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Financing War or Facilitating Peace? The Impact of Rebel Drug Trafficking on Peace Negotiations in Colombia and Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Rebel involvement in drug trafficking is broadly found to prolong and intensify civil wars. Being an illicit good with strong demand, high profit margins, limited barriers to entry, and few interdiction opportunities, narcotic drugs disproportionately benefit rebel groups as a source of funding in civil wars. Furthermore, drug trafficking is believed to prolong civil wars by creating war economies that benefit rebel groups, making them reluctant to engage in peace negotiations. However, recent peace agreements suggest that drug trafficking can in some cases be used to "buy off" rebel leaders, whereas other insurgents willingly relinquish this source of funding. This article compares attempts at conflict resolution in Colombia and Myanmar, focusing on the impact drug trafficking by Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and United Wa State Army has on contemporary peace negotiations.

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Ending Long-Duration Civil Wars

Over the past decade, research on civil wars has shed considerable light on the political economy of rebel groups. As state sponsorship of rebel groups declined following the end of the Cold War and diaspora financing has diminished as a result of increasingly stringent laws against terrorist financing, insurgent groups have been forced to become increasingly self-funded.[1] Faced with the challenge of obtaining sizable, reliable, clandestine, and renewable sources of funding, the solution many rebel leaders opted for was involvement in organized crime, including trafficking in high-value goods such as alluvial diamonds, hardwood timber, and narcotic drugs.[2] Dealing with large incomes under situations of limited monitoring however creates significant principal-agent challenges, tempting individual members of rebel groups to steal from the organization.[3] Some researchers took the argument further, claiming that whereas involvement in organized crime typically starts out as a means to an end, over time terrorist groups and insurgencies become not only funded by organized crime, but increasingly *motivated* by it.[4] Hence, an influential school of research today argues that the private financial motives of rebel leaders, not the formal ideological aims of rebel groups

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best explains the continuation of so-called intractable conflicts. For instance, Crocker et al note that in some cases, adversaries from both sides benefit from conflict, leading the scholars to ask whether there might be such a thing as "'happy' intractability, an untidy but possibly acceptable status quo" where conflict pays and "the chief beneficiaries of the war economy may have strong incentives to keep the conflict boiling."[5]

According to this line of argument, rebel involvement in organized crime thus creates significant barriers to negotiated resolution of conflict through two mechanisms. First, proceeds from the drug trade strengthen the insurgents, making the state increasingly *unable* to win the conflict militarily; and second, by making insurgent leaders *uninterested* in peace, since they allegedly benefit financially from the continuation of conflict.[6] In this article, these assertions are tested by comparing historical and contemporary peace negotiations in Colombia and Myanmar.[7] Being two of the key coca and opium producing countries, respectively, and facing two of the oldest active insurgencies in the world, Colombia and Myanmar are often used as paradigmatic cases, illustrating the nefarious impact of rebel involvement in drug trafficking on the prospects for peace. However, analyzing how drug trafficking has been addressed in historical and contemporary attempts to end these conflicts, it is clear that the impact the rebel drug trade has on peace negotiations is neither as uniform as typically assumed, nor is it necessarily always *negative*. Recent research has for instance suggested that incomes from the heroin trade was used to successively "buy off" warlords in Tajikistan, eventually leading to the peace agreement in 1999.[8] In another variation, Zabyelina and Arsovska argue that whereas military might was vital to the conflict outcomes in Kosovo and Chechnya, during the post-conflict phase corruption has served as "a power-sharing agreement between antagonistic parties, thereby reinforcing peace."[9]

Hence, the literature suggests that illicit incomes not only finance war but also may sometimes serve to *facilitate* peace negotiations and uphold peace agreements. While controversial, if we accept preliminarily this notion, this raises the question as to under what conditions a "bribing for peace" mechanism may come into play. Contrary to research which assumes that most insurgents are motivated by the same types of incentives and can generally be conceptualized as akin to "organized crime,"[10] this article challenges this so-called sameness hypothesis.[11] Instead the article argues that the nominal ideological agenda of rebel groups still provides vital analytical leverage for understanding *some* contemporary insurgencies, including the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC).[12] Specifically, the article argues that the ideology of FARC and its strict internal monitoring of combatants, funds, and war materials have minimized the motivational change caused by involvement in drug trafficking.[13] Furthermore, whereas FARC is heavily involved in the Colombian drug trade, its senior commanders view it as a social malady and consistent with their nominal left-wing ideology remain firmly committed to finding alternative sources of income for coca cultivators as part of the peace negotiations.[14] Hence, guerrilla involvement in drug trafficking is a limited challenge to the current peace process in Colombia. By contrast, in Myanmar, and with the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in particular, the state has historically offered an implicit acceptance of continued involvement in drug trafficking in return for cease-fire agreements, with state security agencies simultaneously benefitting from the trade. Somewhat counterintuitively, since continued conflict is not a prerequisite for maintaining the illicit incomes, rebel drug trafficking does not appear to pose a major challenge in the peace negotiations in Myanmar either. Whereas the outcomes of the contemporary peace processes in Colombia and Myanmar remain

unknown at the time of writing—and may well fail—evidence from historical and contemporary negotiations are used here to explore the theoretical argument that rebel drug trafficking does not by necessity pose a major challenge to peace negotiations.

The case selection is based on dual criteria. First, FARC and UWSA have participated in the two longest active, contemporary insurgencies in the modern era and both have been heavily involved in the drug trade in their respective countries—in part explaining their longevity— which makes them theoretically relevant for the purposes of this article. Second, we seek to explain two different outcomes—a situation in which the government and the insurgents "collaborate for change" in terms of curbing the coca trade in Colombia[15] versus a tacit, implicit "bribing for peace" mechanism in Myanmar, in which both parties agree to a cessation of the hostilities in return for mutually benefiting from the war economy that originally financed the fighting. Hence, this article argues that whereas rebel drug trafficking certainly finances war, it can sometimes also—albeit counterintuitively—be used to facilitate peace. The analysis of historical peace negotiations draws predominantly on secondary sources. The analysis of the contemporary negotiations however draws on access to the negotiation agendas for both peace processes, as well as interviews with Colombian and Myanmar state officials, international observers, as well as former combatants from FARC,[16] internal communications from FARC and U.S. embassy cables from Bogotá and Yangon, respectively. Hence, while analyzing these negotiations remains challenging—especially in terms of teasing out rebel rationales—the study draws on unusually good primary sources.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section surveys contemporary research on how rebel drug trafficking is perceived to impact peace negotiations, challenging the claim that illicit sources of financing by necessity makes insurgents less inclined to sign peace agreements. This is followed by a description of how FARC and the UWSA initially became involved in trafficking coca and opium and how this trade is managed organizationally inside the respective groups. Next, the impact of rebel drug trafficking on previous peace processes (Colombia 1999–2002, Myanmar 1989) are analyzed, showing why the Colombian negotiations resulted in a "drug war," whereas the negotiations in Myanmar ended in a "bribing for peace" solution. The fourth section analyzes how rebel drug trafficking has been addressed in contemporary peace negotiations, preliminarily resulting in a "collaborating for change" outcome in Colombia and a "bribing for peace" solution in Myanmar. The article concludes with theoretical implications of the study, presented as a taxonomy over when rebel drug trafficking can and cannot be expected to fundamentally prohibit peace negotiations, arguing that future research should pay greater attention to how rebel ideology shapes their priorities and behavior during peace negotiations.

Rebel Drug Trafficking and Peace Processes

During the past two decades, it has been amply demonstrated that drug cultivation and trafficking benefits insurgent groups during civil wars, including diverse groups such as the Taliban,[17] Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK),[18] Sendero Luminoso in Peru,[19] the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA),[20] and the FARC.[21] But while drug trafficking without question has been used extensively to finance insurgent arms acquisition,[22] logistical needs and sometimes wages, the research community remains more divided on whether rebel involvement in drug trafficking is uniformly negative for peace negotiations, or whether it can at times facilitate them. Whereas the former claim has received by far most support in the existing

literature[23] some recent studies have suggested that sometimes such involvement can potentially be used as part of a "bribing for peace" mechanism. Researchers such as Driscoll[24] and Engvall have argued that illicit incomes—predominantly from the drug trade—were used to successively "buy off" a number of rebel warlords during Tajikistan's civil war, leading eventually to the peace agreement signed in 1997. Engvall specifically argues that continued division of the spoils from the drug trade (and other illicit incomes) has played a central role in holding the fragile peace agreement together.[25] Likewise, Zabyelina and Arsovska have argued that whereas military might largely decided the outcome of conflicts in Kosovo and Chechnya, division of the spoils of government control—what they call the "bribing for peace" mechanism—has been instrumental in maintaining the relative stability in these respective territories.[26] Whereas Zabyelina and Arsovska do not explicitly discuss the drug trade, other research has strongly suggested that in Kosovo, the KLA benefitted directly from the drug trade during the conflict, and that such connections may have been maintained after senior commanders transitioned into local power-brokers within the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) and the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) political parties.[27] Similarly, in Afghanistan Goodman argues that the most rapid expansion of the drugs trade in the country coincided with two periods of state-building, once under the Taliban and then again under the Karzai regime.[28] Such an expansion may indicate tacit government approval of drug production in return for greater stability.

Building on this emerging research, the article seeks to further develop our conceptual understanding of under which conditions rebel drug trafficking is less likely to impact peace negotiations negatively. First, we argue that the conditions for peace which state negotiators offer to insurgents fundamentally depend on the *opportunities* and *constraints* that the state itself faces. In the example of Tajikistan mentioned above, the opportunity of winning the conflict by military means was largely unachievable. Similarly, since the country was party to few international agreements, there were few constraints on its ability to offer a "bribing for peace" deal to rebel warlords. Second, we argue that rebel groups are impacted differently by involvement in drug trafficking. Whereas some groups' motives are fundamentally altered to center on profit-making (or were focused on generating personal wealth from the inception), others largely maintain their original ideologies.[29] Consequently, some rebel organizations are presumably more likely to accept a tacit "bribing for peace" deal, or may be actively pursuing such an outcome, whereas others would consider it anathema. Given the broad international consensus supporting a restrictive policy of repressing the production of narcotic drugs, a "bribing for peace" deal is unlikely to be openly acknowledged, but instead can be identified indirectly, mainly through observed behaviors. Drawing on this a simple taxonomy can be created, in which only one out four combinations of rebel agendas and the drug policy of the state—"drug war"—inevitably creates a major impediment for prospective peace negotiations.

Table 1 illustrates schematically how the drug policy of the state and the attitude of the rebel group vis-à-vis continued drug cultivation and trafficking can impact peace negotiations.

Table 1. Possible combinations of state drug policy and rebel agendas.

	Power-seeking rebels	Profit-seeking rebels
Restrictive drug policy	"Collaborating for change"	"Drug war"
Permissive drug policy	Non-issue during negotiations	"Bribing for peace"

When the state maintains a strictly restrictive policy against drug cultivation and trafficking and the rebel organization seeks to continue to benefit from the drug trade, this is very likely to result in a major impediment to peace negotiations and may instead lead to a continuation of a "drug war" in which the state seeks to deprive rebels of their illicit source of financing. In situations where the state is instead willing to apply a more permissive approach to the drug trade, this can result in a "bribing for peace" mechanism, in which incomes from the drug trade are implicitly accepted and divided to create a peace dividend for rebels who enter cease-fire agreements. In a third scenario, if the state maintains a restrictive drug policy, but rebels are not attempting to continue benefitting from the drug trade, the outcome can be a "collaborating for change" mechanism, in which rebels may even support efforts to restrict the drug trade in return for other negotiation concessions. Lastly, if the state applies a less restrictive drug policy, but rebels nonetheless do not seek continued involvement in the drug trade, drug cultivation is likely to be a non-issue during negotiations. That said, given the broad international acceptance of restrictive drug policies and the consistent lure of benefitting from drug cultivation, this is arguably the least likely outcome. Some overlap between these combinations may be seen at different stages of the process. However, these four combinations, the authors argue, make up the core conceptual outcomes. The point of this taxonomy is neither to claim that peace agreements are easy to achieve—negotiations may yet fail for numerous other reasons—nor is it normative, in terms of arguing that states should abandon restrictive drug policies. Instead, the argument advanced in this article is that rebel drug trafficking does not *by necessity* impede peace negotiations, and may in some cases even *facilitate* peace, even though states and rebels alike are unlikely to acknowledge this.

FARC and UWSA Involvement in Drug Cultivation and Trafficking

FARC and UWSA represent two of the oldest, currently operational armed groups in their respective regions. Both organizations are formidable fighting forces, which have proven capable of challenging the state on the battle-field, with much of their longevity and military capacity deriving from their deep involvement in coca and opium trafficking, respectively. Lastly, both rebel groups have nominally left-wing agendas and hierarchical organizations that strive to exert control over drug proceeds and channel a large portion of these to organizational rather than individual needs. In neither organization has this system worked perfectly, and there are examples from both groups of mid-level and, in the case of UWSA, senior commanders who seem to have benefited from the drug trade. That said, these organizations have both been able to avert the rampant corruption and profiteering experienced by some other drug trafficking armed groups.[30]

Whereas the nucleus of FARC was created during La Violencia (The Violence) in 1948–1958 in southern Colombia, the left-wing rural rebel group adopted its current name and ideology during the early 1960s.[31] During the following two decades, FARC remained one among at least seven small- to medium-sized left wing rebel groups in Colombia.[32] In 1982, FARC held its seventh national conference, at which the guerilla group decided to begin to advance from the distant, rural areas of Colombia toward medium-sized cities and economic centers.[33] Recognizing that this strategy required extensive financing, FARC increased extortion and resolved to enter the emerging drug trade in Colombia, in spite of initially avoiding the trade. Formally, FARC only taxed traffickers and ensured that coca farmers were paid fair prices, but over time it became increasingly involved in all steps of the trade, including

selling cocaine to international traffickers.[34] This expansion was partly facilitated by the collapse of the Medellin and Cali cartels in the 1990s. The effects were dramatic, and between 1982 and 1999, the group grew from having some 2000 members in 1982 to an estimated 18,000 full-time members and 12,000 militia members in 1999.[35] Incomes from the drug trade were supplemented by kidnapping, extortion or "taxation" in regions under their control, and possibly state sponsorship.[36]

The roots of the UWSA can be traced back to post-independence Burma (1948 onward). During the 1950s, Kuomintang (KMT) and Chinese communist forces began to move into ethnic Wa areas in North Western Burma. In the late 1960's the Chinese-backed Communist Party of Burma (CPB) started to recruit from the local Wa population, which in turn led to an armed conflict with the central government. However, during the 1980s tension began to escalate in the CPB between the Burman leadership and the Wa and Kokang foot soldiers.[37] Inevitably, this led to the breakdown of the CPB and the formation of a new group known as the UWSA, who inherited the CPB's arsenal after it was abolished. In 1989 the UWSA signed a cease-fire with the Burmese military (Tatmadaw) and have enjoyed relatively good relations since. The government has been willing to make concessions to the UWSA due to its sheer strength in numbers (roughly 20,000 soldiers), as well as the closed geography of Wa State. The Wa region today, officially known as Special Region No. 2 in Shan State, is a semi-autonomous region encompassing some 600,000 people. This territory, which runs east of the Salween River along the Chinese border, and a southern command on the Thai border, is an independent country in all but name.[38] The UWSA has built up a government apparatus completely separate from Naypyidaw that includes health and education services, military and security sectors, financial and foreign relations departments. These concessions become clearer when one compares them with other cease-fire regions where the government maintains a strong presence to counterbalance the influence of ethnic minorities.[39]

Whereas FARC has been deeply involved in the coca trade for more than three decades, and is routinely described as one of the world's richest insurgencies,[40] the guerilla group has also sought to resist the corrupting influence of "easy money." From interviews with defectors and intelligence analysts, it is clear that FARC has mainly used incomes generated from this trade to finance its military struggle and does not pay wages to members,[41] which reinforces findings from several previous studies.[42] Furthermore, FARC closely monitors incomes from the drug trade and punishes theft harshly, with even senior commanders having been "incarcerated" or executed.[43] Consequently, whereas there have been individual instances of graft, by and large the guerilla group has been remarkably adept at counteracting the corrupting influence of the drug economy.[44] Involvement in the drug trade is concentrated disproportionately to a handful of the approximately 70 active FARC *fronts*, primarily those located in border regions with extensive drug trafficking corridors, such as the 16th front in Vichada and the 48th front in Putumayo. But even in-depth case-studies of such fronts—including both extensive interviews and surveys with more than 700 ex-combatants—find little evidence that drug trafficking fronts become notably corrupt or greed-oriented over time. Individual instances of graft occurs, but when detected the perpetrators are harshly punished by senior FARC commanders.[45] FARC also seeks to rein in corruption by appointing front commanders deemed trustworthy and well-known by the FARC Secretariat,[46] and corruption among front commanders is uncommon but not unheard of. Hence, whereas occasional claims by FARC commanders that they have no involvement in the drug trade are treated with derision in Colombia, analysts and ex-combatants interviewed agree

that the guerilla group has strictly regulated management of drug proceeds, use them instrumentally to procure arms and logistical need and that senior commanders maintain an ideological agenda.[47]

After 1989, the UWSA continued the cultivation of opium after the abolition of its predecessor, the CPB. The profits from the cultivation supported the strong government apparatus that the UWSA created in Wa state. This allowed the UWSA to become one of the world's most powerful drug trafficking organizations. The "narco-political territory"[48] in parts of Kachin and Shan state currently produce the second highest quantities of opium in the world, after Afghanistan. Opium production in Myanmar has increased from 21,600 ha in 2006 to 57,600 ha in 2014.[49] This follows a period of significant decline in cultivation between 1998 (~130,000 ha) to 2006 (~20,000 ha), which witnessed a growth in the easier-to-manufacture amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS).[50] From discussions with analysts and officials in Myanmar, it is clear that historically UWSA has mainly used incomes generated from this trade to finance its military struggle and that it is a significant, if not the key, factor in explaining their survival.[51] The longevity of UWSA is also in large part due to the support of external state actors.[52] This support has been most substantial from China, which, being eager to hedge its bets in Myanmar's democratic transition and particularly with ethnically Chinese groups along its borders, has furnished the organization with military-grade arms and training.[53]

Poverty has traditionally been the main driver of drug production in Wa State.[54] The cultivation of poppy in the Wa hills has been an integral part of the Wa's agricultural cycle, livelihood, as well as a means for poverty reduction. Drug production has long been one of the main sources of the UWSA's finances. In Wa controlled areas, the UWSA has overseen the complete process of drug production from cultivation to delivery. The high level of development in the semi-autonomous region indicates that much of the proceeds of the drug trade are channeled toward organizational needs. It is alleged that some individuals, such as UWSA chairman Bo Youxiang and his family, have made considerable fortunes from the drug trade and through establishing profitable businesses outside of Wa state. As one commentator notes, "In the Wa hills, the question of whether a person is a drug lord or a political leader, a drug producer or a business man are all irrelevant."[55] The UWSA's production and trafficking of narcotics are deeply integrated with its semi-autonomous status within Myanmar.

Drug Cultivation and Historical Peace Processes in Colombia and Myanmar

During the previous peace negotiations analyzed here—Colombia 1999–2002 and Myanmar in 1989—rebel drug trafficking was handled differently by state negotiators, with drastically differing outcomes. In Colombia, FARC expanded coca cultivation inside a demilitarized zone (DMZ) that it controlled, whereas the Pastrana government leveraged U.S. counterdrug policies to receive substantial financial support through Plan Colombia, nominally a counterdrug assistance program, which, however, also contained a substantial counterinsurgency component. In 2002 this resulted in renewed fighting and what largely became a "drug war." By contrast, in Myanmar permissive drug policies led the government to reach a "bribing for peace" solution, in which UWSA agreed to a long-term cease-fire in return for semi-autonomy and a permissive environment for the drug trade.

During the mid-1990s, FARC inflicted a series of military defeats against the Colombian armed forces, overrunning military and police outposts and taking countless police and military hostage. With its increasing military strength, FARC came to be seen as a threat to the power of the country's traditional, local elites, as well as to criminal cartels, who began funding paramilitary "self-defense" groups that targeted FARC. This did little to halt the guerilla, but resulted in a growing tally of civilian victims.[56] When peace negotiations between the FARC and the government of Andrés Pastrana began in 1999 in a demilitarized zone in Caguán southern Colombia, FARC stood at the apex of its military might. The Caguán negotiations were doomed from their inception, since arguably neither FARC nor the government was honestly pursuing a negotiated settlement at the time. FARC unilaterally froze the negotiations several times and brazenly used the DMZ as a rear-operating base where it expanded coca cultivation, recruited extensively, planned attacks in other regions of the country and conducted military training.[57] Whereas FARC nominally sought alternative livelihoods for coca cultivators, in practice the guerilla had no intentions of abandoning the trade, instead expanding cultivation to fund preparations for what they believed would be the final military offensive.[58] Meanwhile, the Pastrana administration negotiated Plan Colombia with the U.S. government. While formally focused on counternarcotics operations, the Colombian armed forces also received technical assistance that radically improved their counterinsurgency capabilities, including human intelligence (HUMINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT) collection, intelligence analysis, special operations, and precision bombardment capacity.[59] Hence, the Colombian government leveraged rebel drug trafficking to acquire U.S. support for its counterinsurgency campaign, conditioned on Colombia wholeheartedly agreeing with the U.S. eradication and interdiction agenda.[60] Unsurprisingly then, whereas the formal negotiation agenda had 12 themes and 48 subthemes, during three years of negotiations the parties did not reach agreement on a single one. Hence, the combination of FARC pursuing continued involvement in the drug trade and state officials strongly committing to a restrictive drug policy was one of the major incompatibilities that resulted in the negotiations breaking down in 2002. This was followed by continued fighting which bore all the hallmarks of a "drug war."[61]

The 1989 cease-fire agreement between the Burmese government and UWSA occurred in the wake of the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma (CBP). The breakup of the CPB resulted in the creation of a number of new organizations, one of which was the UWSA, who inherited the CPB's headquarters in Phangsang, military arsenal, and knowledge as well as much of its drug resources.[62] The Burmese government's head of military intelligence, Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, designed a new cease-fire strategy in light of these new non-state armed actors and dispatched envoys. The result for the Wa was a cease-fire agreement with the government on 18 May 1989. The conditions were that the UWSA retained the right to administer its own territory and keep its opium empire. The only restriction was that UWSA would not seek an independent Wa state but rather accept status as something between a state (*pyi-neh*) and district (*khayaing*) under the responsibility of the Burmese central government.[63] This peace agreement thus represents a clear-cut example of the "bribing for peace" mechanism, with a permissive drug policy used to "buy off" a rebel group unwilling to relinquish its involvement in the trade.[64]

The Tatmadaw, however, went one step further and became directly involved in the drug trafficking activities of the UWSA. According to some analysts, the UWSA have been supported logistically by Myanmar military units stationed around border areas in the ethnic

areas. Joshua Kurlantzick explains that it is impossible to move drugs around the heavily militarized areas without the knowledge of the military. "The military is closely involved in the shipping of the drugs out of the country and into Thailand and Laos, where the army units help move the drugs past checkpoints and ensure security from raids by Thai forces and DEA units that work with them."[65] The involvement of the Myanmar military in the border areas is motivated by financial gain. Troops in these areas are expected to provide for themselves, according to the Tatmadaw's self-sufficiency policy from the 1990s. This policy often forces border troops to engage in the illicit drug trade as a source of livelihood.[66]

Government authorities have historically turned a blind eye to these activities in return for amicable relations and a share of profits from drug kingpins. Ties between government and drug kingpins have been documented at the highest levels. A U.S. embassy cable in 2007 alleged that government contracts in construction were diverted to a prominent construction company owned by the son of Lo Hshing Han, allegedly a key drug smuggler.[67] Other commentators note that such an approach is not new and occurs at the highest echelons of government: "Former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt allowed Lo Hsing Han to continue the drugs trade, even ensuring lucrative contracts that would help disguise his earnings, in return for negotiating cease-fires with powerful ethnic groups."[68] A similar conciliatory modus operandi was assumed in the tensions between the military and intelligence corps, headed by Khin Nyunt until 2004. The military needed the widely disliked and reportedly corrupt intelligence corps to maintain order, particularly in ethnic regions, therefore rather than crack down on disobedience the military tolerated intelligence corps indiscretions.[69] The degree to which this was done was at the highest order, when the military installed Khin Nyunt as prime minister in 2003 for the "sake of stability."[70] The intelligence corps is alleged to have "lent money to cultivators to finance crop, taxed it on harvest, owned shares in heroin and amphetamine refineries and their troops guarded those fields and factories."[71] However, the U.S. government has maintained that there is little credible evidence to such allegations.[72] Other sources in Myanmar note the involvement of elements of the Tatmadaw, namely the People's Militia Forces, as key actors in the opium and ATS trade[73] and have also ensured free passage across the Myanmar-Thai border.[74]

Addressing Drug Cultivation in Contemporary Peace Negotiations

In the contemporary peace negotiations in Colombia and Myanmar, the issue of rebel drug trafficking has not proven to be any major obstacle to reaching a negotiated settlement. In Colombia, during the Havana negotiations the parties reached a preliminary agreement on combating illicit drugs, with FARC promising to end its involvement in drug trafficking in return for support provided to coca growers[75] and—presumably—judicial measures that allow guerilla commanders to avoid extradition to the United States. In Myanmar there have been proclamations by the government to address and even eradicate drug production, although little if any of this talk has been directed at the UWSA. As such the previously negotiated cease-fire agreements appear unlikely, without a significant change in government position, to be challenged.

Following the collapse of the Caguán negotiations, FARC has gradually been weakened, while the state security forces have continuously gained ground. Between 2002 and 2012, FARC was driven from the urban centers of Colombia toward peripheral border regions, completely lost the strategic initiative, saw approximately 17,000 fighters defect and lost

approximately two-thirds of its fighting force. Meanwhile, the Colombian security forces have roughly doubled in size, acquired critical counterinsurgency skills, and killed three of seven members of the FARC Secretariat and scores of influential mid-level commanders.[76] Combating drug cultivation as a financing mechanism was part of this strategy. Between 2007 and 2014, the acreage devoted to coca cultivation in Colombia has more than halved due to aggressive fumigation campaigns and crucial drug trafficking fronts were specifically singled out as high value targets. In interviews, ex-combatants described how after the 16th front was badly decimated, the 48th front had to assume its financing responsibilities, before this front also came under heavy military pressure.[77] Intelligence analysts and FARC ex-combatants widely agree that this militarily weakening— including but not limited to attacking drug trafficking fronts—was the main impetus for FARC engaging in renewed negotiations in 2012.[78]

Negotiations between the Colombian state and FARC formally began in November 2012 in Havana, Cuba. After initial accompaniment by Norwegian diplomats, the parties agreed on a negotiating agenda comprising six points, of which combating illicit drugs was one. At the time of writing, the parties have concluded 39 rounds of discussions after more than two years of talks, reaching preliminary agreements on rural development, political participation, and the "problem of illicit drugs."[79] The initial agreement covers a wide range of issues, but focuses on offering alternatives to coca cultivation, rather than the one-sided focus on fumigation, which is currently being pursued.[80] The cornerstone of the agreement is the creation of a "Comprehensive National Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops" (Sp: CNPSIC), a national-level authority responsible for implementing the agreement. On paper, CNPSIC is tasked with developing eradication programs in collaboration with coca growing communities, prioritizing manual eradication over the controversial fumigation program, without ruling out the latter completely. Making a distinction between drug production (which local coca growers are often involved in) and drug commercialization (mainly conducted by transnational drug cartels), the agreement also reflects FARC's self-image of representing the coca growers. For its part, FARC commits to cut all ties with the drug trade and provide information on where it has planted land-mines, which the guerrilla has used extensively to counteract the government counterinsurgency campaign.[81] The last sub-section of the accord calls for strengthening of the judicial system against drug traffickers; a strategy against money laundering; strict controls on precursor chemicals; a strategy against drug-related corruption; and the "clarification" of the relationship between drugs and armed conflict.[82]

Whereas these negotiations follow the standard diplomatic formula of "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed," reaching preliminary agreement on measures to combat the cultivation of illicit drugs—mainly but not exclusively coca—was achieved surprisingly easily after six months of negotiations. In part, this is explained by the fact that FARC never fully acquired the type of "criminal nature" that some have ascribed to it[83] and hence is not motivated by profits from the drug trade to continue the conflict.[84] Whereas FARC has been involved in all aspects of the cocaine trade, neither its foot-soldiers nor its top commanders benefit personally from the coca trade, and its leadership have maintained a clear if anachronistic political agenda, pushing their cadres to follow suit.[85] Hence, whereas FARC has committed numerous human-rights abuses and squandered its legitimacy and popular support, the fear that FARC as a whole may wish to continue the conflict in order to benefit from the coca economy seems to have been misplaced.

This agreement comes after the Colombian state has illustrated a strong commitment to—and some success with—a restrictive drug policy. Relying largely on aerial fumigation, the Colombian state has suppressed the acreage devoted to drug production. Today, coca is cultivated at approximately 42,000 hectares—approximately half the acreage in 2002–2007—and 2013 Colombia was surpassed by Peru as the world's largest producer of coca leaf.[86] In 2014, cultivation again seems to be increasing, presumably in expectation of crop substitution support, which will be given to coca growers if a final peace agreement is signed. For its part, FARC can also claim some level of success, insofar that it has been able to negotiate favorable conditions for coca growing communities seeking to exit the trade, which many associate with violence and potential for great economic losses. For example, voluntary crop substitution coupled with economic support until the new product is both profitable and sustainable is a key demand of many coca growers in southern Colombia.

The contemporary peace negotiations in Colombia thus illustrate the interaction between power-seeking rebels and a restrictive drug policy, termed "collaborating for change" in this article. Hence, this strengthens the core argument of this article—that rebel drug trafficking does not automatically create intractable conflicts. While FARC is one of the most notorious drug trafficking rebel organizations in the world, its leadership evidently seems prepared to relinquish this intensely profit-making practice[87] in return for policy changes favoring its political agenda, and the constituency of coca cultivators that they claim to protect. Whereas the Colombian state has been understandably suspicious of the negotiating tactics of FARC—purposely designing the contemporary negotiations to avoid repeating the mistakes of the Caguán process[88]—one area in which it does not seem to doubt the intentions of the guerilla is regarding combating illicit drugs. Describing the agreement, President Santos said that FARC "has promised to effectively contribute, in diverse and practical ways, to a definitive solution to the problem of illegal drugs."[89] Furthermore, in December 2014, President Santos sparked a fierce debate by suggesting that drug trafficking could be considered a "connected crime" in relation to "political crimes" such as rebellion,[90] thus making it eligible for pardons, amnesties, or reduced sentencing as part of an eventual peace agreement.[91] While meant to address the twin concerns of FARC leaders determined to avoid extradition to the United States on drug trafficking charges and keen to remain eligible to seek and hold public office, this proposal is deeply controversial in Colombia and may well evoke strong international push-back.[92] Furthermore, none of this is to guarantee that the contemporary peace negotiations will result in a durable peace, or a drug-free Colombia—individual FARC fronts may well opt to splinter off, and there are many potential pitfalls to the current negotiations. It is to say, however, that FARC involvement in drug trafficking is not the main barrier to peace in Colombia.

In 2009, the Myanmar government's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) put forward the Border Guard Force (BGF) proposal, which would, in essence, amalgamate the non-state armed actors under the Tatmadaw's command and control structure. The BGF plan was received by the UWSA but they opposed the domination of Tatmadaw forces in the ranks of the UWSA.[93] When another ethnic armed group with historical drug trade links, the Shan State Army-North—who outright refused the proposal—was attacked by government troops, the UWSA stood by, reinforcing their position as a government friendly actor in the BGF scheme. In 2011, the ongoing cease-fire with the UWSA was further reinforced when a new cease-fire agreement was signed in Naypyidaw. This new cease-fire was a continuation of the 1989 cease-fire agreement and did not change any of the political concessions previously

granted to the UWSA. The new agreement granted the UWSA greater freedom to administer its territory and therefore continue to produce and traffic large quantities of narcotics.

In Myanmar, a country that has numerous armed ethnic groups and an ongoing cease-fire and peace process, the emergence of a peace economy has been reported in several instances. There are numerous accounts of companies and individuals with vested interests in supporting the peace process in return for a share in future resources. For example, during cease-fire discussions in Karen state, Dawei Princess Company, which holds mining and logging concessions in Karen National Union (KNU) controlled areas, funded peace talks and facilitated dialogue. [94] This was similarly the case in Kachin State, rich in precious stones, where a prominent businessman in jade facilitated dialogues between government and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO). In both cases, the financing partner had commercial interests in the resolution of the conflict and links to government officials. Such examples of the emergence of a peace economy continue. The peace process has become monetized by some companies that see commercial benefits in brokering a peace from which they can later command dividends. In Myanmar, with under-developed infrastructure, access to logging activities offer the most immediate access to such dividends, and was reportedly used as a bargaining tool by Karenni groups in cease-fire talks.[95] These examples highlight private sector involvement in resources and peace processes and allow for comparisons between such government negotiations and drug cultivation by rebel groups. The establishment of such a norm in the monetizing of peace processes has legitimized the use of drug cultivation as a bargaining tool in the UWSA's own peace process.

Norway has played a significant role in peace negotiations in both Myanmar and Colombia. The Norwegian-led Peace Donor Support Group (PDSG) and the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) aims to support the cease-fires in the country and provide practical and political support to the peace effort. The MPSI has attracted criticism from some local civil society groups for "manufacturing consent" in the process rather than mediating or facilitating consensual outcomes,[96] yet it has successfully worked in creating forums for negotiations to take place.[97] However, the peace negotiations in Myanmar, supported by the MPSI, risk losing traction if the initial momentum is not kept.[98] As such, rather than aiming for a transformation of opium crops to other similarly high-value crop, such as was tried with the time-consuming transformation to rubber in previous eradication programs, the current process in Wa state is more accommodating to the status quo. Drug production is a mechanism within the process, rather than simply an illicit activity which must be removed before negotiations can begin. While the existence of this mechanism, in the long term, is unlikely to be sustainable it allows for a continuation of the current process. By contrast, a more restrictive state drug policy—or harsher de facto enforcement—would likely have created barriers to a renewal of the cease-fire agreement.

In the current cease-fire process the strength of the UWSA has meant that it has been largely excluded from the ongoing Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) negotiations, a process the Thein Sein government has championed in the country's democratic transition. UWSA have maintained that previous cease-fire agreements are sufficient and no new agreement is necessary. Its role in the NCA has been largely as an observer. This approach has changed recently when in May 2015 it hosted talks in Phangsang with other ethnic armed groups (EAGs) engaged in the NCA. This appeared to be an opportunity for the UWSA to rally support for its proposal to upgrade from a status of semi-autonomous region to that of a state, a demand it made at the conclusion of the talks. Recent activity suggests that long-standing cease-fire agreements, arrived at with the support of UWSA's drug activities, are

being bet against to secure statehood within the Union. This would indicate the most significant shift yet from the UWSA as a "profit-seeking" group to that of a "power-seeking" group within the environment of a permissive drug policy. Nonetheless, drug cultivation has benefited the UWSA in cash and kind, providing the means to continue the group's military might and strengthening its hand at the negotiating table.[99]

Conclusions

During the past decade, research on civil wars has been beset by an unfortunate tendency to focus predominantly on structural factors as shaping rebel group behavior and thus explaining conflict on-set and duration.[100] By contrast, the internal belief-systems and formal ideologies of rebel groups have been largely ignored, even though the pendulum seems to have begun to shift again.[101] But as this article has illustrated, structure is not destiny. To the contrary, ideological beliefs seem capable of strongly shaping the behavior of rebel groups. The negative impact of rebel drug trafficking on conflict resolution is typically assumed to be that "conflict pays" and that hence, the parties involved have a mutual interest in "keeping the conflict boiling," as phrased by Crocker et al.[102] Whereas true of many conflicts, as this article has shown, at times rebels are willing to relinquish this income, and at other times, they do not need to keep fighting to retain control over this revenue stream. As illustrated in Table 2, applying the analytical model developed at the outset of this article to the peace processes analyzed results in three notable findings. First, in spite of FARC and UWSA being two of the paradigmatic cases of drug-funded rebels, in only one peace process—Caguán 1999–2002—did rebel drug trafficking negatively impact negotiations, and it was arguably not the main cause why this process failed.[103] Second, in Myanmar, a permissive state policy toward rebel drug trafficking effectively transformed the issue into an asset in the search for a cease-fire. This is not to say that such an outcome is desirable, but it is to say that rebel drug trafficking does not automatically present a major impediment to peace, which should become more widely recognized by research in this field. Lastly, in the current negotiations in Havana, combating illicit drugs have presented negotiators with comparatively uncontroversial common ground, whereas issues such as transitional justice have proven far more contentious.

The agreement on combating illicit drugs during the Havana negotiations should be surprising to those who have described FARC as criminalized "narco-terrorists." But whereas FARC has long had access to very extensive flows of drug proceeds, this money has been channeled toward funding the armed struggle, not financing extravagant life-styles of its leadership.[104] In fact, whereas there have been isolated instances of theft, given the combination of large incomes and limited monitoring, corruption inside FARC has been remarkably limited.[105] If anything, rebel drug trafficking has proven to be one of the easier agenda points

Table 2. Impact of rebel drug trafficking on peace negotiations in Colombia and Myanmar.

	Power-seeking rebels	Profit-seeking rebels
Restrictive drug policy	Havana, 2012–, Colombia-FARC "Collaborating for change"	Caguán, 1999–2002, Colombia- FARC "Drug war"
Permissive drug policy	Myanmar 2011–, Myanmar-UWSA Non-issue during negotiations	Myanmar 1989–, Myanmar-UWSA "Bribing for peace"

to agree on. Instead, the key to resolving the conflict lies in reconciling FARC's grand political aspirations with its very limited popular legitimacy and support in Colombia.

In the case of the UWSA, drug production has been key to financing the group and ensuring its survival. This has generated wealth for the leadership but they have in turn used much of these finances to reinvest in their communities in the form of schools, roads, hospitals, and so forth. Furthermore, within the community, there is adherence to certain laws such as that which prohibits drug use, with violators sentenced to severe rehabilitation programs. In this context, the implicit "bribing for peace" deal seemingly offered by the Myanmar authorities allows UWSA leaders to both benefit personally and fund their de facto state. As such, drug cultivation has benefited the UWSA in cash and kind, providing the means to continue the group's military might and strengthening its hand at the negotiating table, rather than prohibiting a prolongation of the cease-fire agreement.

This illustrates a second under-researched assertion in contemporary research on rebel drug trafficking—the claim that drug trafficking almost inevitably transforms from a *means* to an *end* for insurgents.[106] Both FARC and UWSA have used incomes from the drug trade mainly instrumentally, to improve their military capacity and provide social services to their constituents.[107] The extent to which the top leadership of these groups have benefitted personally from the drug trade varies—with UWSA leaders more so and FARC commanders almost not at all. Even so, their instrumental use of incomes illustrates that left-wing, hierarchically organized rebels are indeed capable of restricting the power to corrupt that the drug trade exerts. Whereas there are several examples of wealthy warlords, the image of the greed-driven rebel has often been vastly exaggerated.

None of this is meant to dismiss the impact of the rebel drug trade on civil wars. But whereas drug trafficking often strengthens rebels' operational capability, hence making it vastly more difficult for the state to defeat them, it does not necessarily alter their ultimate aims, or make them uninterested in finding a negotiated settlement to the conflict. In conclusion then, rebel drug trafficking remains an enduring challenge, but it should not be assumed to be the key factor in making conflicts intractable. Rather than viewing rebel drug trafficking as the yoke that drives conflict it may also at times be seen as the bargaining chip, the mechanism that facilitates peace.

Notes

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