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TRANSCRIPT
The Asia Chessboard Podcast

“Hooked: Exploring Drug Prohibition and Norms in Asia with Prof. Diana Kim”

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Andrew Schwartz: Welcome to the Asia Chessboard, the podcast that examines geopolitical dynamics in Asia, and takes an inside look at the making of grand strategy. I’m Andrew Schwartz, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Benjamin Rimland: In our 20th episode, Mike is joined by Georgetown professor Diana Kim to discuss Diana’s new book, Empires of Vice. We’ll look at how colonial administrations came to ban drugs across Asian territories. How did this process affect the development of governing norms in Asia?

Michael Green: Welcome to the Asia Chessboard. I’m joined by professor Diana Kim, my colleague in the Georgetown School of Foreign Service Asian Studies Program. An expert on transnational crime, Southeast Asia, and the author of a wonderful new book "Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition Across Southeast Asia." Professor Kim looks at these transnational challenges, crime in particular. She teaches a very popular course at Georgetown on crime in Asia, Transnational Crime, and has produced officials now working in Interpol in Singapore battling the triad and the green gang. As far as I know, she hasn’t produced any actual drug kingpins, but we’ll find out.

Michael Green: This is a look at the underbelly of Asia, the world of vice and how it affects international relations historically and today. Diana, it’s terrific to have you. We usually start by asking people how they got into Asia, how they got into this topic. And I have to ask, in your case, how did you get so into drugs?

Diana Kim: Well, thank you for having me. And well, I suppose, on the Asia front I am a product of two cultures having grown up as a child in the United States in the Midwest, but doing all of my schooling in South Korea. And, in a way, thinking about Asia and the Asian context comparatively it was something that was ingrained in me really early on, and what was the thing that drew me into studying diplomacy and politics as an undergraduate at Korea University. So, I did model UN and I was animated by questions about the interactions between countries, differences and similarities in politics, economies, cultures, the kind of standard ways of thinking about comparative politics and international relations. And I was really fascinated by questions about how do these translate into the relative strengths and exceptionalism on the global stage.

Diana Kim: For Southeast Asia specifically, I was on an exchange trip, this was as an undergrad that was organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Korea. They sent us to Thailand and Laos, which I mean for me this is a reason when we teach our students to really encourage region travel as well as kind of exposure because I just fell in love with the region. And I wanted to be more informed, and I was more curious about this part of Asia that I knew very little about.

Michael Green: You knew early on you wanted to get a PhD, or be a scholar, or did this come to you as you discovered what Southeast Asia was all about?
Diana Kim: I am the product of two academics. I honestly did not really realize that one did not pursue a PhD until I was in college, so I'm a product of path dependency in that way.

Michael Green: You didn't pursue a PhD, a PhD pursued you, right?

Diana Kim: Exactly. And that PhD pursued me pretty vigorously into political science. I did my grad work at the University of Chicago and, initially, I started focusing just on Thailand. I was interested in the AIDS epidemic, which was this, as you remember, a hugely lauded success case, not least through its outreach to sex workers and injecting drug users. But I ended up focusing on drugs partly because I found it to be this really unexpected, unconventional, but fruitful lens to think about politics and power, but in a way that really gets that it's human and nitty gritty side, the sort of darker elements of vulnerability, crime, contested morality. So, that was the kind of early trajectory for me.

Michael Green: The book, Empires of Vice, is that your dissertation?

Diana Kim: This is my dissertation.

Michael Green: And postdoctoral work as well?

Diana Kim: Exactly. So, I was very fortunate to get a postdoctoral fellowship at The Center for History and Economics at Harvard University. And this was a time when there was a really vibrant community of historians, economists, political scientists, political theorists, who are all thinking in really innovative ways about issues of methods, and how to do both qualitative and quantitative research that's historically informed, but can speak to contemporary issues. So, I benefited immensely for that. I got a lot of time because I had a fellowship through the Center for Overseas American Research Centers that let me do a lot of archival research in Southeast Asia and in Europe. And that was the kind of formative research for the book that came out just this year.

Michael Green: So, when I read Empires of Vice, which is fascinating on several levels, the political philosophy, the definition of norms and morays, the inner Michel Foucault, you clearly channeled, but also the bureaucratic politics. Reading it reminded me of when I first traveled to Asia after college, lived in Japan, traveled across Southeast Asia, and I couldn't get enough of books like “Heart of Darkness,” or Wells' “Burmese Days,” or Thoreau's, not well known, but fantastic book “The Console's file.” These are all books about colonial administrators or diplomats in the far corners, forgotten corners of Southeast Asia. And it really has that feel to it as these, but for your book, nameless, forgotten colonial administrators for the French and British in Malaya and in Burma, and in Indochina, were in bits and pieces at various points in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pushing on their own systems prohibition of opium, which was a major moneymaker.
Michael Green: And it really brings home the importance of agency even at a micro level in forgotten corners of colonial Asia. Tell us a bit about what this should mean for us, especially those of us who focus a bit more on international relations, or on structure, or power politics. What's the lesson for those of us trying to understand Asia from this exploration of colonial Southeast Asia's vice and underbelly?

Diana Kim: Yeah, I'm a huge fan of Orwell as well. And you're very right to note that the type of figures that I look at in this book are much less the kind of marginal people who are banished to the peripheries of empire and kind of waste away in irrelevance, but they're almost the cogs at the heart of the Imperial machine. They're often like the bean counters, the paperwork pushing guys who are very central to the way that the bureaucratic apparatus of the empires, the British and the French empires, worked.

Diana Kim: I suppose a way to think about the significance of agency is two sorts of directions, which could be two big takeaway points from my book. One is that if we want to understand change at the international level, in terms of questions of the global order, we really do need to think domestically as well, especially for issues that deal with great moral transformations. So, opium prohibition in Asia was in effect on par with the transatlantic slave trade of the early 19th century and its abolition, on par with the kind of turn against piracy for the early modern European sovereigns, and kind of similar to climate change today in the ways that we think of the enormous scales and the complexity of the moral, the economic and the political stakes that have to be balanced.

Diana Kim: And, typically, I think, when we take the more structural perspective, a kind of more big picture IR theory approach, we think of these major changes in state behavior being pushed by the external forces. So, ideological changes, new ground norms, the power of ideas. And, in the case, of opium, the way it's often told is that there was a transnational moral crusade that's sort of discovered the harms of opium. And those external pressures are certainly super important and they can get at why states change their languages and their official rhetoric. And even why they would change postures and public stances. But they can't really get at when and how states will actually effectively change. Like how is the will of a government, of a state-

Michael Green: It doesn't explain the process through which the norms change, just some of the exogenous factors. And what you've really done is shown that process at a micro level across time and geographic space.

Diana Kim: Exactly.

Michael Green: Now, you have all of these incredibly interesting archival sources from the British Colonial Office and from Paris, but also from Phnom Penh and from Cambodia, and from colonial Burma and archives in modern Myanmar. You
were finding bits and pieces of evidence across all of these different documents. When you went into the archives, did you know what you would find? I mean, did you expect to see these patterns of local initiative? Did you have a pretty good amount of confidence in your hypothesis? Or were you really going in... This would have been a very high risk endeavor otherwise.

Diana Kim: That's a great question. I think I fancied myself as being much more adventurous and daring than I actually was because I was initially afraid that drug policy, the kind of colonial history, especially as it relates to opium, could be a sensitive issue. So, I wondered if I would be denied access to a lot of archives.

Michael Green: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Diana Kim: But what I found was that we have to remember that opium was legal for these empires well into the 1940s. They had legal taxes that were being levied on them. So, the opium related records are actually a part of really public official budgets, they're in finance reports, they are openly recorded in issues for customs, labor, immigration, and hygiene, which reflects how deeply embedded it was in the entire fabric of colonial governance. So, it became a really interesting process and kind of challenge to figure out how do you pull together these different elements of a story together? And how do you piece it together to give the insider's view of what was really going on within these states, within these bureaucracies.

Michael Green: You did that masterfully I think. The empirical chapters are a little bit like Clue, you're getting all the bits and pieces, but the framing chapters and conclusion really wrap it in a story that that ties all these different individual experiences across different colonial periods for France and Britain together. So, this is a really compelling story about how agency at a micro level brings change in not just state policy but norms. And it's a story I want to come back to in a moment because there may be some utility for people trying to understand what's happening in the ideational context in Asia today. There is a clear competition of ideas about civil liberties, human rights, democracy, women's empowerment, and a lot of the scholarship is either looking into it at the very micro level, or somehow trying to look at a structural level.

Michael Green: You really, obviously, focused on the micro level, but across a very ambitious space in time and geographically from basically India to Indochina. There must've been though, in your mind, some big pan-Asian questions, even though these cases were in very narrow periods of time and narrow places. For example, in the late 19th century, early 20th century, you had this change in consciousness about what the nation state was. You had the Japanese example of an Asian state modernizing and defeating a modern Western power in Russia. You had Bolshevism, you had Woodrow Wilson and self-determination. The Europeans losing confidence in their own will after World War I. Did you tune that out? To what extent did you try to account for big geopolitical, structural
changes in terms of ideas, but also the balance of power? Did you tune that on? How did you deal with the structural questions on an international level?

Diana Kim: So there are at least three sorts of big picture structural changes that are the larger context in which Southeast Asia's anti-opium turn is happening. One is very much the ideational one. So, both in terms of the legitimacy of empires and how the civilizing mission is being justified for this “far east territory,” which includes Southeast Asia but also into China, is being really debated at this time. It’s because it also coincides with the rise of different racialize arguments. Social Darwinism and eugenics plays a huge role, but also the kind of advance of medical knowledge.

Diana Kim: So all of these things will play into the emergence of multilateral organizations and opportunities for cooperation that culminate in the League of Nations, for example, one. So that really brings a large anti-opium discussion to the forefront, which is different from how opium was thought of before. It was always morally contested, but in an ambivalent way. People said, "Well, it could be harmful for the “Asiatic people,” but it also could just be their traditional way of being." So that's kind of consensus was being done away with around the turn of the late 19th and early 20th century.

Michael Green: Let’s turn to the present and I want to come back to that theme about normative change, ideational contestation on an international level and how it happens at a micro level within States because we're living in that kind of Asia today. But first let's talk about the legacy of opium and prohibition in Southeast Asia today. You mentioned in the beginning of your book how many Southeast Asian post-colonial states like Malaysia have the death penalty for drugs as one piece of evidence. But what are the other ways that this opium plague and then prohibition has left its stamp in the Southeast Asia that we see today?

Diana Kim: So one of the big takeaway arguments from my book is that the reason why Southeast Asia has such major drug problems today has to do with its colonial past. Until the 1930s opium was a legal source of revenue, the European empires are collecting taxes from popular consumption. Then those same powers who were responsible for encouraging opium initially are also the ones who are going to try to ban it. So what we see today in Southeast Asia in terms of the ferocity of drug wars, the transnational illicit economies, these are downstream effects of this radical reversal in state behavior that happened or started during the early 20th century in the age of empires.

Michael Green: So prohibition, largely by the Imperial powers, created drug significance in effect because the demand was still there?

Diana Kim: It encourages a lot of demand because it's commercialized and then the effort to ban it, of course, has unintended consequences of promoting black markets, smuggling-
Michael Green: So like prohibition in the US in the 1920s?

Diana Kim: Quite similar in a lot of ways. Bootlegging is a big kind of issue that happens in the United States context and you see parallels of that in terms of drug trafficking in the Northern kind of today's Golden Triangle region in Southeast Asia.

Michael Green: What else can you say about the contemporary legacies? The obvious pernicious and pervasive effect of drug syndicates in many parts of Southeast Asia. Has it left a stamp on definitions of sovereignty or other state practice in modern Southeast Asia?

Diana Kim: It leaves a really clear imprint in the nature of corruption within many Southeast Asian States, as well as how we understand the form of the deep state. So what happens with the taxation structures and a lot of the infrastructure that the colonial European powers build up is that they continued during World War II. These are such sticky institutions, that during the war time they're used for labor mobilization, they're used to raise emergency finance, and this will continue under Japanese occupation during World War II. It's also something that will continue during the early periods of independent state formation and post-war counterinsurgency for Southeast Asia.

Diana Kim: So because those institutions, these colonial legacies are so deeply entrenched, effectively state building in Southeast Asia never happens on a black state. The governments are always trying to deal with an already existing problem of opium, formulating questions of governance that already presupposed the impossibility of doing away with these opium related illegal economies. And so the answers and the policies are formulated in terms of compromises, not how do we eradicate drugs, but what are sorts of tolerable violations of the law? What is permissible collusion between the state and organized crime? What kind of information should be disclosed to international observers or not? So this is, it would be a mischaracterization to call this just total corruption. It's a way of coping with an existing problem. And that existing problem comes from the colonial era.

Michael Green: And it really is at the source of some of the most fundamentally vexing governance, human rights, and conflict resolution problems the region faces. I mean, you look at the extrajudicial killings in the Philippines or a decade ago in Thailand, it's because authoritarian leaders decided they had to use extreme violence and extrajudicial means to eradicate drugs. Or you look at the inability to achieve ceasefires with most of the ethnic minorities in Myanmar. And in many cases it's because of drugs. It really not only complicates and challenges these governments, but it vexes their relations with the United States and the democracies who don't approve of the way governments are handling this, in many cases.
Diana Kim: I think that's exactly right and what I think understanding the history behind this helps us do, is it helps us avoid either or answers to saying the governments of Southeast Asia are not doing enough or they're too harsh, or international communities are not doing enough or they're intervening within state sovereignty. Those ways of thinking of the questions at stake are a bit too blunt because it misunderstands the complexity of the way that drugs have been embedded in early state building and kind of have path dependencies within there. It also helps understand why zero tolerance approaches to drugs in Southeast Asia just often don't work.

Michael Green: They don't work, but you can understand why they're appealing to countries who see, and governments, that see their own sovereignty as having been undermined by the Imperial position of drug policies and prohibition methods that they didn't think fit their circumstances. It does raise the question, you said earlier, you used the passive voice when you talked about drugs being embedded, can we just lay this all at the foot of the European Imperial powers or is there something that predates them or something in Asian culture or even in geography or botany in the region? Why is it that Southeast Asia has such a challenge with opium in particular and with drugs? The book is primarily about the European colonial experience, but is it broader than that?

Diana Kim: To my mind, it is very much a story of empires, but not just the 19th century empires. This is a story that goes back to the 17th century, the sort of early modern empires throughout, because if we think of this as just Asia's sort of curse due to geography, it doesn't tell the complete story. Poppy cultivation is something that was not limited to Asia. It was grown in Egypt, parts of Lebanon, Greece, France, Slovenia, Serbia, Latin America. There are other parts of the world that have also had old histories of poppy cultivation. What happens for Asia is that opium becomes a major trade commodity first in this region and the sorts of networks and capital and knowledge that helps commercialize this creates a large and long sort of dark advantage. So that could be thought of as a sort of curse of economics, but also historical contingency.

Diana Kim: And then the story kind of unfolds from there. The early modern mercantile companies, the Dutch East India company and Portuguese merchants dominated the trade routes. The British East India company comes in into and takes over, they compete, and these escalate into trade tensions with China that are the famous 19th century Opium Wars that we know much more about.

Michael Green: Let's turn to the present again and see, are there ways we can use your approach to understand norm contestation in Asia today? So this is a story about change at the micro level as colonial administrators for the British and the French, in some cases from a moral imperative, but in most cases for pragmatic reasons, were favoring prohibition of opium because it was creating so many other problems as they were trying to create efficient and effective administrative policies. I wonder if there's some lessons in Southeast Asia today,
particularly with respect to human rights and democracy and governance. Should we be looking for local change agents, civil society leaders, officials, who are making changes bit by bit to be more effective, more efficient, and in many ways therefore adopting a better governance, better democracy? Not because of some external moral imperative, but just to be more effective states.

Diana Kim: Right. That's a great question. I think maybe two big lessons to take away from the way that we approach bureaucrats and understand bureaucrats for the history of opium in Southeast Asia is, one is it's really hard to align the imperatives and the languages and the incentives of the international community regarding human rights, but also cultural norms regarding drugs and otherwise, it's hard to align those with independent countries that have different histories from which they developed their own reasons for policy action. They have different kind of more scattered concerns. But the other kinds of more optimistic story is that it's really difficult to align, but that doesn't mean that we can't incentivize and encourage countries in Southeast Asia, but more these kinds of countries in general, to develop problem solving frameworks on their own terms.

Michael Green: So if we project a little beyond the late 19th early 20th century stories of opium prohibition in Southeast Asia to today, it sounds like the lesson is if you want to international norms to align with local conditions, you need to understand the history of how they've dealt with vice or challenges or corruption and you have to frame it in ways that help them do their job. The change comes when local officials see the advantage to them of adopting new norms in pursuit of more effective government, more efficient outcomes.

Michael Green: And I think in that context, we have a reason to be optimistic in spite of the turmoil in Asia, particularly in recent days, because most Asian nation states want to be legitimate and, and grow and be strong and resilient. So if we can pitch as an international community, things like governance reform, women's empowerment, civil society building, religious freedom or freedom of the press in terms of pragmatic outcomes, particularly, not just at a national level, but local officials. It sounds like we're going to have more traction than if we just come up with a great argument that resonates in London or Washington or Tokyo.

Diana Kim: I think that's exactly the right kind of way to approach this. Just to add, I would say that, when we think about what is pragmatically and what makes sense for the independent country perspective, we can think about legitimacy not just as what is legitimate in the eyes of an international community or two proponents of human rights and democracy in that static way, but think about multiple ways that legitimating happens. To the extent that a lot of the colonial states that I look at had different ideas of what was legitimate and made sense on their own terms, those were the moments when you actually saw policy changes happening. Those are the moments when you saw directions going towards
ways that would align with the actual demands of the international community. Not because of pressures, but because it was following a historical process that was unfolding on their own terms.

Michael Green: Your current research also looks at sub-state level change. And are you still doing the project on the outcasts in India, Korea, Japan? Is that something you can tell us more about?

Diana Kim: Very much so. So my next project moves a little bit away from drugs and the dark sides of empires but kind of continues this interest in states and history and what they can tell us about the making of elicit global economies today. And I’m fascinated by the legacies of different casts and stratification as well as the outcasts, the marginalized populations across Asia. But this is also a larger kind of global phenomenon that brings in not only European empires, but non-European empires such as the Japanese in Southeast Asia. So that is where my next project is heading and I’m in the process of developing a second book.

Michael Green: That is fantastic. The work you’re doing, Diana, on sub-national and even micro level, but aggregated micro level across the whole region, change, normative transformations, changes in state preferences, they really enrich our understanding of the dynamics of Asia as a whole. The podcast is called The Asia Chessboard because we’re looking at the big geopolitical pieces, but when you open up how change happens, it may be driven by variables like balance of power or new technologies or large ideational shifts around democracy or other ways of thinking about government legitimacy. But at the end of the day, the change comes from within these States and your book does a fantastic job showing us how, in a way that’s a great read, but also widens your brain power as you think about problems in Asia today. Thanks very much and I look forward to the next book.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening. For more on Strategy and the Asia Programs work, visit the CSIS website at C-S-I-S dot O-R-G and click on the Asia Program page.