



Fragmented sovereignty and the geopolitics of illicit drugs in northern Burma

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ABSTRACT

The study of the relationship between illicit drugs and state formation opens new directions for empirical inquiry into modalities of sovereignty. This article investigates the process of state formation in northern Burma, a highland notorious for illicit drugs for several decades, by examining how the drug trade both lubricates the Burmese state's territorial expansion and coercive control, and undercuts its sovereignty in the highland. Building upon Gramsci's theory of hegemony, I argue that illicit drugs foment domestic tensions and external intervention, and thus bolster a condition of fragmented sovereignty in which the Burmese state's crisis of hegemony is protracted. Regarding the role of illicit drugs in the process of state formation in source countries, we must transcend the debate on state failure or state consolidation and take fragmented sovereignty seriously as the dysfunction of state hegemony in relation to multiscalar political struggles among relatively autonomous, sometimes competing, cores of power.

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Introduction

This paper contributes to the body of critical work that has developed in recent years linking illicit drugs and state formation, for example by Warf (2014), Williams and Warf (2016), and Taylor (2015). The focus of these works is the politics of illegality and the intersections of drug economy, territorial control, and military conflicts (Banister, Boyce, & Slack, 2015). The threat brought by illicit drugs to individuals and societies cannot be underestimated. In the *World Drug Report* published in 2015, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Executive Director Yury Fedotov emphasizes that “risk factors and circumstances that can render people more vulnerable to illicit drugs, as well as facilitate the establishment and expansion of illegal markets, are often related to issues of development, rule of law and governance” (UNODC, 2015, p. 1). Indeed, the production and trafficking of illicit drugs resonates with “a broader and more prevalent crisis in the capacities and legitimacy of modern states” (Milliken & Krause, 2002, p. 755). To address the crisis, this paper analyzes the geopolitics of illicit drugs in northern Burma, a highland

region that includes ethnic Shan and Kachin states, and which has been notorious for drug business for decades.¹ The geopolitics of illicit drugs is defined as the political struggles and compromise that underpin the production, trafficking, and control of illicit drugs in the process of making and remaking of national territory. My analysis aims to reveal the deep historical roots of the drug trade in northern Burma and connect the trade to the domestic tensions and external intervention that have generated an unruly condition of fragmented sovereignty since Burma's independence in 1948.

This examination comes in the wake of new developments in political geography, notably the focus on territory and sovereignty that has opened up geographical analysis of state formation. Murphy (2013) posits that a territory's continuing allure makes a state reluctant to surrender it to other forces. Literally, the state has legitimate power to control national territory and “the monopoly over the means of violence” (Risse, 2011, p. 4). This legitimate power requires “both communicative and infrastructural resources and a high degree of popular acceptance to operate effectively,” giving rise to what Agnew (2005, p. 443) calls effective sovereignty. According to Agnew (2005), effective sovereignty cannot rely solely on direct coercion because of limited likelihood of long-term success; it also requires popular acceptance within a national territory. Agnew's particular insight is to follow Gramsci's (1971) conception of hegemonic leadership involving consent and coercion. Agnew's

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¹ In 1989, the ruling military junta changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar. In this paper, Burma and Myanmar are interchangeable.

account of effective sovereignty is a useful framework for analyzing the state formation process. Nevertheless, Agnew (2005, p. 446) restricts his analysis to the impacts of globalization on state territoriality in relation to monetary sovereignty, arguing that globalist states in the U.S. and China count on hegemony in the sense of “a mix of coercion and active consent.” This paper will expand Agnew’s work along two lines of inquiry: fragmented sovereignty and illicit economy.

First, scholarly work on the state offers detailed empirical and theoretical insights on the territorialization of state power (Collyer & King, 2015; Jessop, 2016) and how the state maintains hegemonic leadership for territorial control (Agnew, 2005; Agnew & Corbridge, 1995). However, there is a symptomatic silence on how the state ineffectively exercises national sovereignty or delivers public goods to its citizens. This silence leaves the dysfunction of state hegemony undertheorized. If political authority *qua* effective sovereignty requires “a governmental apparatus to serve as a final seat of authority” and “an accepted definition of functional and geographical scope” (Agnew, 2005, p. 443), then fragmented sovereignty represents a state’s inability to create a condition of final authority to maintain the monopoly over the means of violence due to domestic tensions and external intervention (see Risse, 2011). Agnew (2010, p. 782) reminds us that the exercise of powers need not be confined to states, but includes “so-called private actors and political organizations other than states.” I add to Agnew’s conception the irregular armed groups that share power with the state or even establish their own exclusive authority. Here I follow Davis (2010: 398) to define irregular armed forces as “non-state armed actors who wield coercive capacity that either parallels or challenges that held by the state, and whose deployment of violence undermines the state’s monopolization of the means of coercion.” Northern Burma provides a good example of fragmented sovereignty that refers to a condition in which state hegemony becomes dysfunctional because of multiscalar power struggles among relatively autonomous, sometimes competing, cores of power (Davis, 2010; Nordstrom, 2000).

Second, scholars have examined the impact of globalization on state formation and the territorialization of sovereignty. For instance, Agnew’s (2005: 443) work on the synthesis of central state authority and political territoriality provides a helpful lens, revealing that sovereignty is “necessarily about ceded, seduced, and co-opted diffused power as well as coercion by (and acceptance of) centralized power.” Nevertheless, scholars pay inadequate attention to “the clandestine side of globalization” (Andreas, 2004). Clandestine flows in global trade reflect and reinforce “the illicit ‘underside’ of economic globalization,” raising questions about whether globalization is out of control or the state is in retreat (Andreas, 2015, p. 782). In 2015, *Territory, Politics, Governance* published a special issue to explore “clandestine economies and the political geographies of law enforcement” (Banister et al., 2015, p. 365). Articles in this special issue discuss law enforcement against drug-related crimes (Agnew, 2015; Taylor, 2015), legalization of certain drugs (Polson, 2015), and social and political resistance against the War on Drugs (Massaro, 2015). Though illicit economies are not limited to drugs (see Holden, 2017), the exclusive focus on illicit drugs in this special issue draws much-needed attention to the global drug economy and its impacts on global politics. By expanding Agnew’s focus on licit globalization to drug-related clandestine globalization, this article sheds light on how the drug economy and related violence reshape the territorial template of state sovereignty in source countries and thus challenges us to rethink theories on state formation, sovereignty, and territory.

This paper’s primary goal is to explore the entanglement of illicit drugs and fragmented sovereignty in Burma by analyzing

how the drug trade foments internal conflicts and external intervention. Most of the research on illicit drugs in Burma focuses on the dynamic relationship between the drug economy and irregular armed groups in its northern highland. Callahan’s (2004) work on civil wars and nation building, Meehan’s (2011) research on the central role played by the drug trade in Burma’s changing political order, and McCoy’s (2003) study on the CIA’s complicity in Burma’s drug trade, all demonstrate the geopolitics of illicit drugs in Burma. What these authors neglect is the question of territorial sovereignty in relation to illicit drugs. I widen the ambit by focusing on how the drug economy induces a situation of fragmented sovereignty, whereby the Burmese state is unable to exercise jurisdiction over part of its territory. Specifically, this paper examines how the drug economy creates a platform for political strategies of coercion, compromise, and resistance among three major players—the Burmese state, irregular armed groups, and foreign forces—that fragment state sovereignty in northern Burma. These players either are involved, directly or indirectly, in the drug trade for various and even competing interests, or control drug plantation and trafficking.

My argument is twofold. First, the drug trade is not merely about making profit from illicit goods, but also reinforces and perpetuates a power imbalance within Myanmar (the Burmese state and irregular armed groups) and beyond (Burma and strong powers such as the U.S. and China). Furthermore, the drug trade in northern Myanmar does not always bolster anarchy and chaos, but can foster an unruly condition of fragmented sovereignty and economic underdevelopment that shapes the course of ethnic conflicts and peace negotiations between the Burmese state and irregular armed groups.

Second, the coexistence of multiple authorities that either share sovereign power or claim exclusive authority gives rise to territorial fragmentation, even though territorial integrity is nominally maintained in source countries. Part of the national territory in these countries is therefore not under the full control of centralized authority, as in the cases of the Gulf of Urabá in Colombia (Ballvé, 2012) and Aziz in northern Afghanistan (Goodhand, 2009). In the context of transnational drug business and narcotics control, national territory is integrated into a global space of narcocapitalism within which the legitimacy and policy-implementing effectiveness of the state is “eroded and undermined both within and without” (Cerny, 1995, p. 621).

The next section theorizes fragmented sovereignty through Gramsci’s theory of crisis of hegemony. The third section turns to the context of colonialism and independence to delineate Burma’s divided geography between lowland and highland, and discusses the booming drug trade due to the Kuomintang troops from China. The final two sections will show how different irregular armed groups in the highland—ethnic drug lords from the 1960s–1980s and ethnic military groups from the 1990s to the present—have confronted or collaborated with Burmese Armed Forces (called *Tatmadaw* in Burma).² Specifically, these sections will show external forces, from the U.S. and China, involved directly or indirectly in northern Burma through promoting or controlling the drug economy. The geopolitics of illicit drugs, as the paper concludes, plays an important role in fragmenting state sovereignty and territorial integrity in source countries.

² Ever since Burma became independent in 1948, the *Tatmadaw* has been crucial in maintaining law and order. It constitutes most important institutions in charge of coercion in the Burmese state. After Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy won the 2015 general election and came into power, the *Tatmadaw* has continued to play a key role in Burma’s domestic politics by controlling three ministries—defense, home affairs, and border affairs.

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