

Book Review of *Drugs and Contemporary Warfare*

Paul Rexton Kan
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Dr. Kan's book is a comprehensive visualization of how drugs play a role in warfare, within armed forces, and as a source of funding for terrorists and illicit activities. Dr. Kan is an associate professor at the U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA. He has written extensively about the blurred, but important to understand, territory of irregular warfare, drugs, and criminality. My reading of "Drugs and Contemporary Warfare" coincided with a recent event. Federal authorities have uncovered an attempt to murder the Saudi ambassador which was tied to the Iranian government in co-operation with Mexican drug cartels where drugs were the currency for covert murder. The intricate web of drugs, drug trafficking, the mix of warlords, criminal and political actors, covert operations, and flow of money that paves the way is well described in Dr. Kan's book. The Iranian attempt to "hire" the Mexican drug cartel to support their political murder attempt by providing opiates to the Mexicans is an archetype for the kinds of new threats Dr. Kan displays.

Dr. Kan also shows clear linkages to terrorism. Drugs are used as monetary and resource channels for terrorists. Drugs can transfer financial resources once sold and avoid detection by the authorities as no money is transferred through the bank system. Another goal can be to make

a street profit to fund the terrorist activity. The role of drugs in terrorism and asymmetric warfare is a key theme through the book.

There are also several challenging ethical dilemmas presented in the book. As an example, in a combat zone soldiers meet a new reality when suddenly fighting drug intoxicated child soldiers who are so “high” that they are easy targets. These underage soldiers still commit atrocities and shoot at everything they confront. Are they children or combatants? One British unit faced this dilemma in Sierra Leone and was captured because they refused to gun these children down, risking their own lives in the hands of a crowd of intoxicated, undisciplined irregulars. They were extracted by Special Air Service (SAS), the British elite forces, which lost one service member but left over 150 irregulars dead.

The book has a chapter titled “Sober Lessons for the Future” (p.93 and forward) which deserves to be read twice, if not three times, because it is an eye-opener for what we as a nation, the military and law enforcement, are up against. Dr. Kan goes through our efforts to build nations out of collapsed autocracies and shows how warlords, drug-trafficking, and criminal organizations can exploit these efforts. A few myths get crushed on the way such as democratization is always the solution. Dr. Kan points out that a too-quick transformation leads to opposite results when as an example the old military elite of the failed regime serves as an institution even for the new regime. When older institutions are removed and there are no stable institutional replacements from the new regime, it creates a vacuum that drug traders, extremists using drugs as a revenue source, and the illicit economy quickly expand within.

In the chapter “Shaky Paths Forward”, the author lays out several strategies to deal with these challenges. He describes the strategies - their strengths and weaknesses. It is dependent on your general outlook on what is feasible or not. The strategies are well presented. My outlook is

that a country cannot exercise enough control over these actors, from terrorists, drug cartels, to other illicit enterprises, to fully implement strategies in that manner. There is no right or wrong, so I leave it to you as a reader to evaluate the feasibility.

The author points out clearly the danger of amphetamines in different forms, which can be domestically made and are a refined high value drug which differs from 1) marijuana that requires space to grow and is bulky to trade in a grand scale, and 2) the high value heroin that requires a border crossing where it can be intercepted by authorities. The amphetamine as a game changer was a very observant line of thought from the author.

I highly recommend “Drugs and Contemporary Warfare” because it is timely; it explores connections that are hard to see by an untrained eye and the book gives understandable examples where things can go wrong and why. The thorough explanation of the diminishing separation of warfare and drugs affects national security in several ways. Any member of the Emergency Management Community should read “Drugs and Contemporary Warfare” as it covers all levels, from policy, enemies, and terrorism, all the way down to drug usage within their own ranks.