through Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence, or ISI, to arm Afghan mujahedeen fighters who funded their resistance by an opium tax on poor farmers. 'We must grow and sell opium to fight our holy war against the Russian nonbelievers,' one Islamic teacher told a *New York Times* reporter who trekked across southern Afghanistan in 1986 (Bonner 1986). After just five years of such surrogate warfare, the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands became the world's largest heroin producer, supplying 60 percent of America's illicit demand and 80 percent of Europe's (Smith 1982: 2–3; Falco 1979: 2–3). Afghanistan's opium production also grew unchecked from about 200 tons annually at the start of this covert war in 1980 to 2,000 tons by its end in 1991 (United Nations 2003: 6). With funding from the opium traffic and weapons from the CIA, particularly the Stinger missiles that proved so lethal against Soviet helicopters, the Afghan mujahedeen warlords fought the Red Army for a full decade, finally forcing Soviet troops to withdraw in 1989 (Pear 1988).

As this covert operation was winding down in May 1990, the *Washington Post* reported that the CIA's chief asset, an Islamic fundamentalist named Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, was the rebels' leading drug trafficker with a string of heroin labs in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (Rupert and Coll 1990). In a deft convergence with the covert netherworld, the CIA had sanctioned an alliance between the illicit opium traffic and Islamic guerrillas that sustained their resistance for the decade needed to force the Soviet troops out of Afghanistan.

Over the longer term, however, such covert intervention, so easily unleashed in Afghanistan during the Cold War, produced a black hole of geopolitical instability not readily sealed or healed in its aftermath. Emerging from the bloody civil war that followed the Soviet retreat, the fundamentalist Taliban movement captured Kabul in 1996 and then financed its government via an opium industry freed from prohibition. As the country's poppy crop climbed to a record harvest of 4,581 tons in 1999, Afghanistan became history's first opium monocrop—with much of its land, capital, and labor dedicated to producing 80 percent of the world's heroin supply (United Nations 2000b: 15; United Nations 2001b: 32–38). In July 2000, however, the Taliban suddenly ordered a total ban on all opium cultivation in a desperate bid for diplomatic recognition, cutting the harvest from the 1999 peak of 4,581 tons to just 185 tons within a year—an act of economic evisceration that would leave the regime unable to resist the impending US invasion (Berak 2001; United Nations 2001: iii, 12; United Nations 2001a: 9).

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush White House used CIA cash and US airpower to mobilize a coalition of tribal warlords that captured Kabul in October 2001 and then presided over a proliferation of opium planting. Unchecked by any real drug suppression, Afghanistan's opium production surged from just 185 tons in 2001 to 8,200 tons by 2007—a record harvest that provided 93 percent of world heroin, an extraordinary 53 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and the illicit income to revive the Taliban resistance (United Nations 2007: pp. iii–iv, 7, 39, 60, 86).

By 2009, the Taliban were expanding so rapidly that the new Obama administration felt forced to surge US force levels up to 102,000 troops in a bid to cripple the guerrillas (Baker 2009). After months of rising deployments, President Obama's new-look strategy was officially launched in February 2010 when helicopters carrying hundreds of US Marines landed at Marja, a remote market town in Helmand Province, where almost 40 percent of the world's illicit opium was grown largely under the Taliban's protection. By attacking the insurgents but ignoring the opium harvest that funded their annual spring offensives, Obama's surge soon suffered a defeat foretold (Chivers 2010; Nordland 2010).

While US forces wound down major combat operations in late 2014 as part of their planned withdrawal, the Taliban launched offensives in the north, northeast, and south—killing record numbers of Afghan troops and occupying half the countryside (Nordland & Goldstein 2015). By 2016, the Taliban's sustained offensive in the heroin heartland of Helmand Province was overrunning Afghan military posts and winning back key opium districts, forcing Obama to suspend his withdrawal by keeping over 8,000 troops in country indefinitely (Jolly 2016; Nordland and Shah 2016).

These dismal trends persisted throughout 2017 as the Afghan opium harvest nearly doubled to a record of 9,000 tons (United Nations 2017: 8). Convinced that opium provided 60 percent of the Taliban's funds for wages and weapons, the US command dispatched F-22 fighters and B-52 bombers, starting in November 2017, to destroy the Taliban's heroin laboratories in opium-rich Helmand Province (Lamothe 2017; Hughes 2017; Schmitt 2017; Constable 2017). After three weeks of this bombing campaign, the US command claimed destruction of 25 drug labs that supposedly deprived 'drug kingpins' of \$80 million in merchandise and denied the Taliban \$16 million in drug taxes (Cockburn 2018). By contrast, British drug expert David Mansfield estimated the Taliban's actual tax losses at \$2,863, somewhat less than the US claims of \$16 million, while the 25 buildings destroyed were an inconsequential share of the country's 500 heroin labs (Mansfield 2018: 4–5, 21, 26; Schmitt 2017).

More broadly, the amazing asymmetry of F-22 stealth aircraft, that cost \$400 million each, bombing mud-walled huts equipped with cheap electric heaters and rusting steel drums is symptomatic of the US failure to contain an illicit traffic that still remains the economic foundation for this thriving netherworld.

Conclusion

Each of these cases offers insights into the political dynamics of the covert netherworld. In the Golden Triangle, this clandestine domain shaped Khun Sa's rise as the world's most powerful drug lord and prevented the global prohibition regime from controlling his burgeoning narcotics traffic. By deftly playing upon this netherworld's political and economic forces, Khun Sa amassed sufficient local power to dominate the global heroin traffic for a decade and sustain an ethnic revolt for nearly 15 years. While his sudden eclipse precipitated the collapse of the Shan secessionist revolt, it had little impact upon the illicit opium traffic, indicating that the covert netherworld's economic dimension had achieved sufficient autonomy to survive even major political change.

In the Philippines, the netherworld's illegal gambling and illicit drug trafficking developed a parallel power to shape the character of national politics, compromising three presidential administrations over the past 20 years and exercising a profound impact on the moral economy of political life. While President Duterte skillfully manipulated the symbolism of drug suppression to win strong popular support, the spectacular surge in extrajudicial killings coordinated by his National Police has had little impact upon the illicit methamphetamine traffic—again illustrating the economic autonomy of the covert netherworld. For the past 40 years in Afghanistan, an illicit commodity, opium, has shaped the fate of military interventions by the world's sole superpower, allowing it an initial success and later contributing to its ongoing failure.

In each of these relatively weak states, illicit commerce sustained a clandestine domain that can compromise the existing political order, as in the Philippines; sustain an insurgent challenge to the established nation state, such the Taliban revolt and the Shan secessionist movement; or sustain surrogate intervention by foreign powers, as both Bangkok and Washington did in Burma. Even when state power succeeds in crushing the social apparatus controlling the drug traffic, as it did to Khun Sa in 1996 or the Taliban in 2001, the persistence of illicit commerce within this invisible interstice can readily incubate an alternative, either shifting the traffic to a new illicit apparatus or resuscitating an old one. From an economic perspective, illicit commerce persists and

proliferates as it answers a persistent demand for extralegal goods and services. Such illegality thereby becomes an integral component of a clandestine domain beneath society's conventional surface, either compromising formal politics through corruption or creating an alternative through insurrection.

From a political perspective, it seems reasonable to conclude, from the sum of these cases, that the covert netherworld has now attained sufficient autonomy to be treated as a significant factor in international politics. Such autonomy renders the netherworld and its illicit commerce impervious to the actions of individuals, even the most resilient drug lords like Khun Sa or the most ruthless anti-drug crusaders like President Duterte. Like the couriers and street dealers they employ, drug lords are, moreover, expendable and drug source regions are mutable or moveable, rendering suppression efforts by national police and international agencies not only unproductive but often counterproductive.

From a disciplinary perspective, the essay shifts the analysis of criminal syndicates and illicit commerce from criminology, where it is grounded in the specificity of law or survey research, to the realm of politics and history where it shares similarities with more amorphous concepts such as legitimacy or sovereignty. As literature on the covert netherworld, its syndicates, traffics, corruption, and collusion continues to grow, this concept, or something similar, has the potential to lend comparative breadth and analytical depth to these disparate studies.

Although the Cold War fostered secret services of unprecedented power that roiled whole countries and continents with their covert operations, this clandestine domain will likely play an even greater role in future geopolitical conflicts. Through the creation of separate commands for special operations forces (1987) cyberwarfare (2009), and possibly space warfare (2018), Washington has signaled the shift of its global force projection into this clandestine domain. During 2015, for example, the US Special Operations Command had its 69,000 elite troops deployed, often on clandestine missions, in 147 countries, or 75 percent of the world (USSOCOM 2015: 12, 35–43). As countless covert interventions unfold across the globe in coming decades, there will be ample opportunity for clandestine warfare to corrode conventional statecraft, as it did in Afghanistan and Burma—thereby opening new covert netherworlds that can serve as invisible incubators for illicit activities, drug trafficking among them.

The ongoing convergence of this clandestine realm and geopolitical conflict means that the covert netherworld will likely become even more central to great power competition in the twenty-first century than it was in the twentieth, continuing to shape international politics in profound yet unpredictable ways. To extract a larger lesson from these three cases, any analysis of changing global politics that does not consider this covert netherworld is not only incomplete but quite possibly inaccurate.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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