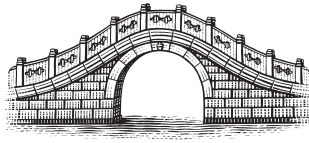


RESEARCH NOTE

North Korea and Illegal Narcotics: Smoke but No Fire?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article examines the extent to which the North Korean regime has dabbled in the state-sponsored production and distribution of illegal narcotics.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Many U.S. policymakers, including the president and secretary of state, and many within the U.S. media tacitly accept the idea that the North Korean state is an increasingly active drug trafficker and producer of heroin and methamphetamine.

A review of the available evidence, however, shows these claims to be unsupported. The fact that the existing data can hold North Korea responsible for only less than one hundredth of 1% of global narcotics production and the fact that satellite imagery has been unable to confirm any North Korean drug production strongly suggest that the regime receives at most a tepid percentage of its annual revenues from narcotics trafficking.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- U.S. policymakers would benefit from decoupling the drug issue from other security issues—such as weapons proliferation and regime collapse—so that targeted security policies could deal with each threat in isolation instead of conflating (and possibly distorting) threats.
- U.S. and Asian counternarcotics operations and strategies could be fine-tuned to address some of the fundamental differences between patterns of North Korean drug production and trafficking and those occurring in Central and Southeast Asia.
- For the community of U.S. analysts and politicians, as well as for many of the major media outlets at large, the characterization of North Korea as a significant illegal narcotics producer and trafficker raises serious questions regarding the way such information is produced and calls for a rethinking of how many in the U.S. understand the North Korean regime.

Is North Korea a major drug producing and trafficking state in Asia? Early in the summer of 2003, the Australian navy captured more than one hundred kilograms (kg) of heroin aboard a large cargo ship called the *Pong Su*.¹ The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) owned and operated the vessel. More than half the crew were citizens of the DPRK, and one of those arrested was reputedly a senior member of the Korean Workers' Party.

A study released by the Jamestown Foundation claimed that the seizure "is indisputable proof that the North Korean regime is busy exporting illegal drugs for generating state revenue."² The U.S. Department of Defense issued a press release noting that the seizure "demonstrates that elements within North Korea are extending their illicit activities."³ President George W. Bush even stated that:

We are deeply concerned about heroin and methamphetamine linked to North Korea being trafficked to East Asian countries... The April 2003 seizure of 125 kilograms of heroin smuggled to Australia aboard the North Korean owned vessel *Pong Su* is the latest and largest seizure of heroin pointing to North Korean complicity in the drug trade.⁴

Yet the incident of the *Pong Su* proves to have been more complicated than a simple tale of North Korean drug activity. According to Australian sources, the Australian government dropped charges against most of those arrested because of insufficient evidence.⁵ An independent Australian police investigation concluded that the heroin on board was of the high quality Double UOGlobe brand, bearing a distinctive red seal and two lions, that is produced exclusively in Myanmar and with no connections to North Korea.⁶ Officials predict that, rather than leaving North Korea with illicit narcotics, the ship likely picked up the heroin en route between Myanmar and Thailand and then headed south around Australia using established shipping lanes. Furthermore, the four officers on board the *Pong Su* were acquitted of any

¹ Richard C. Paddock and Barbara Demick, "North Korea's Growing Drug Trade Seen in Botched Heroin Delivery," *Washington Post*, May 21, 2004, 12; and Doug Struck, "Heroin Trail Leads to North Korea," *Washington Post*, May 12, 2003, A1.

² Kim Young Il, "North Korea and Narcotics Trafficking: A View from the Inside," *North Korea Review* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 2.

³ Andre Hollis, "Drugs, Counterfeiting, and Weapons Proliferation: The North Korean Connection," testimony before the Senate Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Financial Management, the Budget, and International Security, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2003, *Federal News Service*, 3.

⁴ George W. Bush, *Memorandum for the Secretary of State: Presidential Determination of Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for 2004*, Presidential Determination 2003-38, in *Public Papers of the President of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2007), 10.

⁵ "Pong Su Crew Members Deported," Australian Associated Press (AAP), August 3, 2004, 3.

⁶ Struck, "Heroin Trail Leads to North Korea"; and Paddock and Demick, "North Korea's Growing Drug Trade."

wrongdoing by the Victorian Supreme Court and sent home after spending almost three years in custody.⁷

Why is it then that the seizure of the *Pong Su* captured so much attention? Given that drug trafficking has become, as this article will show, a significant part of a growing condemnation of the DPRK by some security experts, political leaders, and media outlets working in the United States, what does the existing data say? This article argues that upon closer inspection only inconclusive and anecdotal evidence supports the contention that North Korea is a substantial drug state. The article offers evidence suggesting that the country is neither a major producer nor a significant trafficker of drugs, and supports this conclusion through an assessment of drug trafficking data compiled by the United Nations, records of international drug seizures, and an analysis of satellite imagery.

To make such an argument, this article is divided into four sections:

- ≈ pp. 92–97 trace the development of the claim that North Korea is a drug producing and trafficking state in major U.S. government reports, political testimony, and the media
- ≈ pp. 97–105 contextualize this claim and argue that it is not conclusively supported by the data found on international drug seizures or by an assessment of the literature on regional drug producing and trafficking
- ≈ pp. 105–108 focus on the global drug trade and argue that the most significant risks to U.S. interests appear to come from Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and South America rather than from North Korea
- ≈ pp. 108–111 offer implications of the analysis for U.S. policy in the region concerning drugs and security as a whole

THE DPRK AS A DRUG STATE

Although mentioned casually in various documents throughout the 1990s, the 1999 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) first formally suggested that the North Korean state sponsored drug production.⁸ After listing approximately a dozen international drug seizures involving heroin and North Korea or North Koreans, the INCSR established an official

⁷ Keith Moor, “Drug Ship Officers Set Free,” *Herald Sun*, March 6, 2006, 10.

⁸ Sections 481(d) and 489 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and Section 804 of the Narcotics Control Trade Act of 1974 require the State Department to release a report every year to “provide the factual basis for the Presidential narcotics certification determinations for major drug producing and/or drug transiting countries.” See Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report—2008 ≈ <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2008/vol1/html/100772.htm>.

connection between state sponsorship of heroin and methamphetamine production and trafficking. The report, published by the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, dedicated three pages to the DPRK and stated:


There have been regular reports from many official and unofficial sources for at least the last 20 to 30 years that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea encourages illicit opium cultivation and engages in trafficking of opiates and other narcotic drugs as a criminal state enterprise.⁹

The INCSR accusations were picked up in an article written by David Kaplan for *U.S. News & World Report*. The article referenced many of the international drug seizures mentioned by the INCSR and concluded:

Interviews with law enforcement officials, intelligence analysts, and North Korean defectors suggest that the regime is now dramatically expanding its narcotics production and that much of the criminal activity is controlled at the highest levels of government.¹⁰

To support these claims, Kaplan also interviewed two defectors. One, a pharmacist named Ho Chang-gol, claimed that the DPRK ran more than ten official poppy farms to export opium. The second defector, Bae In-su, stated that he worked for three years as a driver for the Communist Party's Foreign Currency Earnings Department, where he ferried opium and heroin to ports for export. According to In-su, at least twice a month he would deliver a van full of opium to Japanese ships or to a local pharmaceutical plant that refined the opium into heroin.¹¹

A few months later, Dennis J. Hastert asked nine members of Congress to form the North Korea Advisory Group and report to him on "the North Korean threat to the United States and our allies."¹² The group, headed by Benjamin Gilman, chair of the House Committee on International Relations, published a final report in December citing the 1999 INCSR and "34 documented instances involving the arrest or detention of North Korean diplomats" that

⁹ Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report: 1999* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2000)  http://www.state.gov/www/global/narcotics_law/1999_narc_report/index.html.

¹⁰ David E. Kaplan, "The Wiseguy Regime," *U.S. News & World Report*, February 7, 1999, 37–42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37–39.

¹² North Korea Advisory Group, "Report to the Speaker U.S. House of Representatives," November 1999, ii  <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/nkag-report.htm>.

“provide credible allegations of state-sponsorship of drug production and trafficking.”¹³

Two years later, in 2001, the *International Crime Threat Assessment*—prepared by a U.S. government inter-agency working group and one of the key reports on drug trafficking—reiterated the connection between the DPRK and drug trafficking. The report estimated that “more than 40 percent of the methamphetamine seized in Japan in 1999 came from North Korea.”¹⁴ That same year the *Wall Street Journal* cited arguments from each of the previous sources mentioned here:

In the past three months alone, police in Australia and South Korea have seized drugs allegedly either produced or marketed by North Korea estimated to be worth hundreds of millions of dollars. U.S. military officials estimate that North Korea’s annual drug exports have risen to at least \$500 million from about \$100 million just a few years ago.¹⁵

By the spring of 2003 the issue had gained enough attention to persuade the 106th Congress to hold a hearing on the matter. Andre Hollis, the first witness to speak, argued that the “numerous reports of drug seizures linked to North Korea” make it likely that the DPRK is a significant producer of Asian heroin and methamphetamine.¹⁶ William Bach noted that the “50 arrests and drug seizures involving North Koreans in more than 20 countries around the world” strongly suggest that DPRK drug trafficking is state sponsored.¹⁷ Testimony by Robert Gallucci, Nicholas Eberstadt, and Larry Wortzel echoed these remarks.¹⁸ Each witness inferred that North Korean drug production and trafficking are responsible for a substantial amount of illicit narcotics in Asia.

¹³ North Korea Advisory Group, “Report to the Speaker,” 41.

¹⁴ *International Crime Threat Assessment* (Washington, D.C., December 2000) ≈ available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/threat/pub45270index.html>.

¹⁵ Jay Solomon and Haw Won Choi, “Money Trail,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 2001, A1.

¹⁶ Hollis, “Drugs, Counterfeiting, and Weapons Proliferation,” 3.

¹⁷ William Bach, “Drugs, Counterfeiting, and Weapons Proliferation: The North Korean Connection,” testimony before the Senate Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Financial Management, the Budget, and International Security, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2003, *Federal News Service*, 4.

¹⁸ See Robert Gallucci, “Drugs, Counterfeiting, and Weapons Proliferation: The North Korean Connection,” testimony before the Senate Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Financial Management, the Budget, and International Security, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2003, *Federal News Service*, 15–16; Nicholas Eberstadt, “Drugs, Counterfeiting, and Weapons Proliferation: The North Korean Connection,” testimony before the Senate Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Financial Management, the Budget, and International Security, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2003, *Federal News Service*, 11–13; and Larry Wortzel, “Drugs, Counterfeiting, and Weapons Proliferation: The North Korean Connection,” testimony before the Senate Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Financial Management, the Budget, and International Security, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2003, *Federal News Service*, 13–15.

Of more interest are comments from two defectors who were invited to testify. An anonymous former North Korean high-ranking government official, called “Defector 1,” claimed that North Korea started producing drugs secretly in the 1970s in the mountainous Hamkyung and Yangkang provinces. The government began to sell these drugs in the 1980s, yet after flooding and economic collapse crippled the economy in the early 1990s, in 1997 the government ordered that all local collective farms must “cultivate and grow opium.”¹⁹ Defector 1 claimed that state-owned pharmaceutical plants in the Nanam area of Chungjin City in Hamkyung-Bukdo Province then processed the opium.

A second defector testified under the alias Bok Koo Lee. Lee stated that he worked at a munitions plant in Huichon, North Korea, as a supervisor of the Technical Department, where he was responsible for assembling and developing missile guidance control vehicles and software. Even though the hearing was nominally dedicated to drugs, the majority of Lee’s testimony focused on an event that occurred in 1989. Lee and five colleagues were ordered by the North Korean Second Economic Committee to travel from Nampo City to an undisclosed location—a trip he estimates took approximately fifteen days—in order to test a missile guidance control vehicle. In exchange for the missile test, his vessel brought back 220,000 tons of crude oil.²⁰ When defecting to China on July 21, 1997, Lee claims to have crossed North Korean poppy fields during his escape. He suggested in his testimony that the poppies were harvested by two thousand military personnel and local school children.²¹

Sufficient evidence of North Korean illicit narcotics had been established to justify a Congressional Research Service policy report on the issue by the end of 2003. The report cites each of the above sources and repeats the defectors’ claims that the North Korean government ordered farmers in certain areas to grow opium poppies, cultivating between four thousand and seven thousand hectares.²² The author of the report, Raphael Perl, interpreted this data as supporting the conclusion that in the 1970s North Korean officials bought and sold drugs, began cultivating opium fields as a matter of state

¹⁹ Defector No. 1, “Drugs, Counterfeiting, and Weapons Proliferation: The North Korean Connection,” testimony before the Senate Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Financial Management, the Budget, and International Security, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2003, *Federal News Service*, 20–21.

²⁰ Bok Koo Lee, “Drugs, Counterfeiting, and Weapons Proliferation: The North Korean Connection,” testimony before the Senate Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Financial Management, the Budget, and International Security, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2003, *Federal News Service*, 21–23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²² Raphael F. Perl, “Drug Trafficking and North Korea: Issues for U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, RL32167, December 5, 2003, 8.

policy in the mid-1970s, started refining opium poppy and exporting opium refined products in the 1980s, and shifted to methamphetamine production in the mid-1990s due to heavy rains and an expanding methamphetamine market connected to modernization and rapid economic growth in Southeast Asia. Because methamphetamine can be produced quickly and cheaply, using a flexible manufacturing process, and sold locally in volume, the report emphasizes that methamphetamine yields a quick return on investment and therefore offers the regime an extremely attractive product.²³

The State Department expanded the section on North Korea in the 2004 INCSR, which was amended to include many of the claims from the Congressional Research Service report and the 2003 congressional hearing. When making the case for listing North Korea as a significant producer and trafficker of heroin and methamphetamine, the 2004 INCSR highlights that “defectors and informants report that large-scale opium poppy cultivation and production of heroin and methamphetamine occurs in the DPRK.”²⁴ The report admits that “testimony and other reports have not been conclusively verified by independent sources,” but argues that “defector statements are consistent over the years and occur in the context of regular narcotics seizures linked to North Korea.”²⁵

In the *2004 World Drug Report*, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime for the first time ever also included references to North Korea. In three separate places the report establishes a North Korean connection to drugs. First, in a chapter on heroin trafficking the report notes that some seizures of heroin in Taiwan and Australia raise concerns that “there may be some heroin manufacture in the DPRK.”²⁶ Second, when discussing heroin production in Oceania, the report argues that “the Australian authorities intercepted a major shipment of heroin involving North Korean traffickers.”²⁷ Third, when discussing methamphetamine, the report asserts that “North Korea has been repeatedly identified as a source country (or at least a major transit country) by the Japanese authorities.”²⁸

Even though no confirmed seizures of drugs involving North Korean state officials have occurred since 2001, the White House and State Department, in addition to the Congressional Research Service report, have

²³ Perl, “Drug Trafficking and North Korea,” 13–19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁶ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *2004 World Drug Report* (Geneva: United Nations, 2004), 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

continued to connect North Korea to drug producing and trafficking. The State Department's March 2006 INCSR noted a long-standing link between the North Korean regime and drug production.²⁹ President Bush, in his fiscal year 2007 determination of major illicit drug trafficking and transit countries, once again expressed concern over DPRK-state sponsored drug activity.³⁰

The idea of a North Korean drug state has become widely entrenched in the media and academia as well. A cursory search of popular newspapers, magazines, and newswires on the LexisNexis database reveals that a scant 37 newspaper articles and 35 magazine articles mentioned both "North Korea" and "narcotics" in 1998; however, by the end of 2005 the number of articles had jumped to more than 1,000. Among academics, for example, Niklas Swanstrom argued in 2006 that state-sponsored drug production had made North Korea the third largest supplier of heroin to China,³¹ and David Asher framed the narcotics situation in the DPRK as "out of control."³²

CONTEXTUALIZING NORTH KOREA AND THE DRUG TRADE

Readers may start nodding their heads in agreement until more nuance is brought into the picture. Note that, in by far the most comprehensive and thorough exploration of North Korean smuggling networks, Sheena Chestnut synthesized much of the existing research on North Korean narcotics and augmented it with field research and defector testimony of her own.³³ She argues that whereas narcotics trafficking and production were state inspired, sponsored, and sanctioned for much of the 1970s and 1980s—driven by the dual motives of ideology and financial necessity—today central control has weakened as criminal networks have become more entrenched in narcotics distribution. Chestnut identifies 80 incidents involving illegal narcotics and North Koreans from 1976 to 2006, with peaks of seizures occurring in 1997 and 2002, which each had ten seizures. She explains the first peak as relating to an operation where North Korea attempted to repay state debts to Russia

²⁹ U.S. Department of State, "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report," March 2006, 13–14.

³⁰ George W. Bush, *Presidential Determination on Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2007*, Presidential Determination no. 2006-24, *Federal Register* 71, no. 189 (September 29, 2006).

³¹ Niklas Swanstrom, "Narcotics and China: An Old Security Threat from New Sources," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (2006): 113–31.

³² David Asher, "The North Korean Criminal State, Its Ties to Organized Crime, and the Possibility of WMD Proliferation," Policy Forum Online, PFO 05-92A, November 15, 2005.

³³ Sheena Chestnut, "Illicit Activity and Proliferation: North Korean Smuggling Networks," *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 80–111.

by using workers in logging camps to distribute illegal drugs outside of the peninsula.³⁴ Chestnut then notes that during the second peak in 2002 the bulk of seizures purportedly linked to the DPRK did not involve state officials, which suggests a shift away from state control. Her assessment even concedes that none of the seizures since 2001 have involved regime officials.³⁵

Based upon both Chestnut's analysis and this author's own analysis, the reader is asked to consider three points: North Korean incidents account for a very low percentage of drugs seized by world police, satellite images have been unable to confirm any production of narcotics within the DPRK, and U.S. and Korean officials have characterized defector testimony as unreliable and unrepresentative.

A Minor Player

On the first point, the historical record suggests that North Korea is by no means a major player on the global drug scene. When the total amount of North Korean drugs seized from 1976 to 2007 is added up, a different conclusion emerges. These drug seizures have resulted in 43 confirmed arrests, involving 400 kg of hashish, 909.25 kg of heroin, 62.2 kg of opium, 37.4 kg of cocaine, 3,487.7 kg of methamphetamine, 1,210 kg of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), 600,000 tablets of rohypnol, 500,000 tablets of psychomimetics, and an unspecified amount of clonazepam and Captagon tablets (see **Table 1**).³⁶

Of these seizures, seven occurred on North Korean vessels, eight involved North Korean citizens, fourteen involved North Korean diplomats, and fifteen had a presumed connection to North Korea.

The result of these seizures, however, is far from conclusive. Seven of the seizures occurred simply on North Korean vessels—some of which were not carrying any North Korean citizens or personnel—and involved nationals of other countries, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Fifteen incidents were simply presumed to be North Korean and include incidents such as drugs washing ashore on the coasts of Japan and Taiwan, seizures aboard unidentified vessels, and confessions of Chinese, Japanese, and Taiwanese nationals who claimed to have received drugs from North Korean agents. One of these groups went so far as to claim that it had received drugs from a North

³⁴ For a discussion of this claim, see also Sophie Quinn-Judge and Shim Jae Hoon, "Opiate of the Party: North Korea Fuels Opium Boom in Russia," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 159 (December 5, 1996): 28–30.

³⁵ Sheena Chestnut, "Illicit Activity and Proliferation," 108–9.

³⁶ Sheena Chestnut calculated 80 incidents rather than the 43 documented here.

Korean destroyer near the coast of Japan, even though North Korea had no functioning battleships at that time.³⁷ In addition, fourteen of the seizures involved drugs such as hashish, cocaine, ATS, rohypnol, clonazepam, and Captagon that the U.S. intelligence community does not even suspect North Korea manufactures or traffics.

Even if one puts aside all of these problems and accepts that the amounts of seized heroin, opium, and methamphetamine are accurate, they still constitute a very small percentage of international seizures. Considering only seizures in the last ten years, the amount taken from North Korea averages approximately 30 kg of heroin, 2 kg of opium, and 120 kg of methamphetamine per year. According to the *2004 World Drug Report*, however, more than 55,000 kg of heroin and 100,000 kg of opium are seized by international authorities every year.³⁸ In a table on the “Global Illicit Cultivation of Opium Poppy and Production of Opium, 1990–2003,” North Korea does not even make the list—although Afghanistan, Myanmar, Laos, Bolivia, Columbia, and Peru are mentioned.³⁹ Regarding methamphetamine, more than 1.3 tons was seized by international authorities in 1998.⁴⁰ The UN reports that this amount jumped to over 15.4 tons in 2002. Again, although listing the Netherlands, Belgium, Bosnia Herzegovina, Finland, and Poland as among the top 22 countries, the UN report never mentions North Korea.⁴¹ To put these numbers in perspective, North Korea accounts for less than .0005% of global heroin seizures, .00017% of opium seizures, and .0089% of methamphetamine seizures every year. The seizures alone, including that of the *Pong Su*, do not indicate that North Korea is a major drug producing or trafficking country.

Lack of Supporting Satellite Imagery

Satellite imagery—the second point—including commercially available remote sensing and earth observation satellites, has reached incredible technical sophistication. The first commercial surveillance satellite, IKONOS,

³⁷ Military analysts report that North Korea has no blue water navy, and thus no heavy destroyers or air craft carriers. Instead, the North Korean navy is believed to consist mainly of hovercraft, light patrol ships, guided missile boats, and personnel transit vessels. See Global Security, “Military: Korean People’s Army Navy,” April 27, 2005 ~ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/dprk/navy.htm>.

³⁸ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *2004 World Drug Report*, i–ix; and Peter Chalk, “Low Intensity Conflicts in Southeast Asia: Piracy, Drug Trafficking and Political Terrorism,” *Conflict Studies*, no. 305–6 (February 1998): 1–36.

³⁹ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *2004 World Drug Report*, 42.

⁴⁰ Alan Dupont, “Transnational Crime, Drugs, and Security in East Asia,” *Asian Survey* 39, no. 3 (May–June 1999): 438.

⁴¹ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *2004 World Drug Report*, 167.

TABLE 1

Documented Drug Seizures Involving North Korea, 1976–2007

October 1976	400 kg of hashish is seized from a North Korean diplomat in Egypt. Four Scandinavian countries expel twelve DPRK diplomats, including the North Korean ambassador to Sweden, for selling unspecified amounts of narcotics, cigarettes, and alcohol.
June 1994	Russian police seize 8.25 kg of heroin from a Taiwanese citizen who claims he received the heroin from North Korea.
July 1994	Chinese officials arrest a Chinese national on charges of smuggling 6 kg of heroin via the DPRK embassy in China. Russian officials arrest a North Korean citizen and seize 200 g of opium.
August 1994	A DPRK intelligence agent is arrested in Russia for attempting to sell 18 kg of heroin to a Russian mafia group.
January 1995	Chinese officials in Shanghai seize 6 kg of heroin and arrest two DPRK nationals, one carrying a diplomatic passport.
February 1995	Russian officials arrest two North Korean citizens and seize 8 kg of heroin.
July 1995	Chinese police catch an agent of the North Korean National Security and Intelligence Bureau with 500 kg of heroin. Zambian police arrest a North Korean diplomat possessing 2.4 kg of cocaine.
March 1996	South Korean police seize 3.6 kg of crystal methamphetamine on a North Korean ship.
November 1996	Russian law enforcement officials in Vladivostok arrest a North Korean diplomat with 22 kg of opium.
April 1997	Authorities in Japan seize 70 kg of methamphetamine aboard a North Korean freighter.
May 1997	Chinese authorities in Dandong apprehend a North Korean businessman with 900 kg of methamphetamine. Japanese authorities arrest two Japanese residents in Kyoto for attempting to smuggle 60 kg of amphetamines on a North Korean freighter.
November 1997	A North Korean lumberjack working in Russia is caught at Hassan Station with 22 kg of opium.
January 1998	Russian officials arrest two DPRK diplomats with 35 kg of cocaine smuggled through Mexico. A DPRK diplomat is arrested in Egypt with 500,000 tablets of Rohypnol.
July 1998	Syrian police arrest a North Korean diplomat with 500,000 capsules of psychotomimetics (stimulants).
August 1998	Japanese police trace a 100 kg shipment of methamphetamine to a North Korean boat disguised as a Japanese vessel.
October 1998	German officials arrest a DPRK diplomat in Berlin and seize an unspecified amount of heroin.
November 1998	A North Korean businessperson is arrested in Dandong City, China, for selling 900 kg of methamphetamine.
December 1998	Chinese officials seize 9 kg of opium from a North Korean consulate employee.

Table 1 (continued)

February 12, 1999	An employee of the DPRK consulate in Shanghai, China, is caught attempting to sell 9 kg of opium.
April 1999	Japanese police arrest Yakuza gang members attempting to smuggle 100 kg of methamphetamine into Japan on a Chinese ship that had docked in North Korea. Authorities at Prague Airport detain a DPRK diplomat stationed in Bulgaria for attempting to smuggle 55 kg of rohypnol.
May 3, 1999	Taiwanese police arrest four members of a Taiwanese drug organization attempting to smuggle 157 kg of methamphetamine suspected to be from the DPRK.
October 3, 1999	Japanese authorities seize 564 kg of methamphetamine believed to be from North Korea from the Taiwanese ship <i>Xin Sheng Ho</i> .
February 5, 2000	250 kg of methamphetamine suspected to be from the DPRK is seized in a raid of the Chosen Soren run trading company.
December 2000	Taiwanese authorities seize 134 kg of heroin allegedly from North Korea.
February 2001	Japan seizes 250 kg of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) from a North Korean boat.
April 2001	Authorities in Taiwan seize over 100 kg of methamphetamine believed to be from North Korea.
May 2001	An ethnic North Korean with Chinese citizenship is arrested in South Korea with 30 kg of methamphetamine.
October–November 2001	Filipino authorities detain a North Korean ship twice in their waters, seizing 500 kg and then 300 kg of methamphetamine.
December 22, 2001	A Japanese patrol boat sinks a North Korean vessel (the same vessel mentioned above in August 1998) suspected of transporting drugs into Japan.
January 6, 2002	150 kg of methamphetamine is seized in Japanese waters from a Chinese ship that had rendezvoused earlier with a North Korean ship.
July 2002	Taiwanese police confiscate 79 kg of heroin that a local crime group claimed it received from a North Korean battleship.
November–December 2002	200 kg of methamphetamine believed to be from the DPRK floats ashore.
April 20, 2003	150 kg of heroin is seized aboard the North Korean-owned ship <i>Pong Su</i> .
June 2003	Customs officials in Pusan, South Korea, seize 50 kg of methamphetamine from a Chinese vessel that had stopped at the port of Najin, North Korea.
June 2004	Narcotics officials catch a North Korean businessperson with an unspecified amount of clonazepam tablets in Egypt.
December 2005	Police in Turkey detail a North Korean citizen and discover an unspecified amount of Captagon tablets.
August 2006	Japanese police seize 13.1 kg of methamphetamines from two suspected North Korean smugglers.

Source: Benjamin K. Sovacool, "Constructing a Rogue State: American Post-Cold War Security Discourse and North Korean Drug Trafficking," *New Political Science* 27, no. 4 (December 2005): 497–520; Perl, "Drug Trafficking and North Korea," 7–24; "Smuggling Diplomats," *Time*, November 1, 1976; Julian Ryall, "Huge Drug Bust a Major Blow to N Korean Smugglers," *South China Morning Post*, August 19, 2006, 9; Peter A. Prahar, "North Korea: Illicit Activity Funding the Regime," statement before the Senate Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, and International Security, Washington, D.C., April 25, 2006, http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/042506Prahar.pdf; and Ryan Clarke, "Narcotics Trafficking in China: Size, Scale, Dynamic and Future Consequences," *Pacific Affairs* 81, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 73–93.

offers multispectral and panchromatic imagery at a resolution up to one meter, with image capture ability so precise that its manufacturers claim the satellite could pick out the names of football teams playing at a stadium. Since its launch in September 1999, IKONOS has been followed by eight other high-quality imaging satellites owned and operated by firms in China, France, India, Israel, Japan, Russia, and the United States, with each new system surpassing its predecessors.⁴² Military satellite technology, of course, is even more advanced. Although the precise capabilities of the intelligence satellites utilized by the CIA, National Security Administration, and National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency are classified, they are known to have much greater resolution than any satellite available commercially.⁴³ These military systems are allegedly so accurate that they can depict objects the size of centimeters and can also switch spectrums to cut through cloud cover and inclement weather.⁴⁴

Senator Scott Fitzgerald, chair of the 2003 congressional hearing on North Korea and narcotics trafficking, asked the defectors testifying why there was no satellite evidence of the alleged poppy production. One of the defectors responded:

It is surprising to me that satellite pictures could not catch the poppy farms in North Korea because, as I said, all since 1988 there are about 30 acres put aside for the sole purpose of cultivating poppies only. And Chinese police officers and Chinese reporters came to the border and they took pictures of these farms. I'm just flabbergasted that satellites of the U.S. could not have access over or obtain this kind of agriculture activity growing poppies.⁴⁵

This answer appears an inadequate explanation, however, as global drug interdiction efforts have relied heavily on satellite imagery to detect poppy fields, estimate harvests, and bolster regional anti-narcotics strategies. Poppy cultivation is the easiest type of narcotics production to document and is fairly easy to measure.⁴⁶ Poppy fields have a special spectral signature,

⁴² Kartsen Jacobsen, "Mapping with IKONOS Images," in *Geoinformation for European-wide Integration*, ed. Tomas Benes, proceedings of the 22nd EARSeL Symposium on Remote Sensing, Prague, June 4–6, 2002 (Rotterdam: Millpress, 2002): 149–56.

⁴³ Richard A. Best and Jennifer K. Elsea, "Satellite Surveillance: Domestic Issues," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, RL34421, June 27, 2008.

⁴⁴ James A. Lewis, *Preserving America's Strength in Satellite Technology* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2002); and Ben Iannotta, "U.S. Drug Enforcement Instrument Aids in Columbia Debris Search," *Space News Business Report*, April 15, 2003 ~ http://www.space.com/spacenews/archive03/debrisarch_041503.html.

⁴⁵ Defector No. 1, "Drugs, Counterfeiting, and Weapons Proliferation," 23.

⁴⁶ Ralph Emmers, "International Regime-Building in ASEAN: Cooperation against the Illicit Trafficking and Abuse of Drugs," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 29, no. 3 (2007): 510.

and poppy plants, known for their bright-red blooms, are conspicuous landmarks. Additionally, because opium production requires arable soil and adequate water, poppy fields are almost always concentrated near rivers and streams. Soil preparation for poppy planting is also unique, yielding an early season plowing pattern quickly spotted in imagery.⁴⁷ U.S., British, and Afghan counternarcotics teams have utilized satellite imagery to prioritize interdiction efforts in Afghanistan,⁴⁸ and U.S. officials acknowledge using satellite surveillance and imagery to document drug production through the Joint Opium Yield Survey in Myanmar,⁴⁹ estimate the prevalence of Columbian poppy cultivation in the Amazonian rainforest,⁵⁰ project the location of opium production in Thailand,⁵¹ and determine drug trafficking routes in Eastern Europe.⁵²

Indeed, NGOs, the intelligence community, and multilateral actors have used satellite surveillance to depict human rights abuses, extensively document nuclear weapons development, and estimate domestic wheat consumption in the DPRK. Human rights activists hired a commercial satellite firm to take pictures of detention facilities in northeastern North Korea in 2002 and published images of a camp near Haengyong documenting the imprisonment of over 200,000 political detainees in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.⁵³ The pictures were so detailed that they even pinpointed individual prisoners working “to exhaustion” at a coal mine near Chungbong.⁵⁴ Two years later the U.S. intelligence community published satellite images of the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center, along with images of suspected nuclear reactors, enrichment facilities, and spent-fuel storage centers, which the International Atomic Energy Agency later used to justify inspections and to pressure

⁴⁷ Kevin P. Corbley, “Fields of Terror: Photo Mapping Aids Poppy Eradication in Afghanistan,” *Geoplance* (July 2007): 10–18.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Myanmar-U.S. Joint Survey Team, “The Tenth Myanmar-U.S.A. Joint Opium Yield Survey for the Total Eradication of Narcotic Drugs,” March 2004 \approx <http://www.myanmar-narcotic.net/heroin/2004/3-10mar.html>.

⁵⁰ Peter Aldhous, “Drugs, Crime, and a Conservation Crisis,” *New Scientist*, September 1, 2006, <http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=mg19125674.400>.

⁵¹ UN Office on Crime and Drugs, “Thailand,” in *Opium Poppy Cultivation in the Golden Triangle: Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand*, 2006 \approx http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/Golden_triangle_2006.pdf.

⁵² Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu, “Monitoring of Illegal Traffic and Crime Prevention: Space Applications” (presentation at the workshop “Security: Services and Benefits from GMES,” Matera, Italy, January 28–29, 2003).

⁵³ John Larkin, “Exposed—Kim’s Slave Camps,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* 165, no. 49 (December 12, 2002) \approx http://web.radicalparty.org/pressreview/print_right.php?func=detail&par=3779.

⁵⁴ Robert Windrem, “Death, Terror in N. Korea Gulag,” *NBC News*, January 15, 2003.

North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs.⁵⁵ In 2006 the UN World Food Programme utilized satellite photos to illustrate that the country's harvest had improved so that the amount of international food aid could be correctly calibrated.⁵⁶

These examples suggest two conclusions. First, they indicate that existing satellite technology can accurately sense, depict, track, render, photograph, and map human movements, poppy cultivation, drug trafficking routes, weapons manufacturing, uranium fuel enrichment, industrial activity, and agricultural productivity within countries, including North Korea. Second, the examples suggest that the organizations collecting this information, including the U.S. intelligence community, have distributed satellite photographs and images publicly to justify policy recommendations, especially after the intelligence blunders concerning Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests, the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Kosovo, the air strike on a civilian Al Shifa pharmaceutical facility in Sudan, and, most famously, the Iraqi nuclear weapons program. Interestingly, the intelligence community has not released satellite imagery to confirm drug production within North Korea using sophisticated remote sensing and surveillance capabilities, even though it has relied on these satellites to confirm drug production in Afghanistan, Columbia, Myanmar, and Thailand. The failure to do so implies that satellite evidence does not confirm North Korean drug production.

Unreliability of Defector Testimony

As for the third point—defector testimony—the anonymity of the defectors makes interviewing them or verifying their statements difficult. In interviews with North Korean women that had fled the country, Kyungja Jung and Bronwen Dalton found that the women's testimony was neither reliable nor representative.⁵⁷ Because a disproportionate number defected from a single province, North Hamgyong, they invariably presented a biased view of the regime, especially given that they were disenfranchised enough to leave the country. In addition, most defectors were paid for their testimony, incentivizing them to embellish in an attempt to make their testimony more valuable. Jung and Dalton also noted that, with Chinese authorities having

⁵⁵ This imagery is available online at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies website ~ <http://cns.miis.edu/research/korea/>.

⁵⁶ Kari Huus, "N. Korea Cuts Off U.N. Food, Ignites Famine Fears," *MSNBC*, December 29, 2005, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10631108/>.

⁵⁷ Kyungja Jung and Bronwen Dalton, "Rhetoric versus Reality for the Women of North Korea: Mothers of the Revolution," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 5 (2006): 741–60.

started to crack down on illegal North Korean immigrants, defector testimony may be intended to divert the attention of Chinese police by exaggerating North Korean criminal threats.⁵⁸ Similarly, Barbara Demick, bureau chief of the *Los Angeles Times* office in Seoul, has interviewed hundreds of defectors and warns that they are often so desperate to win asylum that they have a powerful incentive to make up stories.⁵⁹

More specifically, many claims by defectors regarding drugs—such as those by Bok Koo Lee—rely on experiences from twenty years ago. The Republic of Korea (ROK) used to reward defectors handsomely for testimony on narcotics trafficking. Although the ROK has recently changed its stance, at the time of Lee’s testimony the government had a long-standing policy of providing defectors with a generous aid package—including fixed payments in gold bullion, a subsidized apartment, exemption from taxes, comprehensive health care, and the right to attend university free of charge—as long as defectors provided novel and useful information.⁶⁰ The ROK gave some defectors additional cash rewards for delivering especially valuable information. Yi Ung-pyong, a fighter pilot who defected with his MiG-19 jet in 1983, received 1.2 billion won. Another defector received \$630,000 in 1987 for providing information on North Korean missile technology. Though acknowledging many of these problems with defector testimony, Chestnut glosses over them in a footnote—stating that “information as obtained through a series of defector interviews...cannot be substantiated and may contain outdated or incorrect information”—rather than stating the problems explicitly.⁶¹

THE REAL LOCUS OF DRUG TRAFFICKING

Despite claims to the contrary, North Korea does not appear to play a substantial role in the production or trafficking of opium, heroin, or methamphetamine. Many analysts believe that drug production remains a significant problem in the region, but one that primarily occurs in Central and Southwest Asia. The Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos) and

⁵⁸ Jung and Dalton, “Rhetoric versus Reality,” 44.

⁵⁹ Barbara Demick, “The Hidden Stories of North Korea,” *Nieman Reports* 58, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 113–14.

⁶⁰ W.R. Bohning, “Undesired Jobs and What We Can Do to Fill Them: The Case of the Republic of Korea” (presentation to the Korea Small Business Institute, Seoul, April 19, 1994), 4; and Teresa Watanabe, “South Korea Braces for Defectors from the North,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1994, 9.

⁶¹ Chestnut, “Illicit Activity and Proliferation,” 88.

the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan) produce most of the worldwide supply of heroin.

More than 65% of illicit opium production occurs within the Golden Triangle, an illegal trade worth more than \$160 billion annually, or four times the worth of the global arms trade.⁶² Of this, Myanmar produces almost 90% and cultivates an estimated 200,000 hectares of poppy fields involving 260 villages and 6,250 households.⁶³ Singapore, with well-developed financial and shipping structures, remains a central point for the transit of drugs and the laundering of profits. The Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Vietnam remain large producers of opium, and significant opium production has increased in the northeastern provinces of Lai Chau and Son La, Vietnam. One recent estimate projected that almost 90% of heroin seized in the United States is produced by the Golden Triangle.⁶⁴ China is emerging as a major producer and trafficker of methamphetamines—producing approximately 50% of methamphetamines in Asia, with most production concentrated in the Guangdong Province.⁶⁵ Nearly 30% of Afghanistan's territory is now devoted to opium cultivation, and the World Bank estimates that at least \$15 to \$20 billion will be needed over the next decade to begin eradicating the poverty that fuels drug production in the country.⁶⁶ Indeed, one recent report estimates that opium cultivation has drastically decreased in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam to the point where Southeast Asia as a whole currently grows less than half of the level harvested in Afghanistan.⁶⁷

The causes behind increased drug production, trafficking, and use in Asia are connected to broader social and economic trends. A long period of sustained economic growth in the region created world-class regional communication and transportation networks (including new road, river, and air routes) and

⁶² Dupont, "Transnational Crime, Drugs, and Security in East Asia," 438.

⁶³ Barbara Kwiatkowska and Harm Dotinga, eds., "Elimination of Illicit Cultivation of the Opium Poppy," in *International Organizations and the Law of the Sea* (New York: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2001), 125.

⁶⁴ For more on these global trends, see Dupont, "Transnational Crime, Drugs, and Security," 433–55; Michael J. Dziedzic, "The Transnational Drug Trade and Regional Security," *Survival* 31, no. 6 (November 1989): 533–48; Alfred McCoy, "Coercion and Its Unintended Consequences: A Study of Heroin Trafficking in Southeast and Southwest Asia," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 33, no. 3 (April 2000): 191–224; Chalk, "Low Intensity Conflicts in Southeast Asia," 1–36; U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, "Drug Intelligence Brief: The Evolution of the Drug Threat," 2002; U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, "Drug Intelligence Brief: Methamphetamine—The Current Threat in East Asia and the Pacific Rim," 2003; and U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, "Drug Intelligence Brief: Heroin Signature Program," 2004.

⁶⁵ Clarke, "Narcotics Trafficking in China," 73–93.

⁶⁶ Joseph J. Sisco, "The Challenge for the United States in the Post-11 September Era: An Overview," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 14.

⁶⁷ Emmers, "International Regime-Building in ASEAN," 506–25.

established regional growth triangles and natural economic territories that made it harder to trace and prevent the trade of illegal goods. Pressure from the United States to liberalize Asian economies also accelerated cross-border trade and reduced border restrictions. In addition, the standardization of consumer tastes increased demand for illicit narcotics at roughly the same time as the spread of electronic financial networks, which augmented the ease and speed of money laundering. The regional economic crisis of 1998–99 deepened drug production and trafficking both by escalating unemployment, which forced impoverished workers to switch to trade in illegal narcotics as a lifeline, and by decimating the budgets of East Asian governments, which reduced needed funds for drug interdiction, opium-replacement crops, and cooperative regional responses.⁶⁸

Closer to home, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reports that the majority of heroin entering the country comes from Mexico and South America and that heroin imports from Asia have declined significantly from 1977–2002. In addition, the DEA notes that the two biggest threats to the United States are coca and cocaine production by Bolivia, Peru, and Columbia and heroin production by Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Mexico—not drug production by North Korea. Similarly, methamphetamine production that threatens the United States is linked primarily to Mexico and Myanmar. The *Economist* has noted that Mexican drug labs produce “hundreds of pounds of meth a year” and that “Mexican criminal gangs exert more influence over drug trafficking in the United States than any other group.”⁶⁹ A DEA report notes that Myanmar, China, and India perform key roles in methamphetamine production, with Myanmar and China being the two largest producers, and China and India having vast commercial chemical industries that produce significant quantities of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, which are used in methamphetamine production.⁷⁰

Finally, the world narcotics trade as a whole is estimated to be worth \$300–500 billion per year, equivalent to the value of the global automobile industry and quickly approaching the worldwide oil industry.⁷¹ By contrast,

⁶⁸ See Alan Dupont, *East Asia Imperiled: Transnational Challenges to Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Chalk, “Low Intensity Conflicts in Southeast Asia”; and Oded Lowenheim, “Transnational Criminal Organizations and Security: The Case against Inflating the Record,” *International Journal* 57 (September 2002): 513–36.

⁶⁹ See “Methamphetamine: Instant Pleasure, Instant Aging,” *Economist*, June 18, 2005, 30–31; and “Drugs and Violence in Mexico,” *Economist*, July 2, 2005, 35–36.

⁷⁰ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, “Drug Intelligence Brief: Methamphetamine.”

⁷¹ Stewart Patrick, “Weak States and Global Threats: Fact or Fiction?” *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 27–53.

recent estimates of the value of North Korean drug production have ranged from only \$70–\$200 million per year, implying that the country is responsible for a meager .01–.04% of global production.⁷²

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The preceding analysis suggests three policy implications: one for policymakers attempting to address security concerns on the Korean Peninsula, one for those fighting the war on drugs or attempting to respond to illegal narcotics production and trafficking, and one for the broader community of U.S. security analysts, politicians, and journalists.

Security

For policymakers responsible for U.S. security policy toward North Korea, the issue of drug smuggling should be decoupled from, rather than conflated with, other presumed illicit activity. Conflating narcotics production and trafficking with other criminal activity runs the risk of broadening security policy to the point where it becomes meaningless—unable to identify the systemic causes behind specific security threats. International police have identified eighteen different types of criminal operations in Asia, from money laundering and aircraft hijacking to the theft of intellectual property, narcotics trafficking, and insurance fraud. Some of these operations are driven by religious fundamentalism, others by ideology, still others by financial incentive.⁷³ It makes little sense to group such diverse problems and their associated causes under a single security policy or approach.

The issue of North Korean drug production and trade, for instance, is fundamentally different than weapons smuggling. The smuggling of nuclear weapons components and materials in the DPRK appears to be concentrated on importing those technologies, whereas North Korea's efforts to smuggle narcotics have been focused on exporting drugs.⁷⁴ Unlike the shipment of narcotics, the movement of nuclear weapons and nuclear materials can be

⁷² See Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "North Korea's External Economic Relations," Peterson Institute for International Economics, Working Paper, WP 07-7, August 2007; and Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "North Korea's Foreign Economic Relations," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 8, no. 2 (2008): 219–46.

⁷³ Ralph Emmers, "ASEAN and the Securitization of Transnational Crime in Southeast Asia," *Pacific Review* 16, no. 3 (2003): 419–38.

⁷⁴ Chestnut, "Illicit Activity and Proliferation," 108; see also Selig Harrison, "Did North Korea Cheat?" *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 1 (2005): 99–110.

traced by radiation detectors and surveillance equipment at airports. Drug sales also depend more on complex wholesale and retail networks composed of thousands of transactions, whereas missiles and high-grade weapons materials are much easier to track and involve large, discrete transactions.⁷⁵

Most importantly, even if the sale of illegal narcotics is endowing the North Korean regime with financial resources, analysts Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland have noted that the value of those drugs is sometimes grossly exaggerated. One analyst testified before Congress that the amount of money North Korea could have been receiving from methamphetamine sales to the Japanese market was as high as \$615,000 per kg. This claim, however, overlooks the fact that the street price of the drugs was astronomically higher than the wholesale price of \$17,000 per kg that North Korea probably actually received, thus inflating the alleged revenue by a multiple of 36.⁷⁶ Based on their assessment of foreign economic activity associated with the DPRK, Haggard and Noland estimate that drug sales may bring in at most \$71–200 million in revenues; at the same time, they note that the country receives \$2.6 billion from all revenue sources, including trade.⁷⁷ Given that the money required for weapons development is inherently fungible, the millions of dollars the regime may be receiving from illegal narcotics is incredibly small compared to the billions of dollars coming from other sources. Grouping the threat of North Korean narcotics production and trafficking together with weapons proliferation may ultimately prove counterproductive, especially if each threat requires separate and more nuanced policy responses.

Counternarcotics

For those responsible for U.S. drug policy—and indeed, for those relying on the United States for intelligence on narcotics production in order to combat drug production and trafficking in Asia—exaggerating the North Korean drug issue may induce a waste of resources. Focusing on designing policies in the region aimed at curtailing North Korean drug production and trafficking runs the risk that more dangerous threats from the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent will continue unabated. Instead, policies directed at reducing drug production and trafficking must also become more precise.

⁷⁵ Haggard and Noland, “North Korea’s External Economic Relations,” 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Haggard and Noland note that estimates of drug revenues could be low because North Korean product could be misidentified as coming from the Chinese triads, Russian mafia, or South Korean gangs. Yet they fail to note the equal chance that Chinese, Russian, and South Korean products could also be misidentified as North Korean, leading revenues to be overestimated.

For example, North Korea appears to export most of its drugs by sea—in relatively small amounts through diplomats and businesspersons—to be consumed elsewhere. A strategy aimed at fighting North Korean drug production and trafficking could rest on naval interdiction and surveillance of DPRK diplomatic and business travelers. In contrast, drugs from the Golden Triangle predominately travel over land, involve thousands of smugglers with little to no diplomatic affiliation, are shipped in large amounts, and are largely intended for domestic consumption instead of export (Southeast Asia is home to roughly 60% of the world's methamphetamine consumers).⁷⁸ A strategy aimed at fighting drug production in Southeast Asia could involve focusing on the porous land border between Thailand and Myanmar, developing anti-drug norms through social marketing in order to reduce demand for illegal narcotics, enacting harsher criminal penalties for users, and addressing the relationship between drug use and the spread of HIV through educational campaigns. Moreover, if one of the fundamental components of any successful anti-narcotics effort involves information-sharing, the distribution of information that exaggerates the threat of the North Korean drug trade could negatively influence regional approaches designed to fight narcotics trafficking in Asia and beyond.

Toward a Nuanced View of North Korea

Third, for the broader community of U.S. analysts, policymakers, and some media representatives, the possible exaggeration of North Korea as a progenitor raises deeper questions regarding the way that knowledge about the country is produced and disseminated. North Korea is certainly no model of moral fortitude for other governments to follow, and the regime is undoubtedly involved in numerous illicit activities. Yet many analysts presume their views are correct without carefully examining their sources or adequately recognizing that accurate information concerning North Korea and drugs is hard to come by. As a result, the most serious question becomes how best to manage the North Korean drug problem rather than how to improve techniques of intelligence gathering or whether North Korea even is a drug problem state in the first place. This situation parallels cases of knowledge creation and dissemination concerning September 11, Iraq and Iran, and other issues where threat assessments made by the Bush administration and previous intelligence communities were exaggerated, distorted, or wrong.

⁷⁸ Emmers, "International Regime-Building in ASEAN," 506–25.

The result of exaggerating and distorting intelligence can be an inability to appreciate subtle nuances and changes when they occur. Therefore, a return to more careful and objective analysis is called for—one that considers all of the data on North Korean narcotics and fits intelligence around it, rather than one that begins with the preconceived belief that North Korea is a major player and finds only data to confirm this belief. Such a shift will not only go a long way toward creating more effective counternarcotics strategies in Asia but could also produce stronger policy throughout the region. Admitting uncertainty when it exists could enhance the credibility of all U.S. claims on a variety of issues at a time when many policymakers around the world have good reason to doubt such claims. To the degree that U.S. policymakers engage North Korea, the intelligence community is less vulnerable to charges that it always seeks to vilify and demonize the DPRK regime.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that U.S. politicians, intelligence officials, journalists, and citizens could be more cognizant of the limits of foreign intelligence in general as well as of the existence of a peculiar U.S. world-view that is regarded by many as too prone to interventionism, especially militarily. The result of increased sensitivity to these two points could help fashion a more careful and prudent U.S. foreign and security policy. ◆