**Drug Trafficking**

As a form of illegal trade across international borders, drug trafficking is smuggling, which deprives state of revenue and violent states’ legal control of their borders. But smuggling in general is an economic issue rather than a security one. Unlike other smuggled goods, however, drug trafficking supplies illegal products that are treated as a security threat because of their effect on national and military morale and efficiency. Drug trafficking also has become linked with security concerns because military forces participate regularly in operations against heavily armed drug traffickers. Conflicts over drugs generally concerns states on one side and nonstate actors on the other. But other states can be drawn in because activities in question cross national borders and may involve corrupt state officials.

These international ramifications are evident in the efforts of the U.S. government to prevent cocaine cartels based in Colombia from supplying cocaine to U.S. cities. Such cocaine derives mostly from coca plants grown by peasants in mountainous areas of Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia itself. Processed in simple laboratories in the jungle, the cocaine moves from Colombia through other countries such as Panama before arriving in the United States. In each of these countries (even the United States), the drug smugglers have bribed some corrupt officials, including military or police officers, to stay clear. But other state officials in each country are working with U.S. law enforcement agencies and the U.S. military to crack down on the cocaine trade. The crackdown inevitably brings some negative side effects. In 2001, Peruvian jets working with U.S. radar trackers shot down a small plane over the Andes that turned out to be carrying U.S. missionaries, not cocaine traffickers.

The truth is that segments of the population in several of these countries, especially in cocaine-producing regions, benefit substantially from the drug trade. For poor peasants in Bolivia or for residents of the Colombian cocaine cartels’ home provinces, the cocaine trade may be their only access to a decent income. This dilemma worsened in 2001-2003 as coffee prices dropped to their lowest level in decades. In rural Peru and Colombia, leftist guerrillas have funded their operations by controlling peasants’ production of coca. In southern Colombia, for example the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) movement maintained stronger control than military forces of the Colombian government.

The cocaine trade thus creates several conflicts between the United States and the states of the region. Most such interstate conflicts are resolved through positive forms of leverage such as U.S. financial or military aid. State officials are also often willing to make common cause with the United States because they are threatened by drug traffickers, who control great wealth and power, and who, being outlaws have few incentives against using violence.

Because of the long history of the U.S. military intervention in Latin America, state cooperation with U.S. military forces is a sensitive political issue. Governments in the region must respect a delicate balance between the need for U.S. help and the need to uphold national sovereignty. In some countries, governments have faced popular criticism for allowing the “Yankees” to “invade” in the drug war. In one case, the U.S. military literally invaded. In 1989, U.S. forces invaded Panama, arrested its leader, Dictator Manuel Noriega, and convicted him in U.S. courts of complicity in drug trafficking through Panama.