

# Mules, Pick-ups and Container Traffic: Cross-Border Production and Trade and the Shaping of the Political Economy of Nangarhar

David Mansfield

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Author: David Mansfield

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# About Drugs & (dis)order

‘Drugs & (dis)order: building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war’ is a four-year Global Challenges Research Fund project generating new evidence on how to transform illicit drug economies into peace economies in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar.

It is an international consortium of internationally recognised organisations with unrivalled expertise in drugs, conflict, health and development. Led by SOAS, University of London, project partners are: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Alcis, Christian Aid, Kachinland Research Centre (KRC), London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), Organization for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR), Oxford School of Global and Area Studies (OSGA), PositiveNegatives, Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), Universidad de los Andes, and Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

## Project aims

1. To generate a new evidence base on drugs and illicit economies and their effects on armed conflict, public health and livelihoods. This will be done through comparative empirical research on borderland regions in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar, which together produce the vast majority of global illicit heroin and cocaine.
2. To develop new programmatic approaches and policy reforms, that can contribute to the reduction of violence and more inclusive development and sustainable livelihoods in drugs affected contexts.
3. To build a global network of researchers and research institutions from Afghanistan, Colombia, Myanmar and the UK. This project focuses on drugs, but will widen the field of study to incorporate other illicit economies. This agenda will be driven forward through the establishment of a Research Consortium for the Transformation of Illicit Economies.

To find out more about Drugs & (dis)order visit the website: [www.drugs-and-disorder.org](http://www.drugs-and-disorder.org) and follow us on Twitter [@drugs\\_disorder](https://twitter.com/drugs_disorder).

# About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul that was established in 2002 by the assistance of the international community in Afghanistan. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice by conducting high-quality, policy relevant, evidence-based research and actively disseminating the results and promote a culture of research and learning. Since 2020, AREU organization is registered with Ministry of Economy (MoEc) as a non-profit NGO. As the top think-tank in Afghanistan and number three in Central Asia according to the Global Go To Think Tank Index Report at the University of Pennsylvania, AREU achieves its mission by engaging with policy makers, civil society, researchers and academics to promote their use of AREU's research-based publications and its library, strengthening their research capacity and creating opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate. AREU is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of representatives of donor organizations, embassies, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, Afghan civil society and independent experts.

AREU's core donor is the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Specific projects in 2020 are being funded by the European Union (EU), Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Institute (CAREC), The Foundation to Promote Open Society (FPOS), The French Medical Institute for mother and children (FMIC), The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT), and UN Women.

AREU holds memberships in multiple international development consortiums including the RESOLVE Network, Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), A Conflict Sensitive Unpacking of The EU Comprehensive Approach to Conflict and Crisis Mechanism (EUNPACK), ADB- Asian Think Tanks Network (ATTN) and The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC). For more information visit [www.areu.org.af](http://www.areu.org.af)

In 2018, AREU was awarded Best International Social Think Tank by Prospect Magazine.



# Contents

About the Author .....	IV
Acknowledgements .....	V
1. Executive Summary .....	VI
2. Introduction.....	2
3. Methodology.....	4
3.1. Research objectives and approach .....	4
3.2. Research design and implementation .....	6
4. Background: Nangarhar .....	12
5. Emerging Answers to the Research Questions.....	20
5.1. Physical Geography .....	21
5.2. Physical Infrastructure .....	27
5.3. Geopolitical .....	39
5.4. Violence .....	42
5.5. Regulatory regimes .....	47
5.6. Networks and Patronage .....	57
6. Key themes or lines of analysis that require further research .....	59
7. Conclusions and wider implications .....	63
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	65

## About the Author

David Mansfield is an independent consultant working with AREU since 2005. He has been conducting research on rural livelihoods and poppy cultivation in Afghanistan for twenty four consecutive growing seasons. This research has involved over 16,000 indepth household interviews in rural Afghanistan. David has a PhD in development studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London is the author of *A State Built on Sand: How opium undermined Afghanistan*, and produced more than 75 research based products on the drugs economy and rural livelihoods in Afghanistan.

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# 1. Executive Summary

There are economic and political actors in the eastern province of Nangarhar, including those in the government and the Taliban, who generate significant rent on the production, movement and sale of a range of commodities as a consequence of their control of key locations - or chokepoints - along supply chains. Often these actors are not directly involved in the production and trade of commodities themselves - they neither own or work the talc mines nor opium fields - and do not necessarily own the commodities that are being transported and traded. Neither, are the chokepoints from which they derive their income necessarily at the point of production - for example a quarry, or heroin lab - or the point of exit - the border crossing through which they are transported. Many chokepoints are found along the route, perhaps at the entry to a mountain pass where pack animals have to be used, or the point where a metalled road stops and where commodities have to be cross decked from large container vehicles to smaller trucks to be able to continue the journey. Some of these chokepoints may contain soldiers or police, and consist of a facility where the failure to stop could result in fines, imprisonment or violence. It might be complete with a barrier, a weigh station and government official, but in many parts of southern Nangarhar it is just as likely to consist of a band of armed men by the roadside charged with extracting a payment from those that wish to pass.

In a province like Nangarhar, known for its production of illicit drugs, rich in mineral deposits, in particular vast amounts of talc, and located in such close proximity to the Pakistan border, rendering it a key gateway for the dramatic expansion in the “transit trade” - goods transited free of duty through Afghanistan’s neighbours - the opportunities

for rent extraction are huge. For example, at the peak of the surge in NATO troop numbers in Afghanistan in 2010 there was as many as 800 container trucks crossing the border at Torkham each day, while a large number of people, pack animals, and an assortment of different types of vehicles crossed the numerous unofficial border crossings between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Even in 2019 there were up to sixty container trucks of talc passing through Torkham each day, a total of 2,400 metric tonnes. With commodities moving through the province in such large volumes, the capability to direct and channel trade through preferred chokepoints brings significant rent and favour to political and economic actors in the province and their allies elsewhere. It is the contention of this working paper that knowledge of where these chokepoints are, who they are controlled by, what commodities are transported through them, and the rules that govern the amount of rent paid, is critical to understanding the interests that underpin the political-economy of the province, particularly as the country tries to move towards peace.

As such, this working paper charts the factors that determine where these different chokepoints are located along the supply chains for some of the most valuable commodities in Nangarhar, primarily, drugs, minerals, and the transit trade. It documents why the importance of particular routes and chokepoints have changed over time, and details the means by which the amount and type of rents extracted are determined. The paper is based on over 300 in depth interviews conducted in the fall of 2019 with those directly involved in the transportation and trade of a number of key commodities, and who reside in strategic locations along supply chains in Nangarhar and on its borders. It combines

these interviews with high-resolution imagery and geospatial analysis that covers some of the more remote and inaccessible parts of the province to identify and verify historical changes, as well as examine issues of interest. This paper also draws on more than two decades of fieldwork in the province by the author and the research team, and a review of both historical and contemporary literature.

The paper shows that in Nangarhar physical terrain is a major determinate for the transportation of a significant volume of commodities and thereby the extraction of rent. Moreover, it argues that the provinces mountainous border with Pakistan not only act as a natural barrier to the movement of goods, directing traffic through particular passes or river valleys, but also determines the chokepoints where these goods can be stored and cross decked, and thereby where economic advantage can be gained, and to whom, in the form of employment, income and rents. Often these chokepoints are located some distance away from the point of production or cross border movement and are favoured not only by terrain but by infrastructural investments that encourage the routing of goods, as well as formal or informal rules that determine where goods can be loaded and unloaded, and under what arrangements.

This papers reveals just how investments in physical infrastructure have transformed the political economy of Nangarhar, especially since the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. In some cases physical infrastructure has facilitated the production and trade along particular routes. The main Highway from Jalalabad to Torkham is an obvious example of physical infrastructure that has encouraged the movement of significant volumes of goods - minerals, fuel, and agricultural products - between Pakistan and Afghanistan,

creating an important tax base for the Afghan government at its customs stations at Seracha and Torkham. While at the same time other infrastructure such as southern ring road have encouraged trade, in particular, in transit goods, to be rerouted through the mountains, provided rents to tribal groups closely aligned with local state actors, and bypassed formal regulatory system entirely. In other cases physical infrastructure, most notably the fence built by the government of Pakistan along the Afghan border from 2007 and 2019, has closed a number of unofficial trading routes through the Mohmand tribal areas, concentrating the smuggling of goods - in the form of over 2,500 heavily laden mules per day - through the routes it favours and increased the rents that can be extracted by its allies. As such, this paper also points to the importance of wider geopolitical interests in shaping patterns of trade, how economic and political interests and rivalries between the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as amongst rural elites and groups on either sides of the border, have influenced which trading routes and chokepoints are the most commonly used.

It is also important to note that in many parts of Nangarhar investments in physical infrastructure have been made deep into territory where the government has historically had little control, such as in the southern districts of Nangarhar in the Spinghar piedmont, no doubt under the assumption that “wherever the roads ends, that’s where the Taliban starts”. This paper illustrates how this infrastructure has facilitated the production and trade in commodities, such as minerals and drugs, that the insurgency has been able to tax, and established both an income for those in violent conflict with the state and a network of common interests amongst the Taliban and private state actors, which includes resistance to central state control of these areas and the resources they hold.

This paper also points to the role of violence and conflict in shaping patterns of trade and rent extraction in Nangarhar. In this regard, the trade in illicit drugs appears to be no more problematic than for any other commodity. The only exception is during periods where the national and provincial authorities sought to impose a protracted ban on opium cultivation in areas where the population had no viable economic opportunities. Under these conditions, violence has been deployed both by rural communities and by insurgent groups who looked to gain local support to prevent prohibition and allow production and trade to continue. Rather, this research suggests that violence is deployed more strategically in Nangarhar, used by powerbrokers and groups to disrupt trade, extort and gain leverage for renegotiating rents. There are several examples on both sides of the border where the state and local groups have cooperated, using violence to expel these disruptive forces from an area, thereby allowing production and trade to resume. The most obvious example being the expulsion of Mangal Bagh from Tirah in Pakistan, for fear that his presence threatened the lucrative transit trade.

Finally, this paper highlights just how redistributive illicit economies are. Consisting of multiple segmented journeys, where different local actors are responsible for the trade and transportation of commodities across specific

areas, the cross border trade in drugs and transit goods provide significant income, employment and rent to multiple groups across the province of Nangarhar. Cooperation and collusion between state actors and those in the insurgency - including with regard to formal and informal regulatory systems - also highlights the economic and political interests that underpin existing patterns of trade and rent extraction. As such, the paper concludes that there is a strong constituency for the continuation of these economies and the potential for protest, negotiation and even violent resistance if the state – or other actors - make efforts to restrict production and trade along particular routes or at specific locations. In fact, continued government tolerance of the smuggling of large amounts of drugs and transit goods across the Afghan and Pakistani border highlight the importance of these illicit economies and their role in subsidizing these borderland communities. Moreover, the agency of those involved, their links to provincial and national powerbrokers further constrain the capacity of the formal authorities and the insurgency to act were a peace to be brokered.

## 2. Introduction

This is the first of two working papers documenting the initial exploratory phase of research for the Drugs and (Dis)order project in Afghanistan. This research was led by the author and conducted in partnership with the Organization for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR) and Alcis and undertaken in the provinces of Nangarhar, in eastern Afghanistan, bordering Pakistan, and in Nimroz on the western border with Iran. This paper documents the research in Nangarhar conducted in the latter part of 2018.

In Afghanistan, the goal of the research was to develop a robust and dynamic understanding of the actors, commodities and events that shape the borderlands of Nangarhar and Nimroz. While the overall Global Challenges Research Fund project focuses on the role illicit drugs play in the transition from war to peace in the borderlands of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar, the research team in Afghanistan decided to widen the scope of this exploratory phase of the research to include the production, trade and movement of several key commodities specific to the area.

This decision served several purposes. Most importantly it improved access and security for the researchers, but it also served as a strategy for better understanding the relative value and significance of the drugs trade compared to other major sources of profit and rent in each borderland, and identify whether illicit drugs were more closely associated with violence and instability than the other commodities studied—a presumption that has often beleaguered the design of past research and dominates much of the official and scholarly literature. Given this decision, this first exploratory phase of the research sought to answer four main questions:

- i. How does the production and transportation of key commodities, such as minerals, drugs and fuel impact the political and economic stability of borderlands?
- ii. Do these impacts differ depending on whether commodities are (a) illegal, or (b) legal commodities moved illegally?
- iii. What is the reason for the shifting relative importance of different commodities and transportation routes and how do these relate to changes in economic and political networks and/or violence?
- iv. Which interventions supported/undermined the production and transportation of these commodities; what decisions guided their design and implementation; and how did these interventions ultimately affect the political and economic stability of borderlands?

Maintaining core research values and avoiding fetishising drugs was critical to the methodological underpinnings of this work and the security of all those involved. Alongside the use of high-resolution satellite imagery, this proved essential to the veracity of the research findings. It is important to note that the production, processing and consumption of illicit drugs is just one of a set of activities and means of livelihood in these borderland areas, and often only one of many that are deemed illegal. Therefore, the research adopted an approach that “talked around drugs, not about drugs,” thereby positioning the illicit drugs economy within broader questions about the livelihoods and the political economy of those living in these border areas and avoiding the

kind of direct questions that often lead to the kind of aggrandisement, denial and the leveling of accusations of drugs trafficking at political opponents that has been seen in much of the official and scholarly literature.

Direct and focused questions on the production of opium and cannabis, and particularly the processing and smuggling of opiates, is unlikely to yield meaningful data and can expose researchers to considerable danger. It can also lead to a distorted understanding of the importance of illicit drugs within the political economy of the region. To avoid this scenario, establish and strengthen contacts in situ, and develop a clear understanding of the research possibilities for subsequent rounds of fieldwork, this initial phase focused on charting the economic and political networks that underpin the production, transport and cross-border movement of a number of commodities, including drugs, minerals, “transit goods”, fuel and fertiliser. With its focus on these particular commodities, the research travels the length of their supply chains, from the official and unofficial crossings along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border deep into the hinterlands where some of these commodities are produced, as well as the locations en route where these, and other transit goods, are stored and traded on both sides of the border. As such, the research is rich in spatial data that can be further developed and strengthened during subsequent phases of the research.

This paper is divided into five further sections. The second section offers a detailed account of the methodology. This was a challenging phase of the research, not least because of the difficult security environment in which it was conducted. Levels of violence have increased considerably in Afghanistan in recent years, particularly in Nangarhar and more so in the border areas with Pakistan where the Islamic State has gained a foothold since 2014. The strategy for mitigating these factors are described in some detail here.

The third section of the paper provides a brief overview of the province of Nangarhar—its historical importance as a borderland and its strategic importance in contemporary history both regarding the state-building project in Afghanistan, as well as in terms of drugs production and control.

The fourth section provides emerging findings from this initial phase of the research and is based on 337 in-depth interviews with transporters, traders and key informants in Nangarhar, along with high-resolution satellite imagery analysis. This section documents the ebb and flow across different border points, routes, checkpoints and areas of commodity production, and outlines what these shifts say about how different political and economic alliances in borderlands gain greater control and influence over strategic “chokepoints” where profit and rent can be extracted. In doing so this initial phase of the research raises the possibility that illicit drugs are possibly less important in both value and rent to government and insurgents than the cross-border transit trade, and that much of the conflict and violence associated with drugs in Nangarhar is likely more of a response to drug control policy than a function of the production and trade in drugs themselves. The final section of the report offers some initial conclusions as well as identifies areas for further research.



## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research objectives and approach

This paper documents an initial, exploratory phase of the research in Afghanistan. It drew on the experience of over 20 consecutive years of fieldwork in rural Afghanistan, including in Nangarhar, by the lead researcher, and more than a decade of close partnership with OSDR, Alcis and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). This experience of researching the role of opium poppy in rural livelihoods in Afghanistan, and the different factors that influence it, highlighted the challenges in examining the relationship between the drugs economy, violence and political settlement in the borders of Afghanistan, in particular:

- i. the difficulties of gaining access to remote and conflict affected border areas, and individuals more deeply involved in the processing and smuggling of illicit goods;
- ii. the importance of avoiding “drugs fetishism” and the need to study the political economy of drugs in context, positioning it as one of many commodities around which actors and institutions align, compete, and extract rent and favour; and

- iii. the imperative of a robust methodology that does not rely on the “narratives of the powerful”—the smugglers and political actors who have often been the focus of past research on drugs, violence and political economy—but also provides physical evidence of the changes in the production, processing, and movement of illicit commodities, and the interventions that affect them.

The importance of a robust methodology and the ensuring the veracity of research findings was identified as a priority. Avoiding drugs fetishism, where the world is seen largely through the prism of drug production and drug control measures, and little consideration is given to the wider socio-economic and political context in which they occur, was also viewed as critical for a robust methodological approach. In Afghanistan, rumours, anecdotes and misinformation on illicit drugs production and efforts to control it have also been widely circulated, and gained legitimacy in official narratives and the works of many scholars.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, as an illegal or underground activity, the drugs economy is particularly difficult to research—unseen, unaccounted for, and often subject to personal aggrandisement and bias by officials and key actors, such as smugglers and politicians. This is particularly the case with the relationship between the insurgency and

<sup>1</sup> For example, there are claims that the Taliban imposed a ban in 1994 that led to reduced cultivation in 1995, and that they subsequently rescinded prohibition in 1996. This is despite all the empirical evidence to the contrary. Other unfounded rumours include “opium melons”, genetically modified seeds, and the planting of opium varieties from countries such as Burma, Italy, the US and China. On occasion, scholars and policy analysts are beguiled by such claims and engage in what Furstenberg describes as, “an uncritical acceptance of local mythology,” which has implications for both policy and research. See David Mansfield, “Understanding Control and Influence: What Opium Poppy and Tax Reveal about the Writ of the Afghan State” (Kabul: AREU, 2017). <https://areu.org.af/publication/1724/>; and David Mansfield, “The Sun Cannot be Hidden by Two Fingers: Illicit Drugs and the Discussion on a Political Settlement in Afghanistan” (Kabul: AREU, 2019) <https://areu.org.af/publication/1904/f>;

drugs, where bias and poor methodology have often led to narratives that are discordant with historical realities and to inflated estimates of the revenue generated.

To better manage these challenges and develop a more robust and dynamic understanding of the actors, commodities and events that shaped the borderlands of Nangarhar and Nimroz, the decision was made to focus this phase of research not just on illicit drugs on but on the production, trade and movement of a number of key commodities in specific borderlands. This decision served several different purposes. For one, broadening the scope of the research to include legal commodities, many of which are smuggled illegally, guaranteed better access to officials, elites and individuals involved. Illicit drugs, particularly processing and cross-border movement, remains a deeply sensitive issue for those involved—a function of illegality and the fear of arrest from the authorities, or retribution from corrupt officials or armed actors for sharing information. Discussing the production and movement of a wider range of commodities mitigated the potential of researchers being accused of working for law enforcement and of respondents being reluctant to engage.

Secondly, broadening the scope of the research allowed detailed empirical data to be collected on the different trading networks and routes, the economic and political actors that underpin them, and the degree to which both routes and actors along the value chain specialise in specific commodities or simply “move space” that could contain a wide variety of goods, both legal and illegal. Focusing the enquiry around specific commodities, routes and the circumstances and events that shaped patterns of trade and rent extraction offered respondents a set of tangible facts that they could relate to and describe.

Thirdly, it was anticipated that by including the production, trade, processing and movement of a range of other commodities in the borderlands, the research would be able to develop a better understanding of the relative value and significance of the drugs trade compared to other major sources of profit and rent in each borderland, and identify whether illicit drugs were more closely associated with violence and instability than the other commodities studied.

## 3.2. Research design and implementation

Recognising the security challenges, as well as fundamental resource and time constraints, this research focused on a limited number of commodities namely, (i) illicit drugs - differentiating between cannabis, hashish, opium, morphine, heroin and methamphetamine; (ii) minerals - in Nangarhar primarily talcum powder (magnesium silicate); (iii) diesel; (iv) fertiliser; (v) cigarettes and (vi) people.<sup>2</sup>

Minerals and illicit drugs were identified on the basis that they were both high-value commodities produced in Afghanistan in more remote mountainous areas beyond the central government's control and often cited as a significant source of revenue for the insurgency. Talc, as opposed to marble, is less capital-intensive—often being hand-dug—and is a “lootable commodity” that is still heavily reliant on roads and infrastructure for its transportation and export. This contrasts with illicit drugs that can travel within Afghanistan and across the border by foot or by donkey, making them much more portable, less reliant on major road networks for transportation and therefore potentially less vulnerable to control and regulation.

Diesel and fertiliser are legal commodities and were selected on the basis that they are transported into Afghanistan through the major official crossing points—locations like Torkham in Nangarhar—as well as smuggled illegally in large amounts through multiple unofficial crossing points across the country. These were

prioritised on the basis that both commodities have been a mainstay on the list of Afghan imports and have been a regular feature of the cross-border trade from Pakistan. For example, in 2018, 373,000 metric tonnes of diesel were imported into Afghanistan with a value of US\$166 million,<sup>3</sup> a significant reduction in comparison to 2010 at the height of the military surge in Afghanistan, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was importing most of its fuel through Pakistan under the Afghan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA).

Study of cigarettes, it was believed, would provide a valuable insight into a commodity that is imported into Afghanistan through one borderland, transported across the country and then exported via another, and as such, shed light on the interactions of both the international and intra-national political and economic networks that traded and extracted rent from them. Ultimately the inclusion of cigarettes, as well as a research design built on multiple research sites, proved critical to charting the importance of the transit trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan, a multibillion dollar economy built on goods imported legally from neighbouring countries only to be smuggled across the same borders, or those with other neighbours, to exploit the differential tax rates. In 2014, the value of the transit trade with Pakistan alone (excluding imports by NATO) was US\$2.5 billion.<sup>4</sup>

2 “Workshop: Partner Consultation for Afghanistan Case Study”, workshop report for GCRF Drugs and (Dis)order by David Mansfield, November 2016; Nangarhar Planning Matrix, February 2017; Nimroz Planning Matrix, February 2017. The inclusion of “people” was specific to Nimroz given the scale of people-smuggling across the western border and will be covered in the second working paper.

3 National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “Afghan Statistical Yearbook 2018-2019”, Issue No 40, July 2019, 230-6. [https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Afghanistan-Statistical-Yearbook-2018-19\\_compressed\\_2.pdf](https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Afghanistan-Statistical-Yearbook-2018-19_compressed_2.pdf)

4 Pakistan Business Council, “Afghanistan's Transit Trade Patterns Pre and Post APTTA,” June 2015, 7. <https://www.pbc.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/AfghanistansTransitTradePatternsPrePostAPTTA.pdf>



Once focus commodities were chosen, potential research sites were identified and prioritised for the first phase of the fieldwork and high-resolution satellite imagery analysis and collection. This was done iteratively with OSDR and Alcis. An initial selection of potential research sites involved the identification of:

- i. the major official and unofficial border crossings in Nangarhar;
- ii. the primary points of production for each of the commodities being studied that originated in Afghanistan; and
- iii. the location of any wholesale markets, with the objective of mapping the supply chains for each commodity.

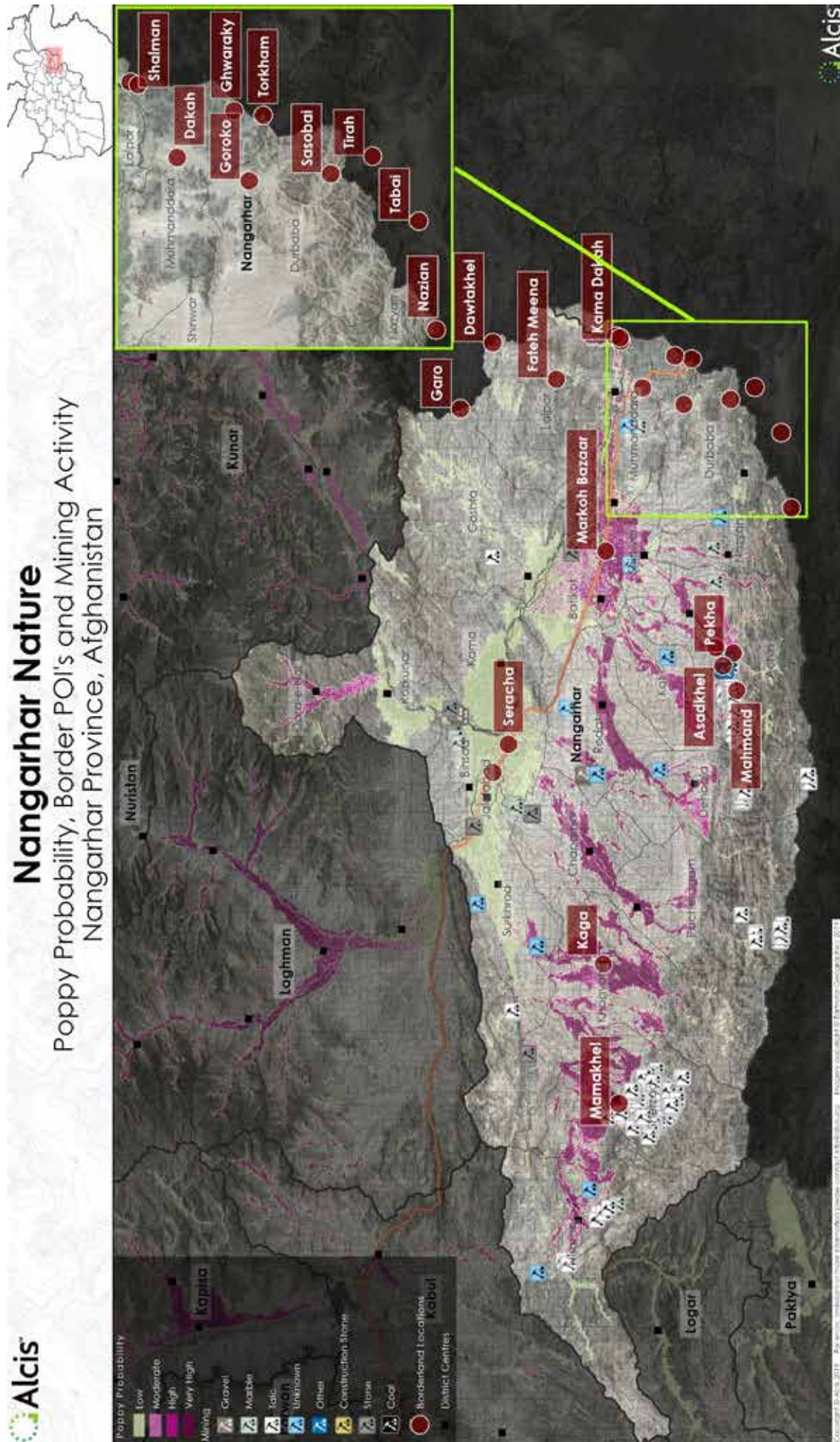
Once an initial list of locations had been established, imagery analysis assessed the current activity in each site, and, where possible, traced supply chains back to further locations that might be of interest. Combining it with a review of some of the historical data identified several locations where commodities were or had been stored and cross-decked from one form of transport to another. It also provided visual evidence of the changes in infrastructure, the amounts of goods stored and transported over time, and a useful point of reference to follow up during data collection in the field. A map of the primary research locations can be found in **Figure 1**.

The final stage in the research design for this first phase was the development of tools for data collection and the prioritisation of respondents. Again, it was experience of research on illicit drugs in Afghanistan that shaped the focus of the initial phase: who would be the respondents? How they would be approached and at what stage in the research? What kind of questions could be posed?

Experience suggested that access to those involved in the different commodity chains for illicit drugs—the traders, processors, transporters, lab owners and workers, and money changers (*hawaladars*)—would be limited during this first phase of the research. This was particularly the case for those involved in the production and transport of morphine, heroin, methamphetamine, as well as money changers and officials. These were the most sensitive aspects of the research and those involved would be more reluctant to speak both openly and accurately. More importantly, there could be serious consequences for local researchers were there to be unrelated law enforcement efforts in the area at a later date. It was judged that during this exploratory phase it would be possible to make initial contact, generate some findings—albeit ones that would need to be handled with caution—and build on the relationships established for the latter phases of the research when more robust data collection might be possible.

Figure 1: Nangarhar and Research Sites during First Phase of Research

Source: ALCIS.



Rather, it was decided that the focus of data collection during this initial exploratory phase was on those involved in the day-to-day activities of extraction, transport and trade of each of the commodities being studied and in each of the research site identified. To circumvent the inherent problems associated with researching an illegal or underground activity, the data collection focused on household livelihood strategies: how these individuals earned a living and how the circumstances that shaped it had changed over time and why. Most importantly, discussions with respondents focused on their direct experience rather than on events or phenomena over a wider geographic area, where answers become increasingly speculative.<sup>5</sup>

A further focus of this first phase of the research were those categorised as “key informants”, that is, individuals who had lived in a particular research site for an extended period of time and had intimate knowledge of the history, political economy and events that shaped that location. Due to problems of access and the composition of the research team at this stage of the research, the chosen respondents were male. To gain as full a history as possible, preference was given to those of 60 to 70 years of age, as most recollect back to the time of King Mohammed Zahir Shah in the 1950s and 1960s.

In prioritising the type of information to be collected during fieldwork, it was recognised that different actors had quite different knowledge and experiences that they could recount. For example, a “transporter” of opium, that is, someone who is paid a fixed amount to move opium from one location to another, knows little about the price per kilogram at different points along the journey to Pakistan;

rather, they only know what they are paid and the costs incurred along the way in the form of payments for transport, storage, bribes and “taxes” to the insurgency. Similarly an opium trader, that is, the person who owns the drugs and is selling them on, has detailed knowledge of the price differentials from one location to another and the amount that would need to be paid to transport a kilogram between them, but would have little and often outdated information of the number of checkpoints en route or who controlled them, and know little of the different payments required at each stage for the costs of hiring a vehicle. Although data collection did focus on drawing out these specific areas of knowledge for each category of respondent, the enquiry was also structured around a set of common themes and questions so as to allow as much data as possible to be cross-checked and verified by category of respondent, commodity, and conduit; a full list can be found in **Table 1**.

In terms of the interviews themselves, it was decided that the sensitive nature of the data lent itself to individual interviews. Therefore, to mitigate bias, interviews with all respondents were conducted with individuals while at work, since holding interviews in the household compound can become subject to interruptions. Group discussions were avoided, as they tend to be dominated by community elites, are inappropriate for sensitive issues and increasingly represent a security threat to both respondents and researchers in rural Afghanistan.

5 Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, “Farming Systems of Nad e Ali District, Helmand Province”, Agricultural Survey of Afghanistan, Report 15 (1992): 1.

Table 1: Number of Respondents by Category, Commodity and Conduit

Routes/ Conduits	Key informants	Traders							Transporters						
		Cannabis	Opium	Heroin	Talc	Diesel	Fertiliser	"Transit"	Cannabis	Opium	Heroin	Talc	Diesel	Fertiliser	"Transit"
Garo/ Dawtakhel	29						1	1						1	
Goroko- Sasobai	26	4	15				9							11	14
Dakah- Kama Dakah	10							3							3
Tabai	20	17	20			1	1		6	8					2
Torkham	30			1	26	7	6					57		2	3
Ghwaraky	3														
Totals	118	21	35	1	26	8	17	4	6	8	0	57	0	14	22

Source: Author.



Flexibility was also built into the first phase of the research through regular consultations between those on the ground, the team leaders at OSDR and the lead researcher. This not only meant that any problems with data collection and security could be discussed and resolved but also allowed the research to adapt to interim findings, including the discovery of further unofficial border crossings that had not been built into the original research design and shifts in the patterns of trade of specific commodities. This was particularly important given just how much trade on the Pakistan-Afghan border had changed with devaluation of the Pakistani Rupee and the Government of Pakistan's (GoP) construction of a fence on the border with Afghanistan along the districts of Mohmand and Goshta in Nangarhar, to the area north of the official crossing at Torkham.

The final stages of the research consisted of an in-depth debrief with OSDR and further Geospatial Information System (GIS) analysis. Initial GIS analysis and mapping products were used extensively in the debrief. These helped overcome the lead researcher's inability to go to the research sites due to the prevailing security situation in Nangarhar and the ethical implications it posed to both Afghan colleagues and respondents. Detailed satellite imagery of each of the research sites, covering multiple years, provided the research team with a vehicle to develop detailed histories of each location and annotate points of interest for further imagery analysis if required. The debrief included a review of many of the interviews conducted with the producers, traders, and transporters along the supply chains of each of the commodities studied. Finally, further imagery analysis was conducted by Alcis at the request of the lead researcher. This

work involved a closer analysis of key visual signatures of changing patterns of trade and events reported by the fieldwork for the purpose of verification of findings and, where possible, their extrapolation.

In sum, the research strategy for this first phase of the project was inductive and iterative, shaped by observations and the results of data collection from respondents actively and from high resolution satellite imagery. Moreover, the underground and illicit nature of the subject matter, as well as the highly challenging security environment demanded caution in terms of methods, data handling and the verification and subsequent sharing of findings. Interviewing multiple actors, in multiple locations along multiple commodity chains, and integrating this work with high-resolution satellite imagery was judged to be good research practice as well as the most effective way of managing the limited resources available for research in such challenging circumstances. As such, this first phase of the research places the political economy of drugs in context, positioning it as one of many commodities around which actors and institutions align, compete, and extract rent and favour.

## 4. Background: Nangarhar

The province of Nangarhar is located on Afghanistan's eastern border with Pakistan. Together with its neighboring provinces of Laghman and Kunar, it forms a geographically enclosed basin of interlocking valleys drained by the Kabul and Kunar rivers and their subsidiary streams. To the south of Nangarhar lie the Spinghar mountains, to the north the massif of the eastern Hindu Kush and Nuristan.

Nangarhar is one of the most densely populated provinces in the country. The estimated population of 2.6 million consists mainly of Pashtuns, although in the northern districts around Dar-e-Nur the Pashai people dominate.<sup>6</sup> The provincial centre, Jalalabad, is located at the confluence of the Kabul and Kunar Rivers. The Kabul River runs in an easterly direction, flowing into Pakistan. The Nangarhar canal, built by the Soviets in the 1960s, flows from the Kabul River and irrigates over 35,000 hectares within the province. The dam at Darunta, also built by the Soviets in 1964, provides electricity to Jalalabad and the surrounding districts.

The climate is considered sub-tropical, with mild winters (except in the mountains) and hot summers. A broad range of agricultural crops cultivated in the main river basin includes citrus and olive trees. Double cropping can be achieved in areas irrigated by the Kabul and Kunar Rivers; however, in areas reliant on seasonal flood streams or on the underground

irrigation systems (known as *karez*),<sup>7</sup> water shortages are more common and cropping patterns more limited. Drought had a significant effect on these areas during the late 1990s and early in the 21st century.

Nangarhar province has long been an economic hub of the eastern region and at the forefront of the border economy with Pakistan. Although the origins of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan lie with the Durand agreement signed on 12 November 1893 between the Afghan Amir, Abdur Rahman, and the government of British India, disputes persist and, in many areas, there are no clear demarcations.<sup>8</sup> Described as, "hav[ing] few advantages and many defects. [The border] is illogical from the point of ethnography, of strategy and of geography. It cuts across one of the main basins of the Indus watershed, it splits a nation in two and it even divides tribes,"<sup>9</sup> the border continues to be encroached by both countries, no more so than on the border at Dawtakhel in the district of Goshta in Nangarhar over the last decade.

The sub-tropical climate makes the provinces rich in annual and perennial horticulture. A wide range of vegetables and fruit are produced in the lower districts, irrigated by wells along the Kabul River and Nangarhar canal, particularly in Behsud, Kama and lower Surkhrod, the districts adjacent to Jalalabad. These districts are major source of agricultural produce to Kabul and to Peshawar in Pakistan.

6 This is the population estimate from the World Pop Flowminder project which draws on high resolution domestic compound data from Alcis and satellite imagery to map domestic compounds (Flowminder, "Final Population Mapping for Afghanistan 2017" Unpublished report, page 18). The Afghan government's population estimate, which is based solely on a ground-based survey, is 1.5 million.

7 A *karez* uses a series of access shafts that make it possible to dig and clean out the underground channels (tunnels) which eventually reach the surface far from the source of the water.

8 Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah, "Fencing the Durand Line and Its Impact" *Internationales Asienforum* 44, no. 1-2 (2013): 89.

9 W.K. Fraser-Tytler, *Afghanistan: A Case Study of Political Developments in Central and South Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958): 188.

Since 2001, Nangarhar has also become a major source of minerals, with a growing number of mines. There are deposits of chromite, nephrite, gold slate, marble, as well as reports of lapis lazuli and jade, mined in the districts of Goshta, Kama and Lalpura to the north of Jalalabad. Much of the official mining in Nangarhar is of talc, which has expanded rapidly in the last decade and is produced under license in the Spinghar piedmont in the south of the province (see **Figures 2 and 3**).<sup>10</sup> This area is rich in deposits and there are numerous mines in the districts of Hesarak, Pachir wa Agam, Khogiani, Kot, Deh Bala, and a particularly high density in Achin and Sherzad. High-resolution satellite imagery

shows as many as 103 separate points in the district of Sherzad where talc is either mined or stored, covering an area of 2.87 square km. Licensing agreements from the Ministry of Mines indicate that there were 2.7 million metric tonnes (MT) of talc extracted in the province in 2018, with a value of US\$178 million.<sup>1112</sup> This research, and records for previous years, suggest the talc trade is less productive than these 2018 figures suggest, with up to 750,000 MT crossing the border into Pakistan, at a value of US\$72 million.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the actual value, the mineral deposits in Nangarhar have led to a vibrant industry in Jalalabad, where minerals, talc in particular, are cleaned and processed before being transported to Pakistan for export worldwide.

10 Talc comprises almost all the total value of minerals produced under contract in Nangarhar. The value of the other minerals produced (gravel, marble, and stone) under contract was only US\$656,000 in 2018. Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Central and Provincial Production and Volume Information, 1395 and 1396" <https://momp.gov.af/central-and-provincial-production-value-and-volume-information>.

11 Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Central and Provincial Production and Volume Information, 1395 and 1396" <https://momp.gov.af/central-and-provincial-production-value-and-volume-information>.

12 These licenses also indicate that, of the 44 issued, all but 16 had expired. Despite this, many mining companies continue operation and export.

13 This figure is based on fieldwork and an estimate of up to 60 trucks crossing the border each day (except Friday) en route to the Peshawar ring road. Here the talc is sold to traders, sorted, cleaned and stored before being sold on the international market. Each truck contains 40 MT of talc which in 2018 was sold in Peshawar for around US\$95 per MT.



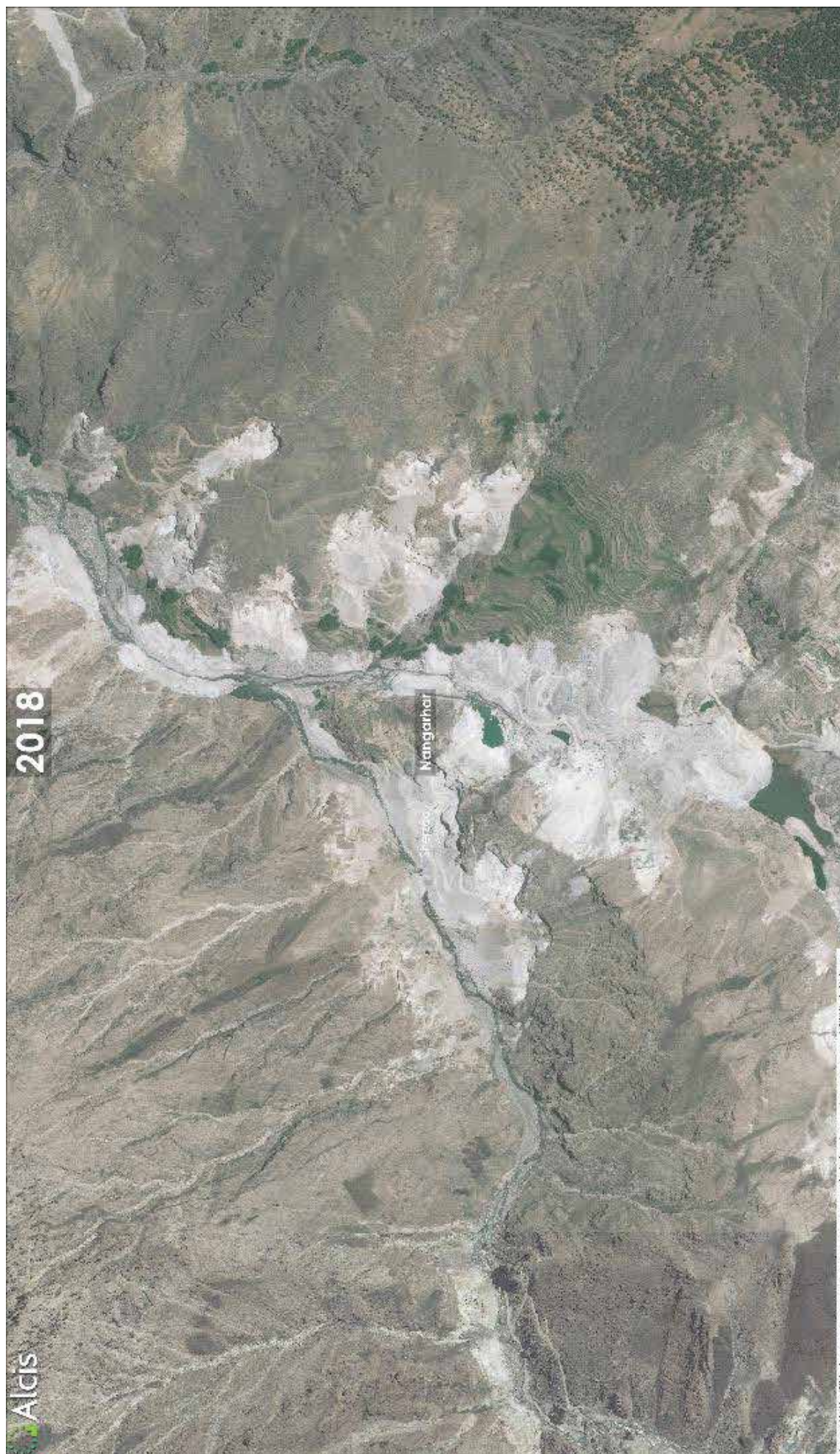
Source: ALCIS.





Figure 3: Extent of Talc Mining in Markikhel, Sherzad, 2018

Source: ALCIS.



Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Nangarhar was a major recipient of development assistance from aid agencies located across the border in Peshawar, Pakistan, 54 km away (from the border at Torkham). Peshawar still dominates the province economically, with considerable trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan, passing through the official border crossing at Torkham and through several unofficial border crossings throughout the province, including Garo, Dawtakhel, Ghwaraky, Kama Dakah, Sasobai and Tabai. The Pakistani rupee remains the main currency used in the province.

Nangarhar's role as an economic hub and transit route for goods to and from Pakistan is reflected in the fact that in 2018 the province officially collected US\$119 million in taxes from imports and exports, more than Herat (US\$117 million) and just a little less than the provinces of Balkh (US\$71 million), Kandahar (US\$37 million) and Nimroz (US\$38 million) combined, where the major official border crossings of Termez, Spin Boldak and Ziranj are located.<sup>14</sup> Nangarhar also generated US\$241 million in government revenue—second only to Herat (US\$308 million).<sup>15</sup>

Taxes on the movement of goods through the province have long been an important source of revenue for those in positions of power in Nangarhar and control over the border crossing at Torkham have provided a source of rent for consecutive governors and their patronage networks. For example, the former Governor of Nangarhar, Gul Agha Shirzai (2005-2013) extracted rent by taxing vehicular traffic passing

through the province under a scheme known as the Nangarhar Reconstruction Fund, claiming dispensation from the Office of the President to use this source of revenue at his own discretion.<sup>16</sup> The ability to influence the appointment of officials at the customs facilities at both Torkham and Saracha is instrumental to exploiting the cross-border trade and collecting rents.

As a border province and a major transit route for NATO supplies to Afghanistan, Nangarhar had strategic significance to both Pakistan and the US. The GoP and Pakistani businesses maintain economic and political interests in Nangarhar. The Pakistani government maintains a consulate in Jalalabad and the Pakistani military improved the Jalalabad-to-Torkham road between 2006 and 2009, at a cost of US\$55 million.<sup>17</sup> Pakistani political interests permeate the border, and there is a long history of migration between Nangarhar and the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (until 2010 known as North-West Frontier Province), with ethnic groups that straddle both sides of the border. Many of the former *jihadi* elite who took up positions of power in Nangarhar—including Gul Agha Shirzai—resided in Pakistan during the war with the Soviets and allegedly maintained strong links there.<sup>18</sup>

From 2001 on, the US military had a considerable presence and interest in Nangarhar province, resulting in large investments in the province's infrastructure, with a number of interventions aimed at penetrating the remote border areas neighbouring Pakistan, including the southern ring road and further highways that run north to south in each of the main districts in the south. Development funds

14 National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghan Statistical Yearbook 2018-2019", Issue 40 (2019): 245. [https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Afghanistan-Statistical-Yearbook-2018-19\\_compressed\\_2.pdf](https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Afghanistan-Statistical-Yearbook-2018-19_compressed_2.pdf).

15 National Statistics and Information Authority, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Afghan Statistical Yearbook 2018-2019", Issue 40 (2019): 245. [https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Afghanistan-Statistical-Yearbook-2018-19\\_compressed\\_2.pdf](https://www.nsia.gov.af:8080/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Afghanistan-Statistical-Yearbook-2018-19_compressed_2.pdf).

16 D. Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); M. Rosenberg, "US Courts Former Warlords in its Bid for Afghan Stability", *Wall Street Journal*. 20 March 2009.

17 K. Kiani, "Torkham-Jalalabad Road Opened," *Dawn Newspaper*, 14 September 2006. <http://www.dawn.com/2006/09/14/top5.htm>

18 D. Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).



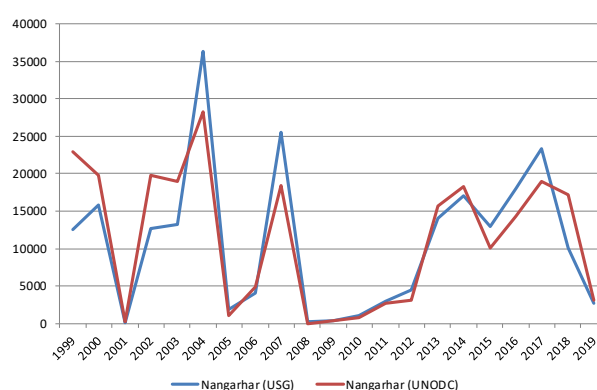
from the USG included US\$118 million between 2005 and 2009 for the Alternative Development Programme aimed at supporting farmers' shift from opium poppy to legal livelihoods, as well as interventions aimed at promoting stability, such as the Local Governance and Community Development Programme and the Commanders Emergency Response Programme. The European Union also funded rural development efforts, road reconstruction including the Kabul to Jalalabad Highway, and work in the health sector in the province. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's National Priority Programmes, that is, the National Solidarity Programme, Micro Finance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan and, in 2010, the Comprehensive Rural Agricultural Development Facility, were implemented in the districts around Jalalabad.

Nangarhar also has a history as a significant producer of opium. Before and during the Taliban regime, the province typically cultivated between 15,000 and 20,000 hectares per year, making it one of the most significant opium producers after the province of Helmand. With the collapse of the Taliban in 2001, the ban that they had imposed in July 2000 was lifted, and the rural population reverted to widespread opium poppy cultivation in the 2000-1 growing season. From an estimated 19,780 hectares of opium poppy in the 2000-1 growing season, levels of cultivation in Nangarhar continued to rise until 2003-4, when cultivation reached an unprecedented 28,213 hectares (see **Figure 4**).

Since then, cultivation has fluctuated wildly, a function of opium bans imposed by governor Hajji Din Mohammed in 2005 and Gul Agha Shirzai in 2008 and their subsequent collapse. The boom and bust has continued, with widespread

cultivation returning to the province in 2013 (15,719 hectares), only to fall to little more than 3,000 hectares in 2019—a function of market saturation more generally, and the Afghan military regaining territorial control over the southern districts where poppy is typically concentrated.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 4: Levels of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Nangarhar province, 1999-2019**



Source: UNODC/MCN 2018 and U.S. Dept of State 2020.

In addition to cultivation, Nangarhar was also involved in trading and processing opiates. In the 1990s, the bazaar in Ghani Khel in Shinwar district, only 6.5 km from the main Torkham road, was a market hub of the opium trade in the eastern region.<sup>20</sup> Traders would come to the area to purchase opium in bulk and ship it for processing in the various “laboratories” within the district and in the more mountainous parts of the province. The price ripple that these large purchases created would prompt local traders and farmers to travel to outlying districts and provinces to purchase opium to exploit price differentials. Following the collapse of the Taliban regime and subsequent efforts by the international community and Afghan special counternarcotics forces, the

19 UNODC, “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2019”, October 2019, U.S. Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2020, Volume 1, Drugs and Chemical Control, Washington D.C.: US Printing Office, March 2020.

20 United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) “Strategic Study #2: The Dynamics of the Farmgate Trade and the Coping Strategies of Opium Traders,” Final Report by D. Mansfield. (Islamabad: UNDCP, 1998).

trade moved further up the valleys, first to Kahi in Achin district, then to Shadal Bazaar in the upper parts of Spinghar, before finally moving to individual houses in 2009 and 2010.

With the Taliban's ascent in the upper parts of Achin, and the government retreat to the lower valleys in 2012, the opium trade was free to resume, with Shadal once again becoming its hub. The emergence of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and further weakening of the Afghan governments hold over territory in Nangarhar changed this in 2015.<sup>21</sup> In fact, one of ISKP's first proclamations upon taking control of the Mahmand valley in Achin was to ban the trade in hashish and opium. Traders were given 1 month to relocate from the bazaars in Shadal and Abdulkhel in the neighbouring valley.<sup>22</sup> They relocated to Markoh, 36 km from Jalalabad along the main highway to Torkham and the official border crossing with Pakistan.

There is also a history of heroin processing in Nangarhar, in facilities that typically consisted of no more than a rural dwelling. Typically, they are in the upper reaches of the Spinghar piedmont, where both national and international forces find them hard to interdict. However, during the Taliban regime in the 1990s, heroin processing was also found in the more accessible lower areas, perhaps reflecting the more laissez-faire attitude of the authorities at the time.<sup>23</sup> During the Karzai regime, the labs returned to the upper valleys and were subject to numerous raids by

the UK-funded Commando Force-333, and the National Interdiction Unit. With the government's retreat from the Spinghar piedmont with the rise of the insurgency, the drugs labs returned to the upper reaches of Khogiani in 2012. With ISKP's move into some of these valleys in 2018, and their firm position on drugs, the labs were once again disrupted in places like Pirakhel, and moved to areas under Taliban control, such as Markikhel in Sherzad.

Power holders in Nangarhar are also alleged to have been involved in the drugs trade. The late Hajji Qadir—governor until he was murdered in 2002—and his son Hajji Zahir are thought to have been major protagonists.<sup>24</sup> Widespread cultivation in their ancestral lands in Surkhrud during the 1990s supports the view that the family was directly engaged in drug production, even if their land was largely managed by tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Aside from these more obvious members of the Nangarhar elite, allegations of trading in opium have been made against Hazrat Ali, Pashai commander, former head of the Provincial Police and Member of Parliament,<sup>25</sup> as well as Mirwais Yasini, former head of the Counter Narcotics Department (the predecessor to the Ministry of Counter Narcotics) and First Deputy Speaker in the Parliament.<sup>26</sup>

21 David Mansfield, "The Devil is in the Detail: Nangarhar's Continued Decline Into Insurgency, Violence And Widespread Drug Production", AREU Briefing Paper, (Kabul, AREU, 2016): 12. file:///C:/Users/David/Downloads/1602E-The-Devil-is-in-the-Details-Nangarhar-continued-decline-into-insurgency%20(2).pdf

22 David Mansfield, "The Devil is in the Detail: Nangarhar's continued decline into insurgency, violence and widespread drug production", AREU Briefing Paper, (Kabul, AREU, 2016): 12. <https://areu.org.af/publication/1602/>.

23 V. Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2010).

24 D. Filipov, "Drug Trade Flourishes Again in Afghanistan", *Boston Globe*. 31 October 2002; D. Blair and L.M. Edwards, "Assassins of Afghan Leader Linked To Drug Trade", *The Telegraph*. 8 July 2002. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/1400723/Assassins-of-Afghan-leader-linked-to-drug-trade.html>

25 S. Baldauf, "Afghan Military Tied to Drug Trade", *The Christian Science Monitor*. 4 September 2003. <http://www.csmonitor.com/layout/set/r14/2003/0904/p06s01-wosc.html>; P. Harris, "With Taliban Gone, Afghans Look Forward to Bumper Opium Crops", *The Observer*. 30 November 2001. <http://renew.com/general17/withtalibangone.htm>

26 The lead researcher has heard these allegations from farmers in Nangarhar, as well as diplomats in Kabul.

Indeed, it would be hard to find anyone in the political elite of the province who is not suspected of involvement in the drugs trade, with a great deal of anecdotal evidence to support the suspicion. Given the opportunity, it would be unlikely for someone to reject the chance to accumulate income, political support and patronage. At the same time, finding robust evidence to support such claims is difficult. These allegations are easily made by political adversaries as a way of discrediting opponents. Such claims are often circumstantial; they link individuals to wealth accumulation and neglect the wider business interests of the political elite, as well as the rent that they have recently extracted from the legal sectors of the Afghan economy in transport, security, construction and the vibrant cross-border trade.

Official narratives also make much of the Taliban generating the majority of their revenue from the taxing and trading of opium, with some, such as the United States Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) suggesting that as much as 60 percent of their total revenue is generated from illegal drugs.<sup>27</sup> It is precisely these kind of claims—many of which do not hold up to scrutiny—that make it essential to examine the wider political economy of the province, and consider the relative importance of other commodities, events, policies and histories, when looking to determine the nature of the relationship between illicit drugs and violence and disorder in a borderland like Nangarhar. The next section draws on the results in-depth interviews with 337 traders, transporters and key informants in 11 districts of Nangarhar, as well as the analysis of high-resolution satellite imagery.

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27 U.S. Department of Defense News Transcript, Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room, 2 December 2016. <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1019029/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-in-the-pentagon-brief/>

## 5. Emerging Answers to the Research Questions

Barfield (2010) refers to the routes by which commodities are transported in Afghanistan as critical to the political economy and cultural of the country:

“...while the mountain peoples live in a world dominated by problems of basic subsistence many of the routes through the mountains have been conduits of international trade that have consistently brought outsiders and high levels of culture through these regions. Like a high voltage electricity line, these routes run through such regions not because they have an intrinsic value in themselves but because they link regions with resources that do. As a consequence, they serve as economic and cultural interfaces between different worlds. This influence rubs off economically, culturally and politically”.<sup>28</sup>

While Barfield’s statement may neglect the monetary value of the commodities currently produced in Afghanistan, particularly the minerals and illicit drugs that are concentrated in the more remote mountainous valleys in a province like Nangarhar, it highlights the historical importance of trade and the vital role rent seeking plays in the local and national economy. The statement also reflects the challenges that physical geography presents to those wishing to transport goods through Afghanistan from markets in India and China onto Iran, Central Asia and Europe, and vice versa. Constrained by a hostile physical

geography that limits the potential routes, and a central government whose writ barely extended beyond the valley plains, traders often risked violent attack and predation by armed actors and regulation and rent seeking by the Afghan state. Managing these risks has required drawing on multiple tribal, familial, and business networks, brokerage with different armed actors as well as a logistical agility to reroute when risks and costs of a route prove too punitive.

What is of interest in this research is why some conduits through the mountainous borders of Nangarhar have been more important than others during different periods of time. What are the factors that impinge on the movement of goods along a route, resulting in traders all but abandoning it, only to see a surge in traffic later? In terms of understanding more about the political economy of cross-border trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan, it is particularly important to explore the role different political and economic networks on both sides of the border have played in channeling the movement of commodities through particular conduits and chokepoints, as well as how they have inhibited transshipment through other conduits, and in some cases closing them down altogether. In the context of the drugs economy of this border area, it is also important to examine whether there is anything intrinsically different about the production, trade and movement of illicit drugs from other commodities, in particular whether greater levels of violence are associated with illicit drugs than with other commodities, such as minerals, fuel, fertiliser, and the transit trade.

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28 T. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010): 45-6.

This section outlines the findings of this first phase of this research, that is, the 337 in-depth interviews and the high-resolution satellite imagery analysis undertaken. It focuses on the role physical geography, infrastructure,

geopolitics, violence, regulation—both formal and informal—and patronage play in shaping patterns of trade in Nangarhar. As exploratory research, the findings are preliminary.

## 5.1. Physical Geography

The mountains that border Nangarhar and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan present an obvious barrier to the movement of people and goods; as such, the mountain passes are natural chokepoints, the control of which provide opportunities for monopolising trade and rent extraction. Some passes are of enough width and altitude to allow animals to pass, while others can only be crossed by foot, limiting the amount and types of goods that can be transported. The most significant passes are those that allow vehicular transport and have the space for storage and trade, making these border areas major economic hubs.

Historically, the Khyber Pass and the border crossing at Torkham have been the primary routes for those travelling from Kabul to Peshawar, the economic and political centre of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in northwestern Pakistan. At only 1,000 metres in altitude and situated along a large wash, Torkham offers an ease of access compared to other routes and is one of three official crossing points between the two countries (see **Figure 5**).<sup>29</sup> Torkham is located in what is government land rented by a number of Pashtun tribes, including the Mohmand and sub-tribes of the Shinwari.

At the peak of the NATO surge in 2010, up to 800 trucks were estimated to have crossed the border at Torkham each day.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, since the 1970s, formal trade at Torkham has been supplemented by large-scale smuggling, aided by the terrain and the availability of land for storage and trading, with around 60-70 shops and a multitude of storage areas, known as *Batti*. For some decades, shipments containing transit goods, officially en route to Jalalabad and Kabul, have been stored, broken into and the goods removed to be smuggled directly back into Pakistan. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, these goods were transported by mule along what became known as “the mule’s way”, *Kacharo lara*, only 300 metres from the official crossing at Torkham. Until 2015, goods were also smuggled by hand, cart or bag by up to a 1,000 people per day, including children. No other border point in Nangarhar has the physical advantages of Torkham when it comes to the cross-border movement of large amounts of freight; it is a critical chokepoint for both Jalalabad and Kabul.

29 The other crossings being Spin Boldak, Kandahar and Ghulam Khan, Khost.

30 In 2009-10, the number of containers entering Afghanistan from Pakistan under the APTTA was 96,914. By 2013-4, it had fallen to 31,881. See USAID Trade Project, Office of Growth and Agriculture, Pakistan “Dwell Time Study”, 2014.



Figure 5: Torkham Border Crossing, 2011

Source: ALCIS.





Other passes that support vehicle movement have also been important trading routes for goods to and from Pakistan. For example, the journey from the fertile plains of Kama to the border in Garo, in Goshta, passes through a large wash for 22.7 km before climbing over the mountains for the last 3.2 km of the journey to the border at 1,300 metres. The route to Dawtakhel on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border in the district of Lalpura also runs through a wash. This one is 25 km from Lalpura district centre, located on the Kabul river, making it easy for cars, pick-ups and small trucks such as a “hino” or “Shashpai” to pass. From both Dawtakhel and Garo, the journey to Gandab and on to Landi Kotal in Pakistan passes through a valley, making it possible to transport a wide variety of goods, including bulk items such as scrap metal, cars and spare parts for vehicles. This was a transit route that was particularly favoured during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the early part of the 21st century, aided by road improvements on both sides of the border.

The border crossing at Dawtakhel, in Lalpura was also a popular route over the same period, although more challenging than the route through Goshta due to the length of the journey. By road, the journey to Dawtakhel from Torkham is 180 km via the route of the Kabul river. The journey was shortened, increasing the popularity of the route in the 1980s, when transit goods from Torkham began to be smuggled across the river by boat at Sarkand. It was intended that the Lalpura bridge, started in 2010 and finished in 2013, would further ease the movement of people and goods across the Kabul river, and avoid the need to travel to Jalalabad. However, by the time the bridge was finished, the route had already been closed by border skirmishes and the erection of a fence by Pakistan.

The final border crossing—a further unofficial one—whose topography supports vehicular traffic is that of Kama Dhaka, in Mohmand Dara; also, Mohmand territory. Like Garo and Dawtakhel,

Kama Dhaka lies to the north of the main highway, and the Kabul river. It is located along the Kabul River basin, offering ease of access to neighbouring Pakistan. It is only 10 km from Dakah, once a major transit and unloading point for freight, via a wash. Located on open land next to the Pakistan border, it is accessible to all vehicles, except container traffic. It is estimated that at its peak, between 2010 and 2014, as many as 15 vehicles—primarily Heinos and Mazda trucks and a few Datsun pickups—would cross this border each day travelling between Dakah to Landi Kotal and on to Karkhano in Peshawar, a round trip of 14 hours.

Crossing into Pakistan or Afghanistan from the unofficial border crossings at either Sasobai, Tabai, or Ghwaraky is much more challenging. Sasobai and Tabai are deep into Shinwari territory where the Afghan government’s writ has always been limited. The terrain, altitude and width of these two passes make them impassible by vehicles, even cars. The only way through is by foot, or by pack animals such as donkeys, mules or camels. Neither border has a suitable open space where goods can be stored, and cross-decked, thereby extending the journey time and the difficulty of the crossing, and consequently the types of goods that can be transported. For example, the route through Sasobai starts in Goroko to the south of the Torkham to Jalalabad highway, a short distance from Dakah. Goroko is in a desert plain 8.2 km to the north of the border crossing itself. Here containers are unloaded, and goods are stored before being reloaded onto pack animals. From Goroko these animals traverse a narrow wash before reaching Zamgora and then climb to 1,600 metres and the Sasobai pass on the Pakistan border. From the pass, they journey a further 1.4 km down a steep slope to Tirah bazaar at 1,300 metres, where the goods are subsequently unloaded and stored before being transported on to Peshawar (see **Figures 6 and 7**).

Figure 6: Border Crossing from Sasobai to Tirah Bazaar

Source: ALCIS.





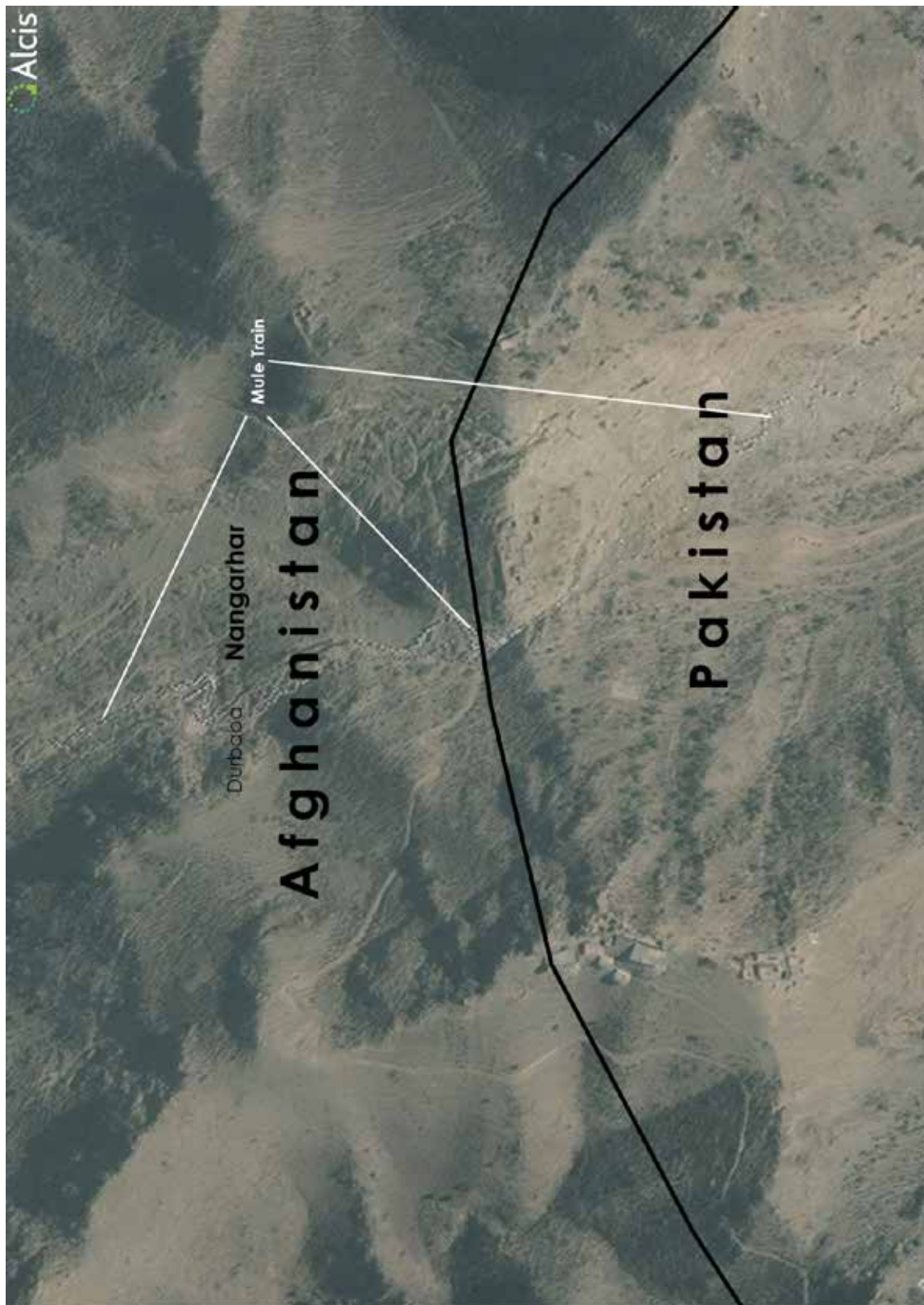


Figure 7: Mule Train Crossing Border at Sasobai

Source: ALCIS.

In total, it takes four hours to travel the 9.6 km from Goroko to Tirah. The route is so narrow in some places that the pack animals are required walk in single file, and some loads must be carried by camels if they are to be able to pass through some of the boulders and obstacles en route. Despite the obvious challenges Sasobai has become an important transport route for a wide range of transit goods being transported from Afghanistan to Pakistan, and both fieldwork and high-resolution satellite imagery indicates that on average between 2,000 and 3,000 pack animals will traverse this route each day – except Fridays. As such, this narrow mountain pass high in the remote mountains of the Spinghar, remains an important commercial link between the two countries, and a source of economic and political power for those groups that control it.

The journey through the pass at Tabai is extremely difficult, and like Sasobai has been used for hundreds of years.<sup>31</sup> Again, the mountain terrain means there are no obvious locations for the unloading and storage of goods near the pass itself. Instead, when the pass was still open, goods were unloaded and stored in the wash near the district centre of Durbaba, and then transported by foot, or by pack animal along a narrow river wash for 5 km to the border with Pakistan. From the pass at 2,000 metres, it is a further 5.3 km along another narrow wash and then down a steep slope to the village of Tabai where goods are unloaded before onward travel to Peshawar. The difficult topography of this route means that even at its busiest in the 1990s there were no more than 5 “Hino” trucks depositing their loads in Durbaba and around 500-1,500 pack animals transporting goods to Tabai. Despite the difficult terrain, Tabai maintains an important role in cross-border smuggling for illicit drugs transported by foot over the mountains into Pakistan.

The last border studied for this phase of the research was at Ghwaraky in Mohmand Dara, 9.4 km from Shalman and only 3.8 km from Torkham. Like Tabai and Sasobai, this route is impassable by vehicle and consists of a narrow wash through the mountains into Pakistan. While a relatively short journey—3.4 km to the border and then 8 km to Landikotal—the terrain has limited the route to pack animals and thereby the kind of goods that can be transported. This has rendered the route largely a secondary option for transit goods, used only when other routes are closed, and for opium and hashish.

Of course, it is not just the physical geography and topography that impacts on the location of chokepoints: other natural features are also important, in particular with regard to the production or extraction of primary commodities. A clear example is the mountains of the Spinghar where mineral deposits are found, including large amounts of talc. While the extraction of talc occurs in multiple mines across the southern districts, their location in the upper valleys and the challenges of transporting such a heavy load over the mountains into Pakistan channels these goods north to Jalalabad and the Kabul River valley, where it is easier to move goods in bulk. The location and terrain of these deposits, as well their bulk and the market in Pakistan, has resulted in several entrepot being established in open areas near the mines themselves. Here the minerals can be sorted, processed and stored, as well as taxed, before onward transport to Jalalabad. Obvious examples include Markikhel in the district of Sherzad (see **Figure 8**) and Shadal bazaar in Achin, both of which contain large inventories of talc.

Opium production is concentrated in these same upper valleys. While it is possible to cultivate opium poppy across much of Nangarhar, the

31 The Sasobai pass is said to be the alternative route Nadir Shah (1736-47) used in his conquest of India, after facing resistance at Landi Kotal by a combined force of Afridi, Shinwari and Orakzai tribesmen. The pass at Tabai was used by General Tytler for his invasion in 1878 at the onset of the second Anglo-Afghan war.

upper valleys of the Spinghar are remote, have poor soils and limited landholdings, and do not have reliable irrigation during the summer season. These conditions have made them ideal for poppy cultivation, whereas farmers in the lower valleys, particularly those in the Kabul River valley, can grow and sell a wide range of annual and perennial horticulture, as well as find non-farm income in Jalalabad, while those in the southern districts of Achin, Pachir wa Agam, Shinwar, Khogiani and Sherzad have few viable

economic alternatives to poppy. As with talc, the concentration of opium production in these upper valleys has helped establish several chokepoints where rent can be extracted including wholesale markets, processing facilities, and smuggling routes to Pakistan. However, as opposed to talc, the high value-low weight nature of opiates and hashish, ease of transportation and their illegality means that these routes typically go south over the high mountain passes into Pakistan and not to Jalalabad and along the Kabul River basin.

## 5.2. Physical Infrastructure

While topography determines the possible routes for those wishing to travel or transport goods to and from Nangarhar, as well as the location of primary commodities, investments in physical infrastructure such as roads and bridges favour some routes over others, and aid the large scale extraction and transportation of bulk materials like minerals. Other investments in physical infrastructure like border fences have deterred, and in some cases entirely shut down longstanding trading routes, and, either by design or default, led to dramatic shifts in patterns of trade, and increased the amount of rent extracted along other routes and chokepoints. Decisions over how and why particular infrastructural projects are prioritised is beyond the scope of this initial phase of the research, but some of the examples offered indicate the degree to which these policy processes impact on economic and political interests in the province.<sup>32</sup>

The rehabilitation of the Kabul to Torkham highway and the establishment of new arterial roads, such as the Jalalabad ring road and roads from the valleys of the Spinghar, and Kama, have supported a dramatic expansion in trade within and through the province of Nangarhar, and offered a source of revenue for the Afghan government

and private-state actors, as well as insurgents. The main highway connects Kabul to Peshawar and has been essential for strengthening the trade links between Afghanistan and Pakistan and establishing Torkham as the primary border crossing between the two countries. It has significantly reduced transit times between Afghanistan and Pakistan and onward to Kabul. Asphalted the Highway, and the southern ring road have also supported the movement of larger vehicles including container traffic. While both are officially restricted to freight of 40 MT, even heavier loads are regularly transported along these routes if the appropriate payments are made to officials.

The role that the Highway has played in reducing travel time between Peshawar and Kabul has been supported by other physical infrastructure, as well as regulatory systems for border controls. Since 2001 there have been major changes to the border town of Torkham itself. New buildings have been built for the Commissari, Customs, the Afghan Border Police and for the inspection of vehicles in Torkham and Bandar Wali (see **Figures 9, 10 and 11**). A further Customs facility was built at Saracha in Sammarkhel, where much of the transit trade is processed.

<sup>32</sup> Fiona Wilson, "Towards a Political Economy of Roads: Experiences from Peru", *Development and Change* 35, no. 3 (2000):525-46.



Figure 6: Border Crossing from Sasobai to Tirah Bazaar  
Source: ALCIS.





Figure 9: New Buildings at Torkham  
Source: ALCIS.



Figure 10: Bandar Wali, 2008  
Source: ALCIS.





Figure 11: Bandar Wali, 2014  
Source: ALCIS.



The main Highway and the infrastructure established for the processing of cross-border movement has been particularly important during the International Security Assistance Force operation from 2001-14. During this time, most of NATO's supplies, including diesel, passed through Torkham. Facilitating the prompt movement of goods through Torkham and control of the Torkham-to-Kabul highway became essential to the NATO mission, as well as to the US military forces based in Nangarhar. It is for this reason that the road and the diesel tankers that travelled it were targeted by the Taliban, particularly between 2009 and 2012, and that Pakistan has often closed the border at Torkham and banned the movement of NATO supplies during periods of political and sometimes military tension with Afghanistan and NATO forces.

The rehabilitation of the main Highway has also made it a major conduit for goods produced and consumed in Afghanistan, as well as the transit goods imported into Afghanistan under the Afghan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, and plays its part in supporting smuggling some of those goods back into Pakistan or neighbouring countries. For example, officials estimate that around 150-250 trucks of goods were exported from Afghanistan each day via Torkham in 2018, the exact number depending on the agricultural season and the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables. Exports of talc (40-60 trucks per day), and coal (60 trucks per day) are a daily feature whose numbers appear to vary. Without the Highway and other arterial roads, the amount of these commodities would be severely limited given their bulk and value. With 5 percent export tax on coal (largely from Baghlan) and talc, this is a valuable source of revenue for the government and any other actors who can extract payment for these goods at Torkham or along the way. The goods imported via Torkham are more varied and largely consist of transit goods as well as construction materials such as cement (100-

150 trucks per day), and, as with imports, offer a valuable source of revenue to the government and others who can prey upon the trade at key points along the route.

By rehabilitating roads, bridges and other physical infrastructure in the districts of Nangarhar, the government and its donors have encouraged the extraction and movement of commodities along particular conduits, not just the main Highway. The southern ring road, for example, has strengthened the position of Goroko as a major entrepot for the smuggling of goods to the Sasobai pass. This road, completed in 2010, also supports container traffic and connects Jalalabad to Bandar Wali on the main Highway via the districts of Chapahar, Rodat, Bati Kot, and Shinwar. Officially, it serves to reduce congestion on the main Highway. However, the road improvements also mean that transit goods that have passed through Torkham, and cleared in Saracha near Jalalabad, can be rediverted and subsequently unloaded in stores in Goroko within 1 hour of departing Customs. It is estimated that as many as 15 container trucks are unloaded in Goroko each day, providing significant revenue for the Alisherkhel tribe, as well as the traders and transporters that dominate this unofficial route to Pakistan.

Other roads have played a similar role in supporting the expansion of unofficial border crossings, the smuggling of goods and rent extraction for particular groups. For instance, once rehabilitated in 2005, the road to Kama and on to Goshta became a major conduit for imports of fertiliser, wheat flour, livestock, oil and kerosene from Pakistan, shipped by traders looking to bypass official controls at Torkham. Instead, goods were taxed as they passed through Mohmand district and at the Kama bridge en route to Jalalabad and onto Kabul.



Finally, there are the valley roads from the Spinghar. While many of these roads have been built to support the movement of US and Afghan military into the restless districts of southern Nangarhar, as primary metalled roads they have also supported the extraction and transport of minerals. The asphalt road to Sherzad that passes through Khogiani and Surkhrud before reaching Jalalabad has been critical to the exploitation of the numerous talc mines in this district supporting the movement of 40 MT trucks. The same is true of the road to Shadal bazaar in Achin. Both roads and the supporting physical infrastructure, that is, the bridges and culverts, have supported a vibrant trade in talc and not only facilitated the movement of hundreds of thousands of metric tonnes of talc per year, but also attracted multiple actors in search of rent. For example, in 2018, there were up to 10 different points along the route between Markikhel and Jalalabad, where drivers were required to make payments, only two of which were official. The other payments were to a variety of government institutions for “safe transit” including different units of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) and the Afghan National Police.

Private actors have also stepped in to fund smaller roads. For example, local businessmen and mine operators have built minor roads in the Spinghar piedmont, including in Sherzad, to support the movement of small trucks and pickups and the transportation of larger amounts of minerals from the mountains. These roads have also offered an important source of revenue for other mine operators and traders wishing to use these roads, who are typically subject to a tax. The pack animal route between Goroko and Sasobai is also being improved to allow for two-way traffic. Funded by a “Tribal Fund” and paid for by taxes imposed on those who ply this route, it is anticipated that this new track will reduce

congestion, increase the number of pack animals that can use this route, and in turn, increase the rents that can be extracted.

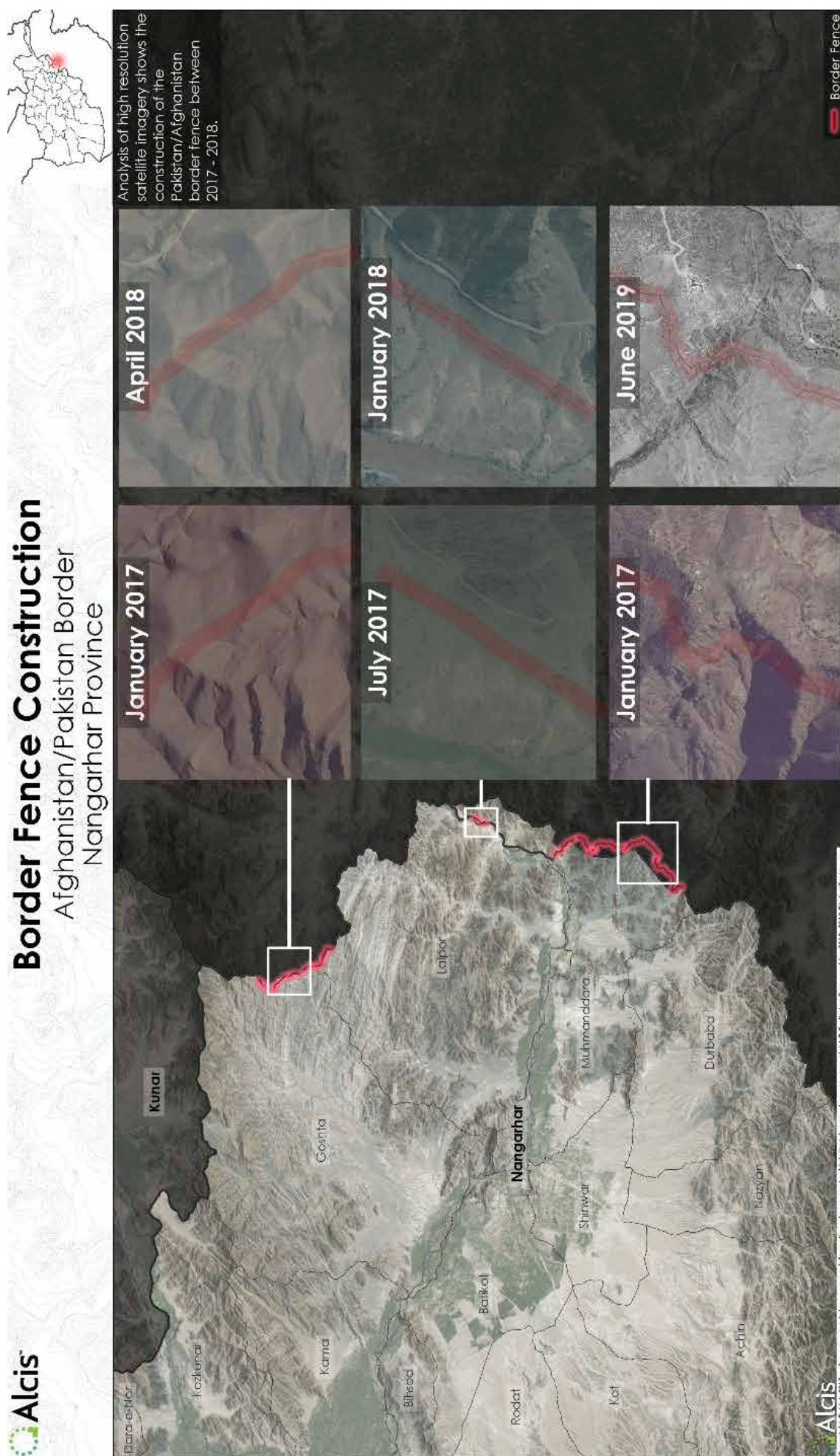
While roads have increased the amount and types of goods that can be transported supported along particular conduit, some physical infrastructure has deterred trade. In Nangarhar, the most prominent example of this is the border structures built by the GoP. The GoP first began to build a border fence in 2007, some years after it was first raised by General Musharraf in 2001.<sup>33</sup> Opposition from the Afghan government was inevitable, a function of the longstanding disagreement over the GoP’s acceptance of the Durand line as the legal demarcation of the border between the two countries. Local opposition in Afghanistan was also vociferous and led to demonstrations and violence in several border areas, including Paktiya and Kunar, as well as clashes between Afghan and Pakistani military forces. To assuage the GoP, and avoid further violence, members of the international community stepped in offering assistance for border security in the form of radar systems to the Pakistanis if they abandoned their attempts to build a border fence.<sup>34</sup>

This changed in 2014, when the GoP began its border project again, focusing on digging a 2x3 metre trench along the southwestern border of Afghanistan in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan. In 2017, the GoP announced its border management plan which prioritised building two rows of 3 metre fence, with razor wire along Pakistan’s mountainous western border with Afghanistan, focusing on the agencies of Bajaur, Mohmand and Khyber, much of which borders Nangarhar (see **Figure 12**).

33 Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah, “Fencing the Durand Line and Its Impact”, *Internationales Asienforum* 44, no. 1-2 (2013): 98.

34 Ibid., p. 100.

Figure 12: Pakistani Border Fence and its location  
Source: ALCIS.





At the time the research was conducted, the fence in Nangarhar ran to the north of Torkham along the districts of Mohmand Dara, Lalpura and Goshta, and since being built the fence has all but closed the unofficial border crossings at Garo, Dawtakhel and Kama Dakah. Unofficial crossing points that once saw numerous trucks and vehicles cross each day were closed, having significant impact on

the local economy and the livelihoods of the population. For example, the cross-border economy of Kama Dakah ceased in 2016 when the border fence was finished; this was the culmination of what many in the local community see as a climate of intimidation that preceded, including border encroachment and firing by the Pakistani military (see **Figures 13 and 14**).

**Figure 13: Cross-border route from Kamal Dakah – Shalman, complete with trucks in 2011**



Source: ALCIS.

Figure 14: Cross-Border Route from Kamal Dakah – Shalman in 2018 after fence had been completed

Source: ALCIS.



The effects of this border closure were not just felt in Kama Dakah but in Dakah itself, where between 30 and 40 local traders closed their stores. Many found employment loading trucks in Bandar Wali, and some migrated to Pakistan. As one respondent in Dakah commented: “For 14 years this way was open, there were a lot of people busy in this [smuggling] business”.

Similar stories were told in Garo and Dawtakhel, as well as along the route to each of these border crossings, including in the district centers, that is, the feeder bazaars of Lalpura and Kama. The livestock pens outside the district centre of Kama that were once a busy entrepot for buffalo en route from Pakistan to Kabul are closed, as are the *batti* in Goshta and Lalpura, that stored cross-border goods either before their onward journey to Pakistan, or after crossing the border en route to Kabul. Typically, respondents reported acts of violence and cross-border shootings preceding the completion of the Pakistani border fence. Border encroachment by the Pakistani military was a major issue at both crossings, but particularly in Garo. There were complaints that Garo bazaar, once an area with 10 shops, 20 *batti* and hotels, was abandoned in 2012 prior to the completion of the border fence in 2015, due to the incursions by the Pakistani military and the threat to life. There is a local consensus that the border fence, as well as the military activity, has negatively transformed these local economies.

What is particularly notable about the border fence is that at the time of the research there were no structures to the south of Torkham, along the southern districts of Durbaba, Achin, Nazian, Khogiani, Pachir wa Agam, Sherzad and Hisrak.<sup>35</sup> The closure of the route to the north through Mohmand territory had subsequently led to a significant uptick in the cross-border traffic south through Goroko and on to Sasobai in Durbaba district (see **Figure 15**). While the high mountains of the Spinghar possibly make the crossing at Durbaba more difficult terrain to build a fence than across the Mohmand areas to the north of Torkham, there are other geopolitical factors that have possibly played a more important role in decision making with regard to the priorities the GoP made in determining which part of the border it would fence. The next section will address these geopolitical factors.

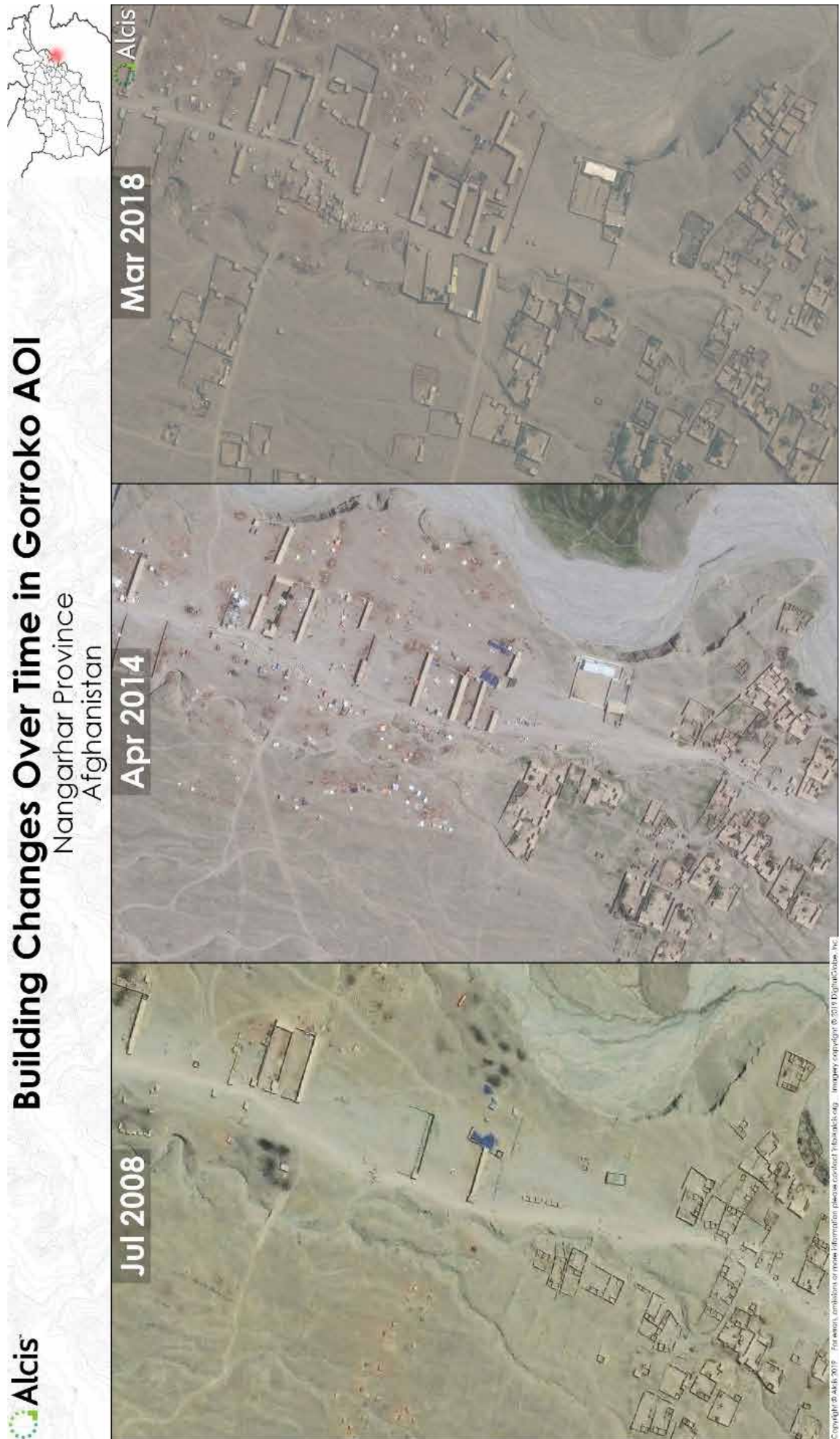
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35 While the fence running along the southern border of Nangarhar with Pakistan was completed by mid 2019 there remain a number of gaps where trade and people pass through, this includes Sasobai where further buildings have been built on the Pakistan side of the border overseeing the cross border movements.



Figure 15: Growth in Goroko Bazaar, 2008-18

Source: ALCIS.





### 5.3. Geopolitical

Clearly Afghanistan's political relations with its neighbours have also played a key determining role in the patterns of trade in its borderland and shaped their political economies. The GoP's decision to build a border fence with Afghanistan is a current day manifestation of how these relations impact on the political economy of a border area like Nangarhar.

Justified via the language of the "War on Terror" and the GoP's claims of concerns over cross-border infiltrations by armed militants, the fence has transformed the disputed Durand line into a permanent international border. In doing so, and by prioritising the permanent demarcation of the Mohmand territory to the north of Torkham, the fence has supported the GoP to gain greater sovereignty over the Tribal agencies of Bajaur, Mohmand and Khyber.

Largely autonomous from the Pakistani national government since independence in 1947, and plagued by insurgency, particularly the Tehrik i Taliban Pakistan (TTP) since 2007, these agencies and their populations have been pacified through development initiatives before being controlled and contained by Pakistani military, and the fence and other border structures. In the past, the Mohmand of Goshta and Lalpura believed the Pakistani state began in Khapakh, some 15 km from the Afghan border of Dawtakhel, as this is where the first Pakistani military outpost could be found. With the erection of the border fence in territory encroached upon by the Pakistani military, there is a view that the Pakistani state now begins inside Afghanistan.

In the process of the GoP gaining sovereignty over the Mohmand tribal agencies in Pakistan the economies of Goshta, Lalpura, and parts of Mohmand in Afghanistan have suffered. Some areas have been depopulated, drawn to live in Pakistan by the GoP's move to improve service delivery and infrastructure in Mohmand tribal lands across the border, others emptied by the encroachment by the Pakistani border forces and the cross-border violence that ensued. In Goshta and Lalpura, this campaign is viewed as part of a GoP strategy to create a "no man's land" and secure its borders. For the GoP, the fencing project is a culmination of its efforts to gain control over its own territory and population and permanently divide the Mohmand tribe that had often leveraged its position of straddling the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to its advantage.

Economic and tribal interests have also been at play in these borderland politics. Shaji Gul Afridi,<sup>36</sup> a member of the Pakistani National Assembly for Khyber between 2013 and 2018, and brother of Taj Mohammed Afridi, a former Pakistani senator and businessman with contracts for supplying NATO in Afghanistan,<sup>37</sup> is seen as instrumental in the closing of the border to the north of Torkham. A member of the Afridi tribe found in Khyber and in the Tirah valley to the south of the Spinghar mountains, with business interests in trucking and oil supplies and a constituency involved in transportation and the cross-border trade,<sup>38</sup> Shaji Gul is said to have run on an election campaign that included closing the unofficial borders north of Torkham.

36 Parvaiz Ishaq Rana, "A Business Journey from Tribal Territory to Port City", *Dawn*. 11 December 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1152290>

37 *Tribune*, "Last Four Seats: Boycott Mars Election of Four FATA senators", 31 March 2015. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/856671/last-four-seats-boycott-mars-election-of-four-fata-senators/>; *The News*, "Karachi Based Business Tycoon Becomes Senator from FATA", 23 March 2015. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/11579-karachi-based-business-tycoon-becomes-senator-from-fata>

38 Da Sokalay Taroon Zeenat, "Goods and Transportation in Tribal Areas", 3 July 2013. <https://archive.org/details/DaSokalayTaroon03-07-2013GoodsAndTransportationInTribalAreas>

The closure of these crossings ultimately favoured the conduit from Goroko to Sasobai in Durbaba, creating a monopoly for transit goods entering Pakistan. In doing so, the Tirah valley became a critical chokepoint in the movement of goods and has allowed the Afridi “peace committee” responsible for the area, to increase rents on goods being transported onward to Peshawar by almost threefold.

It is alleged that Pakistani concerns over militancy within their own territory, as well as their interests in influencing events in Afghanistan, were also responsible for the closure of the border crossing at Tabai, another conduit into the Tirah valley. This was an area that had seen an increase in violence in 2011 due to the actions of Mangal Bagh, a Pakistani militancy from Barra, near Peshawar. A member of Laskhar e Islam, then its leader, Mangal Bagh had waged a campaign against the Pakistani state in Barra since 2005.<sup>39</sup> In 2008 Laskhar e Islam retreated into the Tirah valley, forced there by a campaign to restore order in Barra by the Pakistani military. In the Tirah valley, Bagh’s group fought tribal and political rivals, including Ansar ul Islam and the Zakhakhel tribe, one of the larger more dominant tribes amongst the Afridi, that prompted the exodus of hundreds of families to Peshawar. Locally it is alleged that concerns over control over the valley, as well as the economic hostilities had on the cross-border trade into the Tirah valley, prompted a violent reaction from the Zakhakhel, with some support from the Pakistani military, that forced Mangal Bagh over the Afghan border into Nazian.<sup>40</sup> Once pushed across the border, it is alleged the Pakistani military and the Zakhakhel closed the border pass, preventing

the movement of pack animals between Durbaba district centre and Tabai village, with the aim of preventing Laskhar e Islam’s return. It is said that the closure prompted many of the men from the area to relocate with their pack animals to Zamgora, where they now rent their services for those wishing to transport goods across the border via the Sasobai pass.

The geopolitics that have favoured one border crossing, or conduit, for moving goods over another can be seen throughout Nangarhar and indeed Afghanistan’s contemporary history, shaping its economics and politics, as well as fueling conflict. For example, during the times of Zahir Shah (1933-1973), Daoud (1973-1978) and the communist regime (1978-1992) relations with Pakistan were strained and much of Afghanistan’s imports of transit goods, as well as fuel, came from Iran, via Islam Qala, and through Hairatan from the former Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup> It was not until 1956 that Customs and the Commissari were located in Torkham. Prior to this, these official functions were managed in Dakah, 11 km from the border at Torkham. As such, trucks were unloaded in Dakah and transported into Pakistan via the unofficial crossings at Goroko and along “the mule route” at Torkham, or through Kama Dakah, or cross-decked in Jalalabad, and smuggled through Garo in Goshta, en route to Gandab and Landi Kotal in Pakistan.

In fact, relations with Pakistan only improved under the Mujahiddin government (1992-1996) and it was only then that Torkham, as well as Spin Boldak in Kandahar, became the major crossing points for transit goods, as well as fuel, to Afghanistan. This continued during the Taliban regime, and the prominence of Pakistan and Torkham increased further under the Karzai

39 Syed Manzar, Abbas Zaidi, “A Profile of Mangal Bagh”, *Long War Journal*. November 200. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/multimedia/Mangal-Bagh-Profile.pdf>

40 *Dawn*, “Opportunity in Khyber”, 3 April 2011, <https://www.dawn.com/news/618219>.

41 Anna Patterson, “Understanding Markets in Afghanistan: A Study of the Market for Petroleum Fuels”, AREU Case Study Series, (Kabul: AREU, 2005): 5.

government (2002-2014), supported by NATO. As discussed in the previous section, this is a time when significant physical infrastructure was built to facilitate trade between the two countries, and to aid the movement of transit goods and the supplies required for the NATO intervention. This is the period that traders, transporters and officials alike, agree was the peak of trading through the border crossing at Torkham.

As important as the economic ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan are, the political relationship became increasingly strained in the latter years of the Karzai government and under President Ghani. Determined to reduce the country's dependency on Pakistan as a trading route with the outside world, particularly to India, the Afghanistan government has increasingly looked to Iran. This led to some readjustment in economic and political relations and a larger volume of goods passing through the official border crossing at Islam Qala in Herat and on to the busy port of Bandar Abbas in southern Iran on the straits of Hormuz.<sup>42</sup>

However, in 2017, in partnership with the Iranian and Indian governments, Afghanistan officially opened a trade corridor through Chabahar port on the Gulf of Oman. This allows Afghan goods quick passage to India, as well as other markets, that had previously required transshipment through Pakistan. Iran has also offered low tariffs and import fees to attract Afghan trade and encourage Afghanistan and other Central Asian republics to bypass Pakistan's major port development, built in partnership with China under the Chinese Pakistan Economic Corridor initiative, in Gwadar on the Makran coast of Baluchistan.

India has played a significant role in the development of Chabahar port and the transport corridor, funding the construction of a large amount of physical infrastructure in Nimroz in western Afghanistan (an area covered by the second working paper in this series), as well as investments in Iran. It has also taken on the management of Chabahar port itself. By doing so, India has further strengthened its political and economic relations with the Afghan government and reduced Afghanistan's dependency on Pakistan as a trading partner, contributing to India's own geopolitical objectives in the region.<sup>43</sup> By 2018, the value of trade with Iran was US\$2 billion and surpassed that of Pakistan,<sup>44</sup> and the vast majority of diesel imports were routed via Iran and not Pakistan.

Whilst, to date, there continues to be a significant amount of trade with Pakistan mitigating the impact that this shift in geopolitical and trade relations has had on Nangarhar, and the conduits that link it to Pakistan, the implications for the future—in particular for the border crossing and the population in Torkham—remain uncertain.

42 Asha Sawhney, "Chabahar Port: Unlocking Afghanistan's Potential", *New Perspectives*. April 2019. [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/NewPerspectives\\_APRIL2019\\_Sawhney.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/NewPerspectives_APRIL2019_Sawhney.pdf)

43 Khesrew Omid Farooq, "Chabahar Port a Step Toward Connectivity for India and Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*. 3 July 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/chabahar-port-a-step-toward-connectivity-for-india-and-afghanistan/>.

44 *Financial Tribune*, "Iran Biggest Trade Partner of Afghanistan in 2017-2018", 11 December 2019. <https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-domestic-economy/84309/iran-biggest-trade-partner-of-afghanistan-in-2017-18>.

## 5.4. Violence

Violence has shaped patterns of production and trade across Nangarhar. It has interfered with the extraction of commodities such as opium, cannabis and talc, as well as redirected the movement of goods within Nangarhar and across the border into Pakistan. In many cases violence has been associated with the ongoing conflict that has plagued Afghanistan since the late 1970s and is difficult to relate to interventions contrived to gain economic advantage over the control of rents from commodity flows. In other cases, it can be argued that violence has been instrumentalised to deter interference and regulation by the state, allowing private and non-state actors—including the insurgency—to accrue rent on the production and movement of valuable commodities such as minerals and illicit drugs. What is less clear is the causal relationship between the rents that these actors earn from these commodities and the wider conflict in Afghanistan, particularly where the production of these commodities are concentrated in the more remote, mountainous areas such as in the Spinghar piedmont, where the writ of the Afghan state has always been limited.

It is apparent that the ongoing conflict has been one of the most important determinants of production and trade in Nangarhar. Indeed, almost all the border crossings covered by this research have been closed at some point during the last 40 years due to the civil war in the 1980s, the ongoing insurgency, or border tensions with Pakistan. Entrepot and points of commodity extraction have also been affected by the wider conflict directly, or indirectly by the loss of labour supply for production and trade, particularly when communities have sought refuge from the conflict during the civil war. Goroko, for example, was largely abandoned between 1984 and 1991, with many of the Alisherkhel from the area relocating to

Khkarghaly in Pakistan to escape the fighting. This was a common story across most of the research sites, particularly Torkham which saw extensive fighting between the communist government and the mujahiddin until the government militias were driven from the area in 1989.<sup>45</sup>

Garō, and the route through Goshta, was the only border crossing where the civil war did not significantly disrupt trade. Here, an agreement with the district governor at the time, Mohmand Khan, and the communist government allowed goods—albeit relatively small amounts—to cross the border onto Gandab in Pakistan. As discussed in the previous section, it has been cross-border tensions with Pakistan and subsequently the erection of a border fence that has effectively closed this border, along with Dawtakhel in Lalpura since 2012. Along with infiltration of the TTP and the establishment of border militias under the leadership of the Mohmand elder Faraidoon Mohmand, this border, and the communities and businesses that derived their livelihoods from the trade across it, have experienced significant disruption due to violence.

In recent history ISKP has proven a major disrupter of economic activity and rent extraction in the upper valleys of Achin, as well as other parts of the Spinghar piedmont, deterring the production and trade of both opiates and cannabis, as well as minerals such as talc (see **Figure 16**). Their prohibition of the trade in opium and hashish and the conflict that followed as the ANDSF and their US military allies sought to regain control of the upper reaches of Achin prompted a dramatic shift in the smuggling of drugs through Nangarhar, as well as the production and trade in talc.

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45 Barney Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 261.

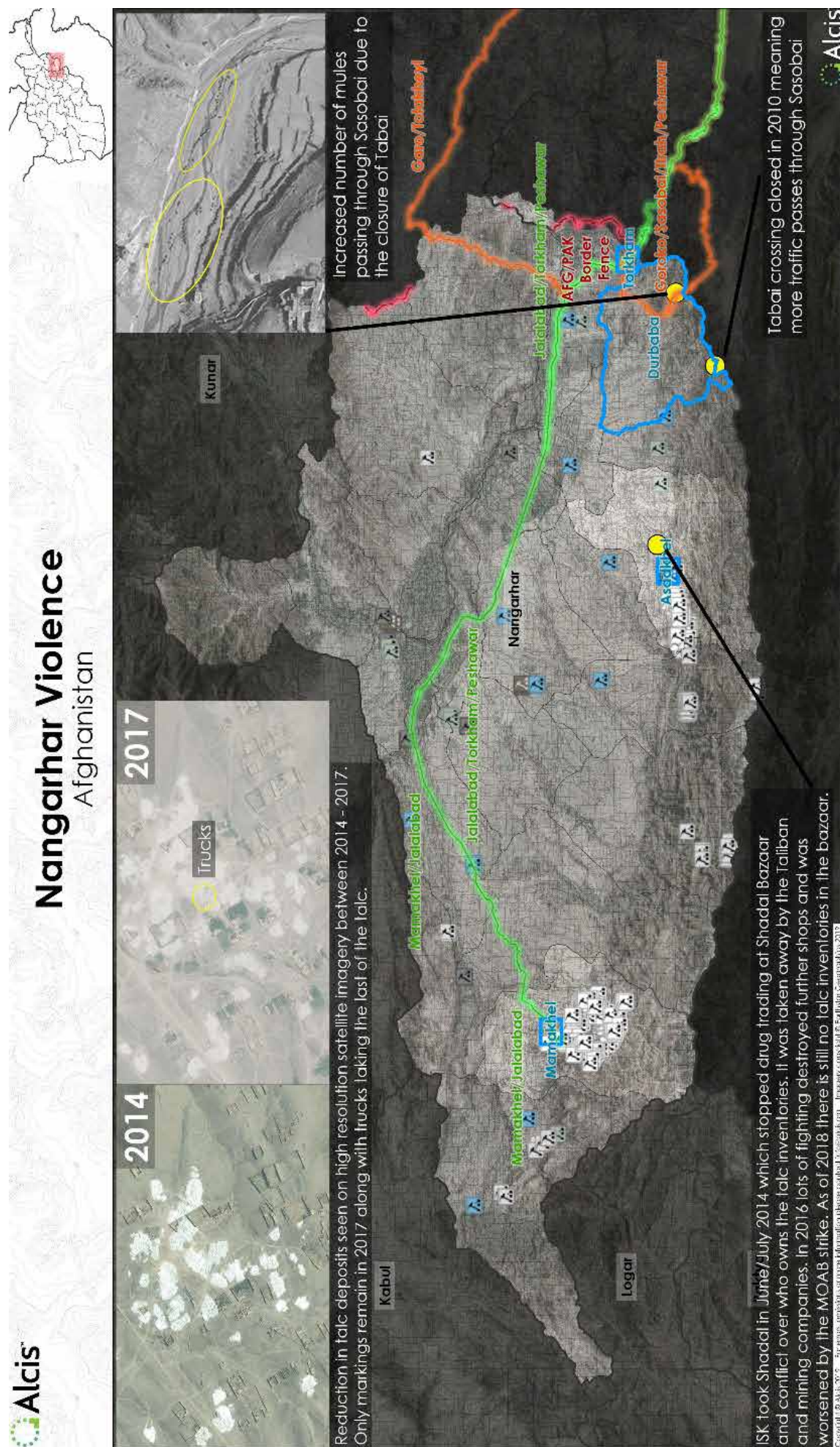


Figure 16: Violence and Its Effects on the Production and Trade

Routes of Talc in Nangarhar, 2014 to 2017

MOAB = Massive Ordnance Air Blast.

Source: ALCIS.



Shadal bazaar had been a major hub for illicit drug production and trade since before the 1990s. Remote and close to the Pakistan border, it was an ideal location for trading both opium and cannabis. Although the central hub of the opium trade moved much nearer to the Jalalabad to Torkham Highway to Ghani Khel during the Taliban regime in the late 1990s, reflecting their tacit support for the trade, Shadal remained an important entrepot for drugs en route to Pakistan, as well as a major centre for the processing of opiates. The importance of Shadal grew with the fall of the Taliban regime. With a new government and a growing international presence in the lower parts of Nangarhar, traders could no longer operate in the lower valleys so returned to the more remote mountainous areas, such as Achin. Between 2004 and 2010, law enforcement efforts, including raids on the heroin labs operating in the area, as well as repeated bans on opium production in Nangarhar, all but eliminated drugs trading from Shadal itself, but business continued from household compounds, and the bazaar remained an important conduit to Pakistan.

ISKP changed all this in the summer of 2015. The initial closure of the bazaars in Abdulkhel, and most importantly Shadal, in upper Achin was followed by an exodus of the local population, fleeing both the brutality of the regime and their imposition of a ban on

cannabis and opium poppy cultivation and the economic effect (see **Figure 17**). What followed was a period of intense fighting that lasted until 2018: first between the Taliban and ISKP; and then between ISKP and the ANDSF, with US support. Much of the fighting centered on Shadal bazaar and culminated in the USFOR-A dropping large amounts of munitions, including the Massive Ordnance Air Blast, or “Mother of All Bombs”, only 2 km to the south of the bazaar, in the village of Asadkhel, in April 2017. It took a further 12 months for the ANDSF and USFOR-A to finally wrest control over the rest of the Mahmand valley and in the process Shadal bazaar was destroyed. Ongoing efforts to clear ISKP from the upper reaches of the Spinghar mountains resulted in the ANDS and the US military establishing a permanent presence in the area and restricting the return of the local population. With a permanent military presence in the valley, the activities of the population remained under scrutiny, even in the summer of 2018, thereby deterring a return of poppy cultivation (although not cannabis) and the trade in both drugs and talc.



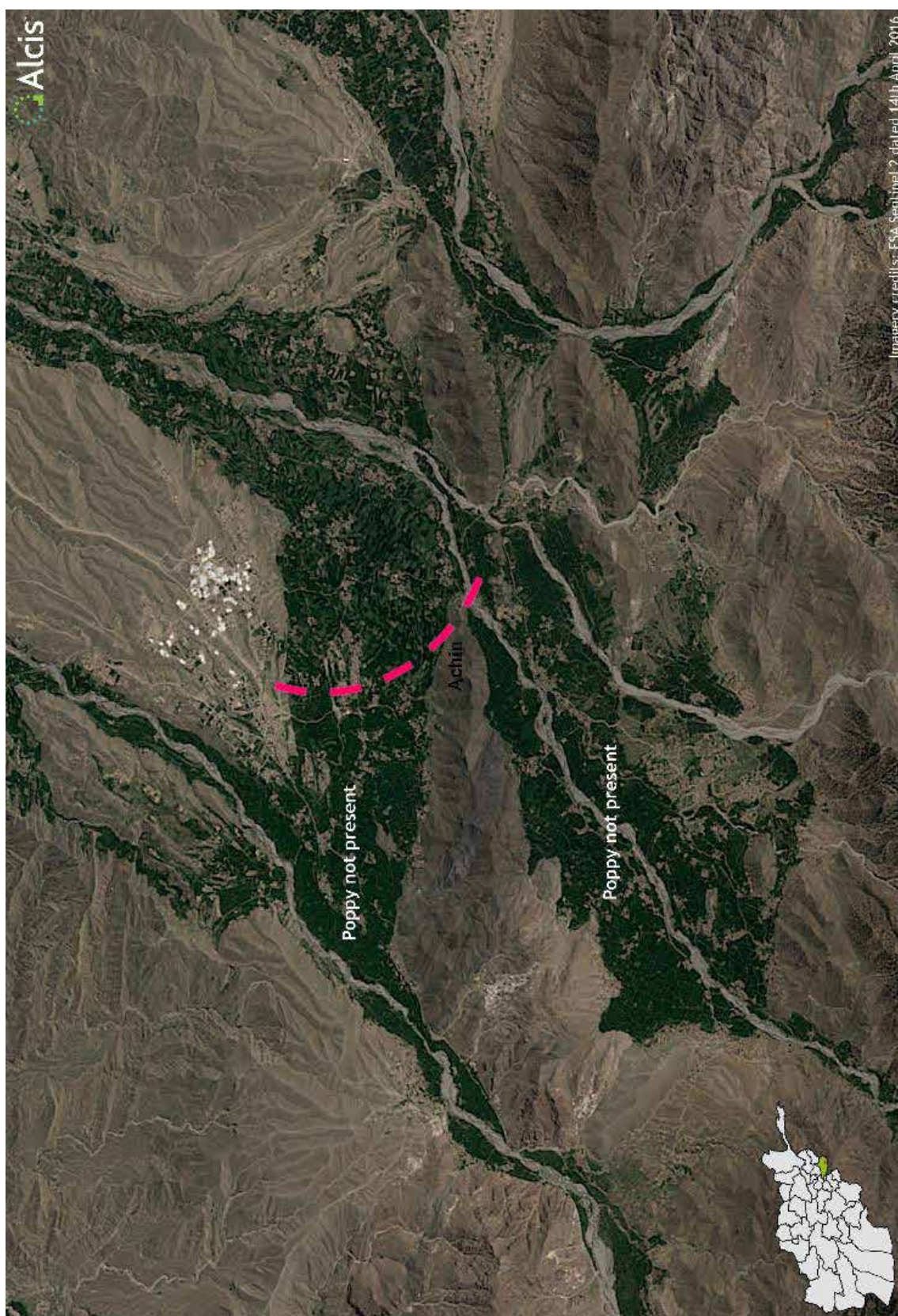


Figure 17: Absence of Poppy in ISKP-held Areas of Achin, Nangarhar in the 2015-6 Growing Season

ISKP = Islamic State Khorasan Province.

Source: ALCIS.



The market adjusted in the wake of this major disruption to the production and trade of opiates and cannabis. The initial ban on trade in Shadal imposed by ISKP, and the conflict that followed prompted traders to relocate to Markoh and the canal area in Shinwar on the main Jalalabad-Torkham highway, while the processing of opiates concentrated in the upper parts of Sherzad (having already had to relocate from the valley of Pirakhel following an ISKP incursion in early 2018). Those trading and transporting drugs from the southwestern districts of Nangarhar such as Sherzad and Khogiani bypassed Shadal completely, adding to their transaction and transportation costs, and reducing profits. Confronted by the threat of violence and a potential loss of income, or life, traders and transporters elected to travel north via backroads and deserts to Markoh bazaar rather than risk the journey south through the front lines between ISKP and government forces, and over the mountains to Pakistan.

Examples of the instrumentalisation of violence for the purpose of diverting production and trade from sites or routes, as well as extracting revenues, were infrequently cited by respondents in Nangarhar. Most were recent and had occurred since the fall of the Taliban regime. Once such example occurred during fieldwork and initially involved an attempt to extract payments from traders in Goroko, but soon escalated, leading to the death of 68 people in Dakah on 11 September 2018.<sup>46</sup> In Goroko, the Abdul Khel linked the suicide attack directly to an ALP Commander in Achin, Bilal Pacha, and allegations that his attempt to extort a payment of Pakistani Rs 15,000,000 from owners of a *batti* in Goroko had been

ignored. It was the subsequent attack on the trader's store—with the loss of US\$2 million of stock—and repeated acts of violence by Pacha and his family on the Abdulkhel in Achin, that prompted the demonstration in Dakah that was subsequently hit by a suicide attack. Despite Bilal's links to the ALP, plus alleged US support, he and his family were arrested by government forces soon after.<sup>47</sup>

Faraidoon Mohmand, a Member of Parliament and tribal elder, is also accused of instrumentalising violence as a way of creating economic opportunities. Already plagued by cross-border tensions with Pakistan, it is alleged that Mohmand used the government-funded militia that he commands and his relationship with the TTP to increase insecurity in the districts of Lalpura and Goshta in order to exploit local mineral reserves of lapis, nephrite and gold slake. It is argued that, by maintaining insecurity with the resources he has at his disposal rather than improving it, Faraidoon Mohmand and his associates can limit central government interference and regulation of their mining operations. As the next section will show, levels of violence, or the threat of it, are often used as a means of enforcing regulatory regimes by which state and non-state actors can derive rent and favour.

46 BBC, "Afghanistan Attack: Nangarhar Suicide Blast Toll Soars", 12 September 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-45494694>; Abdul Qadir Sidiqi, "Dozens Killed and Injured in Suicide Attack at Afghan Protest", *Reuters*, 11 September 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-security/dozens-killed-and-injured-in-suicide-attack-at-afghan-protest-idUSKCN1LR0W9>; Tolo, "Nangarhar Death Toll Climbs to 68", 12 September 2018, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/nangarhar-death-toll-climbs-68>

47 Yousuf Zarifi, "Achin ALP Commander Arrested Protest Continues", 12 September 2018. <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/09/12/achin-alp-commander-arrested-protest-continues>

## 5.5. Regulatory regimes

The regulation of production, trade and cross-border movement provides the means by which a variety of actors, both state and non-state, encourage and direct the commodities along specific routes. Regulation also provides an opportunity to extract a variety of payments including taxes and facilitation fees, as well as providing income-earning opportunities to constituents and patrons. Along some conduits, regulations are formal and imposed by the state; along others, it is local communities, private state actors and insurgents that regulate.

In many cases, there is state tolerance of the rules imposed by these other groups, as well as allegations of involvement in the smuggling of legal and illegal commodities and the rents that are accrued. This tolerance is indicative of what Holland (2014) refers to as “forebearance”,<sup>48</sup> of state actors recognising the redistributive aspects of the illegal economy particularly in the hinterlands, as well as the risks that punitive action may pose to their position and potentially the state itself, and consequently being unwilling to enforce the rules. It can be argued that it is in the interests of all involved that production and trade continues as each party derives some benefit. In this context, enforcement, that is, restricting the extraction or movement of goods by the state or other actors, is often viewed locally as a temporary action and a means of negotiating the redistribution of the benefits rather than an attempt to permanently prohibit the trade in goods, be they legal or illegal.

Formal regulations are bound in law and enforced by state institutions and have had a significant effect on trading patterns in Nangarhar throughout its history. From the rules over the location where freight containers

can be unloaded, the tonnage of trucks permitted to use the roads, the goods can be imported under the APTTA and the licensing of mining companies, formal regulations, and the institutions responsible for enforcement, have shaped what economic activity takes place in Nangarhar and which groups and actors accrue the benefits.

A clear example is the scale of the cross-border trade at Torkham since the collapse of the Taliban regime. At its peak, as many as 800 trucks crossed this border each day. Investments in the physical infrastructure at Torkham and Saracha, as outlined in section 4.1, have been supported by new laws and customs duties, as well as a streamlined administration to process the documentation required to transport goods across the border. With better roads and an improved regulatory system, the main Highway and Torkham is an optimal choice for those looking to move significant amounts of goods in bulk to and from Pakistan.

However, equally important to these formal systems has been the regulatory regimes of other actors. These coexist with the formal regulations of the state, often prospering, from the formal rules that are imposed. The transit trade is an obvious example. It thrives on the tax differentials between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the fact that profits can still be derived despite the challenges of transporting goods over steep mountain passes by pack animal. The revenues this trade generates are derived from the fact that Afghanistan imports more goods than it consumes, and there are few efforts to prevent the surplus from being diverted and redirected back to Pakistan.

48 Alisha Holland, “Forebearance: Theory and Measurement in the Study of Enforcement Politics”, 2 October 2014. [http://cpd.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Holland\\_BerkeleyCP\\_10.02.14.pdf](http://cpd.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Holland_BerkeleyCP_10.02.14.pdf)

Yet, despite the informal nature of the transit trade, it is governed by a regulatory regime that imposes both rules and costs on those transporting goods along the route. No more so than in Goroko where regulation provides rent to the Alisherkhel tribe that dominates the area and generates a multiplicity of jobs for those that reside there. It does this in several ways: firstly, even though it is possible for vehicles to travel beyond Goroko, all trucks and vehicles are required to unload in Goroko and are not allowed to travel further up the wash to Sasobai (see **Figure 18**). This ruling establishes Goroko—where the Alisherkhel dominate—as the critical chokepoint for the cross-border trade to Pakistan. By insisting on unloading in Goroko, the tribe can charge a facilitation fee for each truck and encourage a vibrant trading centre consisting of 40 to 50 stores, traders, and employment for labourers and transporters. Were the Alisherkhel to allow trucks and vehicles onward travel along the wash to Sasobai all this economic activity would occur in the upper area where the Mulagori tribe dominate.

The second aspect of the regulatory regime imposed by the Alisherkhel also relates to the how goods can be transported. Once unloaded into stores in Goroko, the transit goods are readied for onward transport to Sasobai. Prohibited from using vehicles, these goods are loaded onto pack animals, either donkeys, mules or camels for the journey across the mountain pass into Tirah. The amount of goods each animal can carry—for example 21 seer (the equivalent of 147 kg) per mule—the price for each journey, and the number of journeys they can do each day, are also governed by the regulatory regime agreed by the Alisherkhel. A small fee is charged by the tribe for each journey these animals make. The use of these animals has created a large number of jobs in the area, and it is estimated that as many as 10,000 pack animals and 5,000 mule

owners and labourers can be found either in the Goroko area or plying the route through Sasobai to Tirah, passing an Afghan Border Police base at Zamgora along the way.

Once in Tirah another informal regulatory regime is responsible for the onward movement of goods to Peshawar. This is under the auspices of the “peace committee” established by the Afridi tribe under a political settlement with the Pakistani military following a military offensive in the valley in 2015. This committee determines how many trucks of loaded goods can leave the area each day, charging a tax on each. The long line of pack animals crossing the border, the unloading and storage of goods in the villages of Tirah, and the cross-decking of these goods into trucks for onward travel to Peshawar all occurs in close proximity to three Pakistan military bases that straddle the border, highlighting the degree to which both states practice “forbearance” with regard to the cross-border illicit economy.

It is in the context of regulation that illicit drugs currently have many similarities to the other commodities studied during this phase of the research. Although prohibited by international law there have been periods where the Afghan state and its institutions have often proven unwilling, or more likely, unable, to enforce restrictions on the production, processing and trade of illicit drugs. During the times of Zahir Shah, even up to the Communist government, opium poppy was not widely cultivated and was largely concentrated in the upper valleys of the Spinghar piedmont. It was only under the mujahiddin, and during the Taliban regime, that cultivation spread to the lower valleys and successive governments failed to enforce the international drug control conventions that the Afghan state is signatory to.



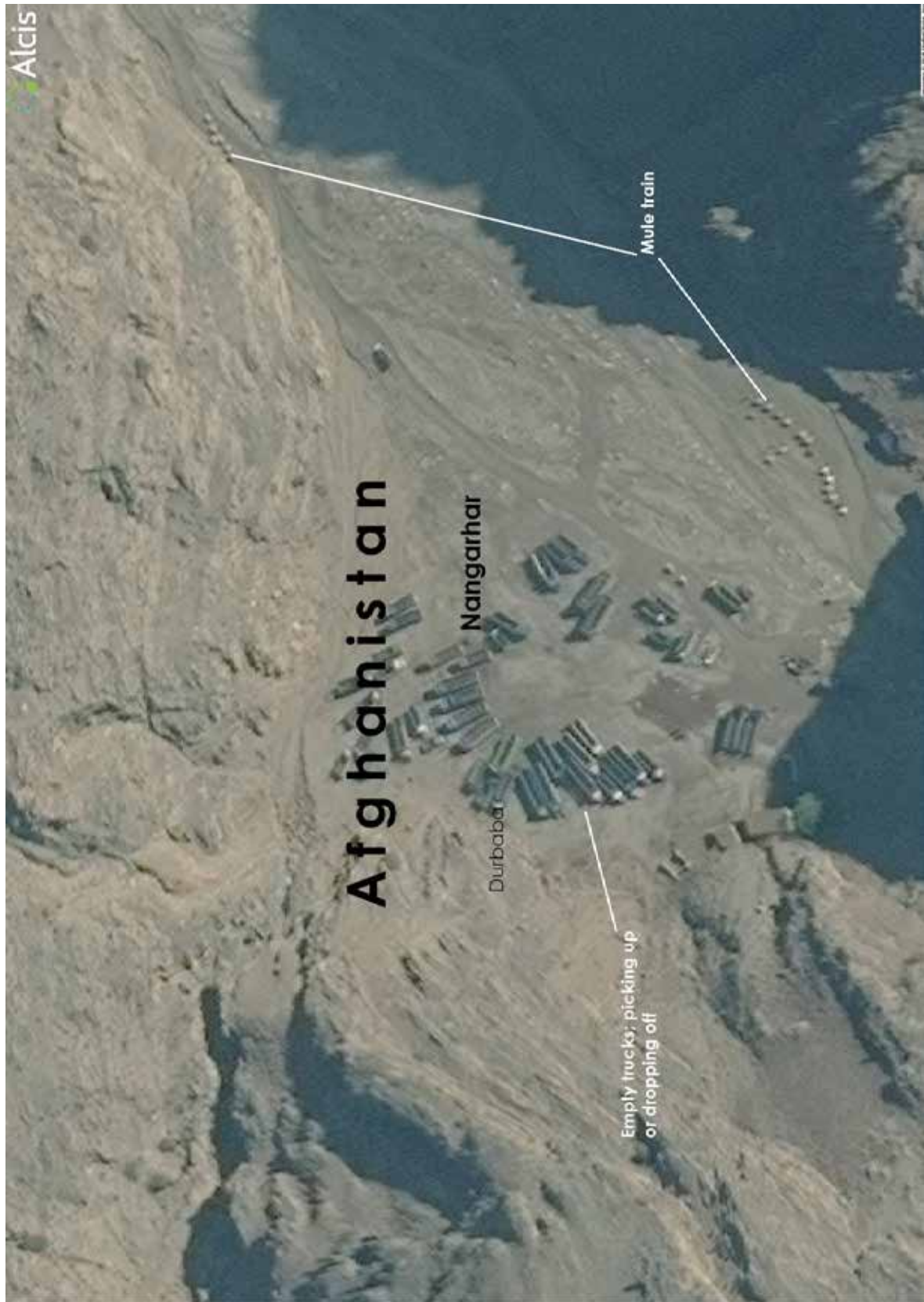


Figure 18: Trucks Being Unloaded and Goods Cross-Decked onto Mules at Goroko

Source: ALCIS.

During the 1980s and 1990s, opium was smuggled across each of the border crossings covered by the research, particularly during the Taliban regime, when respondents referred to the transportation as “legal” and subject to tax at the point of export, while commenting on the prohibition of cannabis over the same period. Over this period, efforts to restrict this movement were resisted. For example, it is alleged that attempts to prohibit cross-border smuggling between Jalalabad and Khyber by the mujahiddin in 1989 were abandoned in the face of protest by traders and the local population.<sup>49</sup> And while the outright prohibition of opium was imposed by the Taliban in July 2000, it was the culmination of successive attempts by the regime to ban the crop,<sup>50</sup> and was subject to protracted bargaining between some of the more influential tribes in Nangarhar and Taliban commanders.<sup>51</sup>

Under the Karzai government, a degree of regulation returned to illicit drug production and trade in Nangarhar. As discussed in previous sections, during this period, Nangarhar underwent a series of opium bans that, albeit briefly, eliminated cultivation or contained it in the upper reaches of the Spinghar. Law enforcement operations also restricted the production and trade of opiates and cannabis to the more remote mountainous areas of Nangarhar, though in larger amounts than during the Zahir Shah and Daoud governments.

However, it is also important to reflect on the potential duality of law enforcement efforts. Some efforts to restrict the production and movement of illicit drugs may be genuine, others should be seen as part of a regulatory regime designed to allow trade to continue and negotiate larger rents for private state

actors. It is often difficult to ascertain which law enforcement effort serves which purpose. For example, the eradication of the standing opium crop in Nangarhar has often been viewed as a process of bargaining between local communities and the district and local authorities, an opportunity for district officials and an eradication team to extract payments from local communities in return for leaving their crop. Yet, there are examples of crop destruction being conducted in Nangarhar in a systematic and comprehensive manner, where there have been few to no incidences of bribery and where the crop has been eliminated in all but the most remote areas. The Taliban ban of 2000-1 and the prohibition imposed by Governor Gul Agha Shirzai between 2007-8 and 2010 are just such examples.

The problem for the state is one of maintaining such strict prohibition, particularly through a prolonged economic downturn, which, as evidence has shown, is an inevitable outcome of imposing a protracted opium ban in the absence of viable alternatives.<sup>52</sup> The issue is therefore one of circumstance and conditions, and, like that of the cross-border smuggling of transit goods, “forbearance” features prominently in the minds of those responsible for regulation: pursue a policy of strict enforcement and there is every chance of resistance, even violence.

49 Rubin, “The Fragmentation of Afghanistan”, p. 262.

50 Mansfield, “The Sun Cannot be Hidden by Two Fingers”

51 David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

52 Ibid.

The 2012 eradication campaign in Nangarhar reflects this reality on the ground. Following on from 4 consecutive years of low levels of cultivation, even restrained efforts to eradicate the crop in the lower parts of the Spinghar in the spring of 2012 were met with high levels of resistance and the deaths of 45 people, including 10 ANP (see **Figure 19**).<sup>53</sup> Conscious of the risk to life and limb, of further fueling the insurgency the government, and the pressure to deliver an environment where voting would be possible in the upcoming presidential election, the central and provincial authorities engaged in a process of protracted negotiations during the eradication campaign in 2013. Under the leadership of an Afghan general from the Afghan National Army, deals were struck over the level of crop destruction each village would undertake—“just for the cameras”—in a hope of stabilising the area and avoiding further violence (see **Figure 20**).<sup>54</sup>

A more recent example of the challenges of prohibition and how it is presented on the wider stage—“the theater of counternarcotics”<sup>55</sup>—can be seen with a recent incident on the border at Sasobai. Between 25 July and 17 August 2018, the border was closed by the Afghan Border Police, allegedly initiated by the government’s concerns over the possible transshipment of drugs across this southern route into Pakistan. The economic effects of closing the border were profound given the number of people involved in the cross-border smuggling and the amount of trade in the area. After protracted negotiations, and what was said to be a guarantee from the Alisherkhel and Shaikhan that the border would not be used for the smuggling of drugs—and a fine of Rs 1,000,000 if the agreement was breached—the

Afghan Border Police reopened the border. The next day it was reported that 6,500 pack animals crossed the border at Sasobai, a number that was verified using high-resolution satellite imagery.

Ultimately, what can be seen from this recent incident in Sasobai is the government taking a public stand on the smuggling of illicit drugs, while ignoring the illegal movement of significant amounts of legal goods. Locally, it is believed that the border closure was part of a bargaining process, designed to extract higher payments for officials, and that concerns over drug smuggling was only a pretext. There are also significant doubts as to how long the authorities could have sustained their position on the border without facing resistance from the different groups that derive an income from the cross-border smuggling, including those in government. Over time, maintaining such a strict prohibition had the potential to undermine the tribal and political leadership in Durbaba, one that has been important in maintaining close relations with the government in Jalalabad and Kabul, kept the insurgency at bay and provided incomes for a large number of people in the area and in Nangarhar more generally.

53 David Mansfield, “From Bad They Made it Worse: The Concentration of Poppy in Areas of Conflict in the Provinces of Helmand and Nangarhar”, (Kabul: AREU, 2014): 44. <https://areu.org.af/publication/1411/>.

54 Ibid, page 30-1.

55 David Mansfield, “Bombing Heroin Labs in Afghanistan: The Latest Act in the Theatre of Counternarcotics”, LSE International Drug Policy Unit, (2018). <http://www.lse.ac.uk/united-states/Assets/Documents/Heroin-Labs-in-Afghanistan-Mansfield.pdf>.



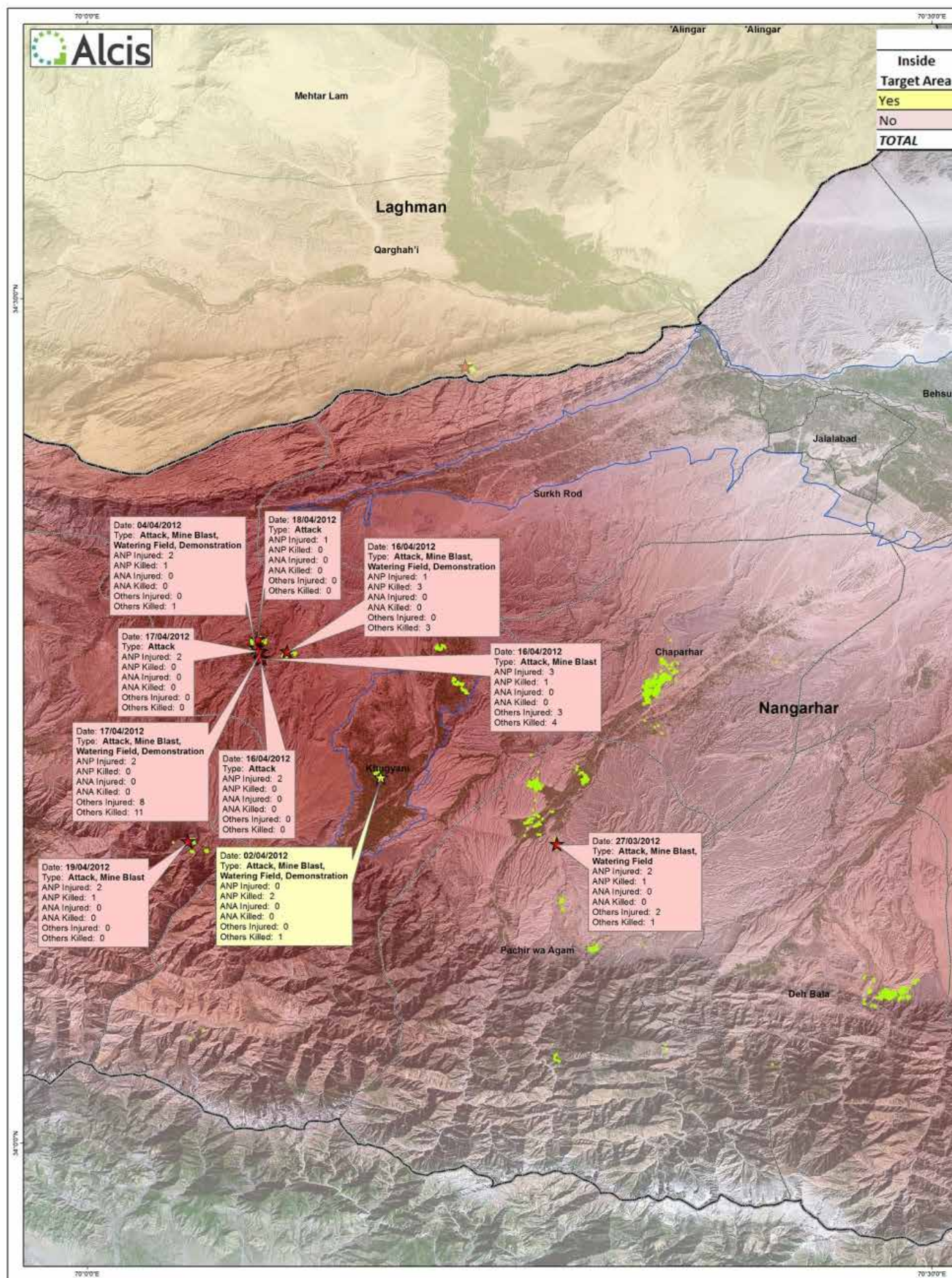


Figure 19: Locations, Casualties and Injuries During the Eradication Campaign in Nangarhar, 2012

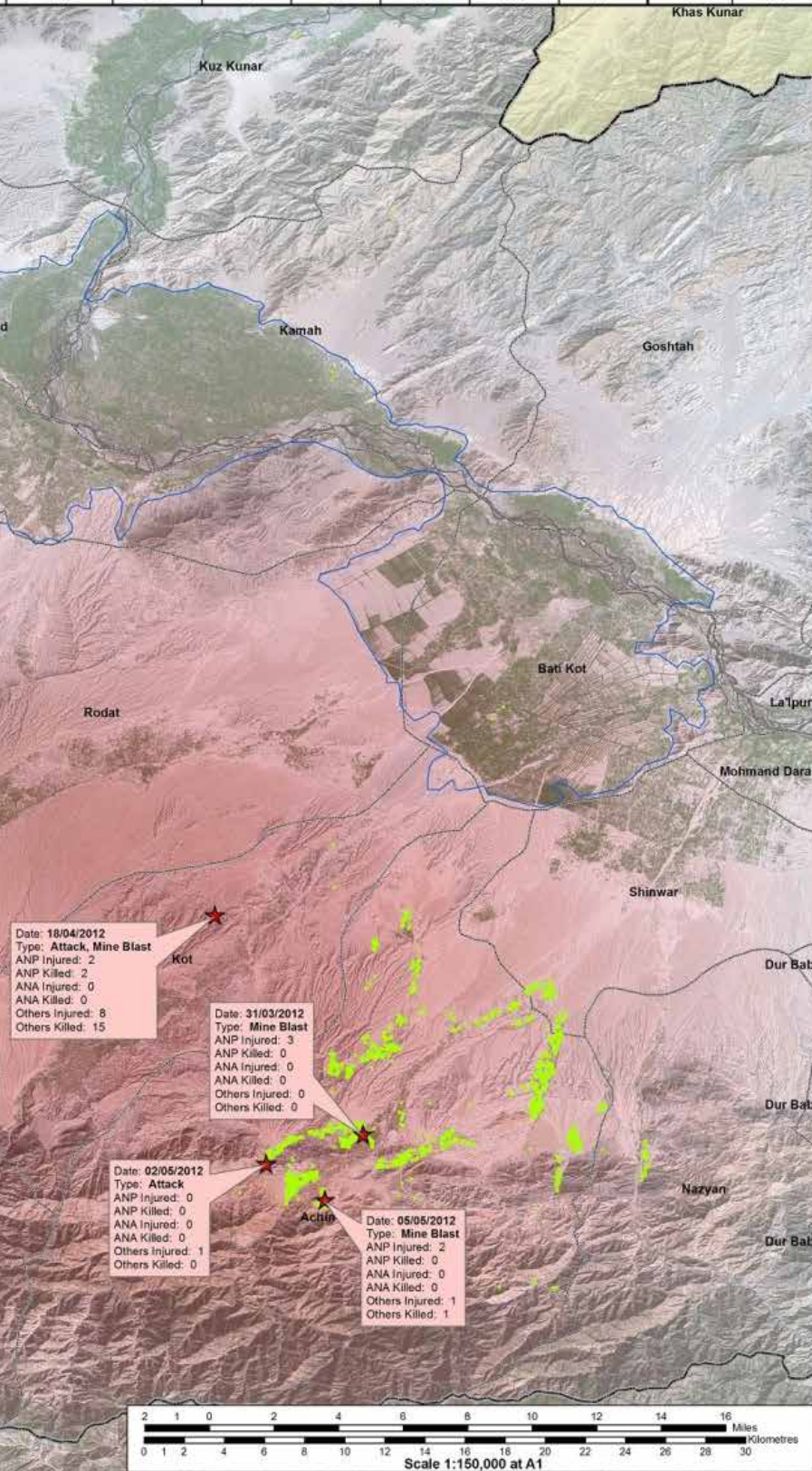
Source: ALCIS.



# NANGARHAR

## GLE Casualties 2012

NANGARHAR								
Number of Incidents	ANA Killed	ANA Injured	ANP Killed	ANP Injured	Others Killed	Others Injured	TOTAL Killed	TOTAL Injured
1	0	0	2	0	1	0	3	0
13	0	0	9	24	36	23	45	47
14	0	0	11	24	37	23	48	47



### Legend

#### Casualty Point in Target Area?

- ★ Yes
- ★ No

#### Casualty Density

- High
- Low

- UNODC Verified GLE
- GLE 2012 Target Area
- District Boundary
- Province Boundary

### Data Notes

Density based on cumulative scores of killed and injured ANA, ANP and Others. Where injury has a score of '1' and a death has a score of '2'.

Coordinates of incidents that are provided by UNODC cannot be independently verified. As such there may be some errors in the exact location of incidents.

### Data Sources

GLE target areas produced by Alcis. Casualty data provided by UNODC. Verified GLE data provided by UNODC. Boundary data provided by AGCHO. Natural View base imagery.

Coordinate System: GCS WGS 1984  
Datum: WGS 1984  
Units: Degree  
Scale 1:150,000 at A1



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Ref: 120514\_GLE\_Casualties\_Nangarhar\_A1L  
Produced by Alcis Limited.

14<sup>th</sup> June 2012







Figure 20: Locations, Casualties and Injuries During the Eradication Campaign in Nangarhar, 2013

Source: ALCIS.





## NANGARHAR

### GLE Casualties 2013

#### Legend

- ★ Casualty Point
- UNODC Verified GLE
- District Boundary
- Province Boundary

#### Data Notes

No target areas were defined for Nangarhar for the 2013 GLE.

Coordinates of incidents that are provided by UNODC cannot be independently verified. As such there may be some errors in the exact location of incidents.

#### Data Sources

Casualty data provided by MCN/UNODC.  
 Eradication data provided MCN/UNODC.  
 Boundaries provided by AGCHD.  
 Landsat base imagery

#### Coordinate System Information

World Geographic System 84  
 Geographic Lat/long

Scale 1:150,000 at A1



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Ref: 130701\_GLE2013CasualtiesNangarhar\_A1L  
 Produced by Alcic

1<sup>st</sup> July 2013



In other parts of Nangarhar, the regulatory systems of the Taliban and the government coexist, supporting the continued trade and movement of goods, so that both parties can extract revenue and avoid the ire of the private actors involved in extraction and trade. This “straddling of multiple levels of regulation”<sup>56</sup> can be seen in the drugs trade with opium poppy and cannabis concentrated in the upper reaches of the southern districts of Nangarhar where the Taliban tend to dominate, but the crop is transshipped via Markoh in Shinwar and over the mountains at Tabai in Durbaba, where those affiliated with government forces hold sway. Both those affiliated with the government and the Taliban extract revenue at particular chokepoints en route, and while the rules and costs imposed by both parties are typically understood by the private businessmen and traders extracting commodities and transporting them along these routes, there is always scope for negotiation.

In many cases, the Taliban regulatory system mirrors that of the Afghan government, reflecting the insurgency’s wish to project itself as a “shadow government” to the population. For example, trucks transporting goods along the Torkham to Jalalabad road are stopped in Bati Kot—a district to the south of the road where the Taliban have gained considerable support—with the driver “arrested”, and taxes demanded. Justification for such a request is offered on the basis that duties have been paid to the Kabul government by the trader at Torkham Gate, and that the equivalent is due to the Taliban “as we too are a government”. The Taliban’s tax of the production and trade of talc in the Spinghar piedmont is determined on a similar basis; a function of the government’s tax, and subject to a commensurate increase when the government hikes its rates.

For those plying these routes—moving between territory governed by local communities, the Afghan state, and its affiliates and the insurgency—different regulatory regimes are the cost of doing business. They provide much-needed stability to production and trade in what can often appear to be an unpredictable and risky economic environment. While the imposition of rules regarding what can be produced, traded and transported by whom and how, imposes costs, there is scope for negotiation both individually and collectively, as well as the opportunity to redirect some economic activities along other conduit and chokepoints when risks and costs prove too punitive. Ultimately, the continuity of production and trade is in everyone’s interest as this is the basis of economic activity and rent. Therefore, restricting production or the movement of goods between the territories of opposing politico-military groups is less common than might be expected, and can provoke unrest and resistance by the traders, transporters and communities that are dependent on them for a livelihood.

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56 Max Galien, “Informal Institutions and the Regulation of Smuggling in North Africa”, *Perspectives in Politics*, (2018): 4.

## 5.6. Networks and Patronage

Regulation requires staff to enforce the rules. Influence over staff appointments, particularly in key nodal points in a commodity chain, provide opportunities to extract rents and favours. In Nangarhar, patronage has allowed senior officials and power brokers to have influence over the appointment of those in the Customs office, Afghan Border Police, or the Afghan National Police along major conduits of trade or in locations where regulations are imposed. In many cases, these posts may come at a price; for example, it is alleged that a previous Commissar of the Afghan Border Police at Torkham paid increasing amounts of money each year to obtain and then keep his job. His alliances with key powerbrokers such as Hazrat Ali, the Pashai commander from Nangarhar, and Abdullah the Chief Executive in the National Unity Government, led to this individual claiming, “no one can sack me”.

In other offices, those in key posts are required to extract rent on commodities produced that pass along specific routes, and provide information on those that have obtained licenses or permission to trade. Those in the talc trade complain that they and their families are particularly vulnerable to intimidation and kidnap due to details of the contracts they are issued by the Mining Department becoming common knowledge and shared with “powerful people within the province”. Indeed, one respondent complained that over the previous 12 months his son, nephew and the brother of his business partner had been kidnapped. Another claimed: “powerful people in the government receive money for nothing. It is our obligation to pay money to them”.

A change of key staff can disrupt trade and rent-seeking opportunities, highlighting the importance of retaining senior positions in government and, thereby, influence over current and future appointments; this is as much to disrupt the revenues of rivals as maintain income for oneself. For example, the Commissari appointed at Torkham in early 2018 ordered the removal of individuals along the main road of the bazaar who were responsible for the collection of taxes, each for different powerbrokers in Nangarhar, to a total value of Rs 12,000 per truck. Disputes over the collection and distribution of rents at Torkham have long been a point of tension between the political elite in Nangarhar, and served to undermine the rule of Governor Shirzai, who became increasingly unwilling to share unofficial tolls collected over the course of his rule.<sup>57</sup>

In Goroko, patronage has played an even more important role in shaping who controls trading routes and thereby access to rents. The desert area where Goroko is located is disputed territory. The Mohmandi in Dakah claim the land is theirs and complain that the Alisherkhel captured it during the time of Zahir Shah, and that the tribe continue to make incursions into the desert area of Girdi, just south of the Torkham Highway. They argue that Dakah would be a more important choke point in cross-border trade were it not for the growth in Goroko and its location at the end of the wash leading to Sasobai, and therefore its strategic role as a major storage area for onward trade.

Blame for the Alisherkhel’s annexation of Goroko is given to Mama Zarghun Shah, a prominent Alisherkhel general in the Afghan army during the times of Zahir Shah. It is said that during this period Mama Zarghun

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57 Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand*.



Alisherkhel allowed his fellow tribesmen, supported by a letter from Zahir Shah, to take Goroko despite the fact there is little logic to the claim; the land lies someway from the historical tribal lands of the Alisherkhel in Achin and Shinwar. There is also little affinity between the Alisherkhel and Shaikhan tribe whose land lies in the upper areas of Durbaba and is concentrated around the border pass at Tabai. For example, respondents from the Alisherkhel tribe report being rebuffed when approaching the district governor for a position in the Afghan Border Police, told that: “you people are from Achin, these jobs are for the people of Durbaba”. Despite these tribal tensions, the Shaikhan receive share of the goods crossing the border at Sasobai, as a failure to pay would prompt disruption and the loss of revenue for all involved.

Ultimately, the evidence indicates that patronage and networks have proven highly adaptable. Along the formal conduit through Torkham, it is anticipated that rents will have to be paid no matter who appoints the officials at the border or in other key offices. Moreover, rates are typically negotiable, where possible through direct contact and some degree of appeasement; if not, there is always collective action, protests and road closures, a relatively common occurrence in Torkham and Dakah and illustrative of the agency of the different groups involved in production and trade along these conduit. The same is true of the unofficial border crossings.

It is particularly important to note that traders in Nangarhar have proven adept at rerouting commodities along different conduits where conditions require; a function of the ebb and flow of cross-border trade they have experienced, and the degree to which transport routes are broken into distinct and separate journeys. Very few commodities can be transported along a route on an end-to-end

basis. For example, from the mountains of the Spinghar or even Jalalabad to Peshawar in Pakistan there are multiple places where goods have to be loaded/unloaded, cross-decked and then transported across the next leg of the journey by a new set of actors who are typically local to the area. This is perhaps moreso with illegal goods like drugs, but it is also the case where legal commodities are being smuggled across the border illegally. This means that those involved in the production and cross-border trade of goods need to be integrated into a wide body of networks if they are to be able to adequately respond to a rise in the rents imposed at a particular chokepoint, increasing levels of violence en route or the closure of border crossings with Pakistan.

The more fundamental changes that have arisen in the cross-border trade since 2010, particularly with the closure of the routes through Mohmand territory, will undoubtedly impact the distribution of jobs, incomes and rents along these conduit, increasing the importance of the formal crossing at Torkham and the informal trade through Sasobai. This may increase the rents to those that can influence appointments of key staff in these areas, but also create increasing tension in a patronage system that has often relied on a rapid turn-over of staff as way of redistributing rents and favours to key brokers and their constituents. It is possible that the increased channeling of trade through these two points of entry/exit, and the concentration of rent in the hands of those that control them, may make these routes more vulnerable to higher levels of spoilage, and possibly even greater levels of violence as other actors look to wrest control of these areas from the Afghan state and its associates.

## 6. Key themes or lines of analysis that require further research

This initial phase of the research set out to answer four main research questions:

- i. How does the production and transportation of key commodities such as minerals, drugs and fuel impact on the political and economic stability of borderlands?
- ii. Do these impacts differ depending on whether commodities are: (a) illegal, or (b) legal commodities moved illegally?
- iii. What is the reason for the shifting relative importance of different commodities and transportation routes and how do these relate to changes in economic and political networks and/or violence?
- iv. Which interventions supported/undermined the production and transportation of these commodities; what decisions guided their design and implementation; and ultimately how did these interventions effect the political and economic stability of borderlands?

With regard to the first and second research questions, this initial phase of the research points to a number of preliminary conclusions. Most importantly, the research highlights the redistributive nature of illicit economies in the borderland of Nangarhar, and the degree to which a wide range of communities and groups are involved either directly or indirectly in production, transport and cross-border smuggling. Consisting of multiple segmented journeys, where different local actors are responsible for the trade and transportation

of commodities across specific areas, these economies provide significant income, employment and rent to multiple groups across the province, and neighbouring Pakistan. With so many horizontal cleavages, both profit margins and rents are more limited than economies where there is greater vertical integration, such as many licit economies.

The research also shows that, in the illicit economies of Nangarhar, rents are negotiated not imposed in recognition that punitive rates deter production and trade and lead to a loss of income. With such high costs, commodities need to be moved in volume to generate income. As such, investments in physical infrastructure to facilitate trade, establishing formal and regulatory regimes and a level of stability, appear to offer a certainty to private sector traders that allow them to better manage price fluctuations of cross-border markets and the high cost of business in this environment.

Furthermore, the research indicates that rents are constantly subject to repeated renegotiation, particularly when officials are changed at key choke points on cross-border routes. The appointment of new staff can be followed by a period of market uncertainty in border trade, as travel times, costs and rents are recalibrated and redistributed amongst different patronage networks. This can provoke unrest, protest and even violence as a new arrangement is agreed and a new equilibrium is found. In this context, draconian and restrictive action by the state authorities can be seen as a first stage to exact concessions and higher rents from traders, as well as play a performative function for the benefit of external actors. Similarly, protests and even

violence by those groups affected by attempts to bar the movement of goods also has a theatrical element, designed to impose a direct and significant short cost on those looking to extract higher rents, in the hope of reaching a settlement that will be less punitive in the longer term.

Aside from these rather visual displays of unrest and resistance, illicit economies—be they in minerals, drugs, fuel, or the transit trade—tend to be more cooperative than many might presume, or official narratives often suggest. In fact, coexistence, if not cooperation, is required between groups and communities with quite different territorial and ideological interests and affiliations, if a sufficient volume of commodities is to be extracted and transported and enough income and rent is to be generated for all involved. This creates a strong constituency for the continuation of these economies and a climate of protest, negotiation and even violent resistance when the state or other actors restrict production and trade along particular routes or at specific locations. The agency of these groups, that is, their links to provincial, national and regional powerbrokers further constrains the capacity of the formal authorities and the insurgency to act. All this suggests that illicit economies – including the drugs economy have a stabilising effect on the borderlands of Nangarhar; a preliminary conclusion that is further developed in the answer to the third research question.

The third research question examined the reasons for the shifting relative importance of different commodities and transportation routes and how these related to changes in economic and political networks and/or violence. Here the initial phase of the research provides substantial and rich evidence of the shifts in trade flows over space and time, linked to a number of factors most notably geopolitics, investments in physical infrastructure and conflict.

With regard to the role of geopolitics in shaping cross-border trade, the research highlights the historical importance of Nangarhar as a primary route for conquest and trade for empires on both sides of Afghanistan, as well as how the contemporary history of the province has been shaped by the central government's relationships with its neighbours. A port of exit during much of the 20th century for goods coming from Iran and Central Asia, it is only since 1992 and the fall of the Najibullah government, that Nangarhar became a more significant player in cross-border trade and the national economy. Perhaps surprisingly, its political and economic links with Pakistan were further strengthened with the collapse of the Taliban regime and the NATO state building project, in particular the US military and civilian presence in between Nangarhar and the investments they made.

Over time, the relationship between the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan have worsened and with it has come a new era in which their economic and political ties have become particularly tense. This manifested in Afghanistan's outreach to India and Iran and the growing importance of the western borderland economies of Herat and Nimroz, and Pakistan imposing significant restrictions on cross-border movements and trade with its erection of a border fence that has contained the Mohmand territories to the north of Torkham. It remains to see what impact this will have on communities in Goshta, Lalpura and Mohmand who have long depended on cross-border trade for their livelihoods.

The research clearly shows how investments in physical infrastructure, such as the border fence, have transformed the political economy of Nangarhar, especially since the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. Physical infrastructure has facilitated the production and trade along some routes and entirely closed others. In some



cases, investments have been made deep into territory where the government has historically had little control, such as in the Spinghar piedmont, no doubt under the assumption that “wherever the roads ends, that’s where the Taliban starts”. However, this infrastructure has also facilitated the production and trade in commodities that the insurgency has been able to tax, establishing both an income for those in violent conflict with the state and a network of common interests amongst the Taliban and private state actors, which includes resistance to central state control of these areas and the resources they hold.

This initial phase of the research also suggests that conflict has had a significant impact on the cross-border economy in Nangarhar. It has had particular effect on production, trade and the movement of commodities during extended periods of fighting such as the civil war and the campaign against ISKP between 2017 and 2019. Conflict has led to the closure of border crossings and chokepoints and resulted in the departure of local communities that service the production and movement of goods and depend on the cross-border economy for their livelihood. However, when the conflict has subdued, the importance of these conduits and chokepoints has typically resumed—a function of the physical geography of the province and the limited number of routes over the mountains. This initial phase of the research shows how the trade and movement of illicit drugs, with their high value-to-weight ratio, and portability, have proven particularly adept at adapting to periods of conflict and can be carried over the mountains by foot, if required.

The research does suggest that when it comes to violence, the production and trade in illicit drugs in Nangarhar appears to be no more violent than for any other illicit or licit commodity. The only exception is during periods where the national and provincial

authorities have sought to impose a protracted ban on opium cultivation in areas where the population has no viable economic opportunities. Under these conditions, violence has been deployed both by rural communities and by insurgent groups looking to gain local support to prevent prohibition and allow production and trade to continue. Rather, violence is deployed more strategically in Nangarhar, used by powerbrokers and groups to disrupt trade, extort and gain leverage for renegotiating rents. There are several examples on both sides of the border where the state and local groups have cooperated, using violence to expel these disruptive forces from an area, thereby allowing production and trade to resume. The most obvious example being the expulsion of Mangal Bagh from Tirah in Pakistan, for fear that his presence threatened the lucrative transit trade.

The fourth and final research question looked to identify which interventions supported/undermined the production and transportation of these commodities; what decisions guided their design and implementation; and ultimately how did these interventions affect the political and economic stability of borderlands. This research question was largely beyond the capacity of this initial phase of the project to answer. Preliminary conclusions point to the key role that investments in physical infrastructure have played in both encouraging and deterring the production and trade of commodities, particularly the mineral trade where extracting and transporting volume is critical. Without the necessary infrastructure, including roads and bridges in the southern districts of Nangarhar where the talc deposits are concentrated, this economy would not have become a hundred-million-dollar industry, as it is today.

The transit trade, with its current use of pack animals transporting goods across the border at Sasobai, is not dependent on infrastructural

investments as the talc industry is, but it has greatly benefitted from some of the significant investments in road building in Nangarhar, as well as the official buildings and facilities at Torkham and Saracha, that have made importing these goods more efficient. The main highway and southern ring road have made it easier to transport transit goods in greater volumes to Goroko, and, along with the completion of the border fence on the Lalpura and Goshta border with Pakistan, has been accompanied by an expansion in storage facilities and trade.

The drug trade has also gained from these infrastructural investments but its continuation and growth is not dependent on them. In many cases, transporters will actively look to bypass major highways and roads, as is evident by the off-road routes adopted en route to Markoh and across the border at Tabai. There are no doubt times where the main highway and official crossing at Torkham is used for the transportation of illicit drugs, but this did not feature in this initial phase of the research. The complicity or direct involvement of officials in the drug trade is a particularly sensitive matter, subject to widespread speculation, and very difficult to verify through this kind of independent research.

Ultimately, the decisions that guide the design and implementation of physical infrastructure, and how priorities are made over which road or bridge to build, was beyond the scope of this initial phase of research. There are, however, some interesting case studies that are worthy of further examination, particularly those investments that have facilitated the production of minerals deep in insurgent territory and have thereby served as an important source of rent for those opposing the regime in Kabul. The impact of the border fencing along the border with the Mohmand territories of Lalpura and Goshta, is also worthy of continued research.

Other interventions that have encouraged and/or hampered the production and trade of key commodities in Nangarhar include the counternarcotics effort of the Afghan government and the international community that backs it. The particular decisions that underpin the range of interventions that fall under the drug control rubric, most notably the implementation of a poppy ban and crop destruction, are well documented in my own earlier research in Nangarhar,<sup>58</sup> and do not need to be repeated here. It is, however, worth noting that these interventions have largely proven destabilising, particularly in the southern districts of Nangarhar, where, in the absence of viable economic alternatives, farmers have turned to violence and resistance in the face of the authorities sustaining a ban on opium production over a 2- to 3-year period.

ISKP could only sustain the prohibition of opium poppy in the upper reaches of Achin district in 2016 and 2017 in the absence of the rural population, who had fled to the lower parts of the district and to neighbouring Shinwar, to escape the group's brutality. Opposition to ISKP, and the prohibition of opium poppy and cannabis they imposed, only added to the militant group's unpopularity with the local population, as the ban on opium poppy did for the Taliban regime in 2001 and then Governor Gul Aga Sherzai in 2011 and 2012. In sum, there is much to be learned from these repeated efforts at drug control in Nangarhar, and the role they have played in unseating local, provincial and indeed national political elites, particularly when enforced comprehensively and during periods when there are many other social, economic and political factors at play, each restricting the livelihood options of the wider population.

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58 Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand*.

## 7. Conclusions and wider implications

This initial phase of the research was exploratory. It was specifically designed to overcome many of the challenges associated with conducting research on illicit economies in conflict affected areas and to assuage the “drugs fetishism” that dominates much of the official and scholarly literature.

This literature, which draws heavily on the quantitative surveys of drug control agencies like United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, typically presents the illicit drugs economy, or efforts to control it, as the primary driver of economic activity, social change and conflict in border areas like Nangarhar. As such, the cultivation, production and trade of illicit drugs—or counternarcotics interventions—become almost the sole cause of social ills, instability and conflict despite the different primary commodities produced and traded, and the contested nature of political power in most of the areas where illicit drug crops are concentrated.

The purpose of this research was to examine illicit drugs in situ amidst the wider political economy in which they are grown, processed and traded—not to abstract and rarefy drugs, but to locate them firmly within the physical, political and economic space of the border region straddling Afghanistan and Pakistan. Widening the enquiry to include the production and trade of other commodities was instrumental in providing the means by which to examine the relative importance of different conduits and chokepoints, actors, and periods of disruption, and identify whether there was anything specific about the illicit drugs economy, or those involved, that render their production and trade intrinsically different from other commodity chains, particularly in these contested border areas.

This first phase of the research also built on a methodology developed over many years by the three primary research partners, under the leadership of the author. This approach integrates well-focused fieldwork and high-resolution satellite imagery, along with detailed time and space geospatial analysis to examine, verify and where possible, extrapolate, research findings in areas where the subject matter and the security situation has rendered wide-scale surveys and other quantitative techniques all but impossible. This was the first time that this approach, which has been used for many years by the primary research partners to examine drug crop cultivation—a phenomenon that has a distinct visual signature for remote sensing—had been deployed to research the trade and transportation of both licit and illicit commodities.

A further important element of the methodology was to structure interviews in the field so as to disaggregate by commodity, location, role and task, and focus on “what people do,” not what they think. This was critical at this initial stage of the research as a way of mapping the relative importance of different conduits, chokepoints and commodities, and verifying the component parts of the data sets. While narratives and perceptions around the role of drugs and drug control efforts can be of value, this initial phase sought to avoid more speculative claims beyond the knowledge and practice of respondents and focus down on the day-to-day realities of the functioning of cross-border commodity chains and markets.



This phase of the research also highlighted the importance of “talking around drugs, not about drugs,” particularly when interviewing those directly involved in the production, trade and transportation of commodities like opium, heroin and cannabis. Treating illicit drugs as just one of many the many commodities produced and traded in an area was important not just for better understanding context. As a methodological tool, it can desensitise this kind of research and mitigate some of the risks of denial, exaggeration and aggrandisement by those involved in the trade. It also tempers the tendency for respondents to attribute all kinds of social, economic, political and environmental phenomena directly to the production and trade of illicit drugs.

Nevertheless, despite these efforts to “talk around drugs” and focus on “what people do” discussions with those involved further up the value chain in the processing and movement of heroin, as well as with officials involved, proved much more problematic. This is work that requires much longer-term contacts in the field and an extended period of trust building between all partners, as well as respondents. It also requires careful handling of sensitive data and systems for the sharing and publication of this material.

Ultimately this initial phase of the research has established the networks for conducting pioneering research on illicit economies in Afghanistan, but also built the methodological foundations for similar work in other conflict affected places, where robust and verifiable data has so often proven inaccessible.

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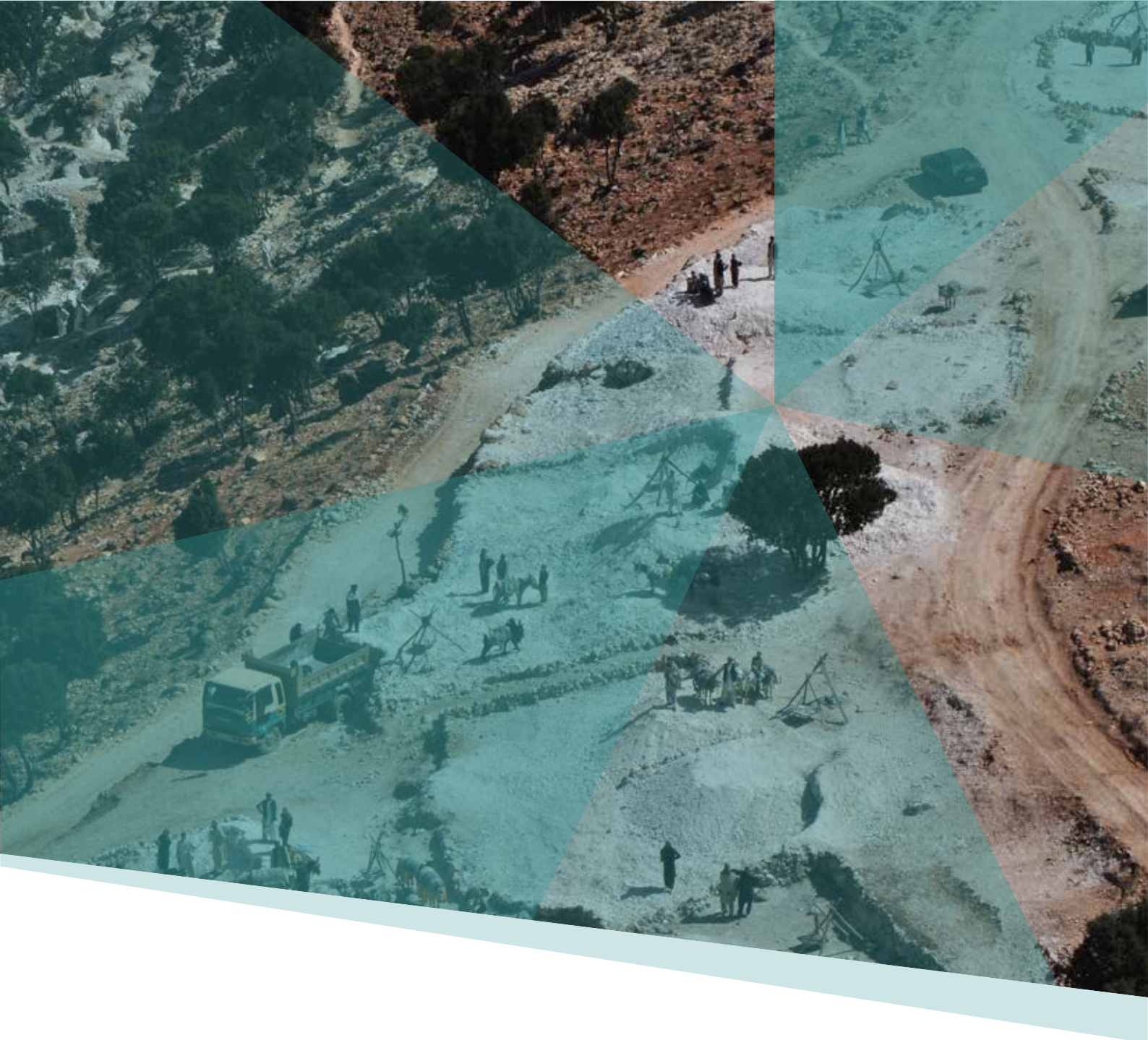
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