

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



***Preventing the establishment and development of
criminal organizations that are related to drug
production and export in Asia***

-Research Report-

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Table of Contents

<u>1. INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>2. KEY TERMS</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>3. HISTORY</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>3.1 General</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>3.2 Golden Triangle</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>3.3 Golden Crescent</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>4. KEY ISSUES</u>	<u>20</u>
<u>4.1 Ensuring political stability and combating corruption</u>	<u>20</u>
<u>4.2 Providing alternatives to farmers</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>4.3 Rising drug production</u>	<u>23</u>
<u>5. MAJOR PARTIES INVOLVED</u>	<u>26</u>
<u>6. TIMELINE</u>	<u>28</u>
<u>7. EVALUATION OF PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS</u>	<u>29</u>
<u>7.1 The Regional Programme for Southeast Asia</u>	<u>29</u>
<u>7.2 Integrated Solution for West and Central Asia</u>	<u>30</u>
<u>7.3 The Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control</u>	<u>31</u>
<u>7.4 Prohibition</u>	<u>32</u>
<u>8. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS</u>	<u>33</u>
<u>9. BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	<u>34</u>
<u>10. APPENDICES</u>	<u>37</u>

1. INTRODUCTION

At the present time, the demand for drugs is growing as strong as ever, and to meet this demand, criminal organizations set up drug production operations, particularly in politically unstable regions, often with the collaboration of local militias. These operations help fund the violence and many other criminal activities committed by these organizations, including money laundering, wildlife trading, smuggling, prostitution, human trafficking, and modern-day slavery. Furthermore, the kind of drugs grown are harmful both to the growers of the raw material in the origin country, as they are often trapped in cycles of poverty which inhibit economic development, as well as to the users, due to the societal harm addiction causes upon the population. Therefore, it is essential to fight against the drug trade and find ways to mitigate its effect; however, this is notoriously difficult.

Typically, the mechanism for these kinds of operations is the following: farmers in politically unstable regions are forced to grow the plants from which drugs are extracted as they are the only ones from which they are able to make a living; they do this under the protection of local warlords or militias, to whom they often have to pay tax to. Raw opium is delivered, generally through local middlemen, to the criminal organizations that handle the refining and distribution to the rest of the world. This is usually done with either the tacit acceptance of the government, which might consider the militias as strategically useful, or by bribing corrupt government officials who will turn a blind eye.

Nowadays in Asia, there exist two main areas where drug production is rampant. These are the so-called "Golden Crescent" and "Golden Triangle". The Golden Crescent covers parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, though production is nowadays mostly concentrated in Afghanistan. The area has had a long history of cultivating poppies in order to extract opium at a small scale; nonetheless, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, many mujahideen guerrillas turned to poppy farming and opium refining as a source of income, and this continued and increased throughout the end of the Soviet occupation, and the beginning of Taliban rule, as Afghanistan became the world's major source of opioids and replaced Iran and Pakistan's dominance in the region. This lasted right up until the Taliban introduced a ban on poppy farming in 2001, which was brutally enforced and caused a sharp drop in poppy farming with an accompanying skyrocketing of the price. This was short-lived as the September 11th attacks soon occurred and the ensuing invasion of the country by the United States yet again plunged the area into conflict and poppy production once more became the only source of income for many farmers. Despite many attempts by the democratic Afghan government, to this day Afghanistan continues to be the world's largest producer of opioids, which mostly get trafficked to Europe and North America, and the end of the Afghan War and resumption of Taliban rule don't seem to have put a stop to it. Despite nominally being against the drug trade, the Taliban has been accused of using poppy farming to secure its own funding and of intentionally causing the spike in price in 2001 to sell its own reserves at a higher price. The democratic government seemed more inclined to genuinely try to solve the problem; however, local corrupt officials severely undermined its efforts. Though the Golden Crescent's main export is opium, recent forays into the production of synthetic drugs such as methamphetamines have been reported, and the region is also the top exporter of cannabis.



Fig.1: Locations of the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent

Regarding the Golden Triangle, it is an area located where the borders of Laos, Thailand and Myanmar meet. Much like the Golden Crescent, it is a rugged and mountainous, politically unstable area with the right conditions for poppies to be grown. Here, however, the mass growing of poppies is much more recent, and only really boomed in the latter half of the 20th century. Following a brief stint at democracy after its independence in 1948, Myanmar soon fell under a military dictatorship of its army, the Tatmadaw, and civil war of some kind has raged on ever since its independence. Myanmar is and has been home to many insurgent ethnic armed movements who wish for self-determination and autonomy, causing internal conflict that has destabilized the region and allowed for the proliferation of organized crime and drug production. Following the defeat of the nationalists of the Kuomintang (KMT) in the Chinese Civil War, many fled from Yunnan province in southern China to Shan state in Myanmar, which mostly comprises the area of Myanmar that falls under the Golden Triangle, and is home to many of Myanmar's rebel movements. The KMT set up in Shan state for a period of time, while they continued to fight against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and began to force local farmers to grow opium in order to fund their operations. This planted the seedling that would eventually become the Golden Triangle as poppy farming spread massively across the region. The KMT eventually left the area but local militias took control instead, including the Ka Kwe Ye and later on the Pyi Thu Sit. These kinds of militias fought against the ethnic rebels, and therefore received direct support from the Tatmadaw in the central government, which allowed the drug trade to flourish so long as it suited their interests of quashing the rebels. Similar situations happened in the Thai and Lao parts of the Golden Triangle but for a long time most production has eventually come to only happen in Myanmar and some very small remnants in Laos, with Thailand and Laos serving mainly as part of the trafficking routes. Despite this region's opium-producing origin, nowadays the main drug produced there is methamphetamine, made from either legal or illegal chemicals. Though both the government and the Tatmadaw have at times claimed to be fighting the drug trade, the collaboration between the Tatmadaw and the militias responsible for growing the drugs is well known and would have undermined any attempt at eliminating the drug, and with the Tatmadaw

taking control of the country in the 2021 coup d'état, it seems even more unlikely that Myanmar will make efforts to fight drug production.

It should be noted that though the Golden Triangle and Crescent are the main areas where drugs are produced, there have been reports of others, such as drug laboratories being established recently in Cambodia, and those ought to have an eye kept on them as well.

Moreover, some further factors also complicate the elimination of the drug trade, first of all being that currently both Myanmar and Afghanistan heavily depend on the drug trade economically, as it is estimated that drugs are one of the most important exports for both of these countries, and therefore any proposal regarding this topic has to consider how to provide a way of sustenance for the people who are dependant on growing opium for a living, which are victims of the criminal organizations as much as anyone else. Furthermore, it is very easy to blame the wrong groups in relation to this issue: the way the criminal organizations operate is by exploiting poor people's need for money amidst an unstable situation in order to make them grow or transport drugs. The people who transport drugs across borders, often known as drug mules, are those most often caught and punished, whereas the higher-ups in the criminal organizations, who could be said to be much more at fault, seldom face consequences. It is important to avoid vilifying the farmers, the addicts, the mules or the ethnic groups to which many militias belong. It should also be considered that putting any measure into effect is going to be made hard on account of the conditions present in both the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent: they are rugged, poorly communicated mountainous areas deeply immersed in political instability which are controlled by militias and where governments have little power. Finally, the role of government compliance should always be taken into account, whether at the level of local corrupt officers or at a larger scale like the support of militias by the Tatmadaw. This allows the drug business to continue to proliferate and leads to an underreporting of the data. Owing to the fact that UNODC uses government data to make its reports, they have been accused of underreporting the true scale of the issue.

2. KEY TERMS

Transnational Organized Crime (TOC): Crime which operates across a multitude of countries, employing violence and corruption to carry out diverse criminal activities.

Opium, opiates opioids: Opium is a drug extracted by cutting unripe seed pods of poppies (*Papaver somniferum*) and collecting the liquid that comes out, which naturally contains opiates (natural opioids), a class of narcotics which bind to opioid receptors in the brain, including morphine and codeine. Opium can be refined into synthetic generally more potent opioids, most notably heroin and fentanyl.

Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS): A set of chemically similar stimulant drugs derived from amphetamine. They can be synthesized by using ephedrine, which naturally occurs in *Ephedra* plants as a precursor, or entirely chemically. The most common is methamphetamine, which can be found in crystalline or tablet forms or alternatively mixed with caffeine to create Yaba, a variant popular in Southeast Asia.

Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (SCND): The 1961 UN treaty which regulates narcotic drugs by placing them in *schedules*, with schedule I drugs being the most tightly controlled and schedule IV the least.

Convention on Psychotropic Substances (CPS): A 1971 expansion on the SCND in order to address the many synthetic drugs which had begun to appear.

Golden Triangle: A region near the borders of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand which is nowadays the world's leading producer of methamphetamine and second of opioids. Production is mostly concentrated in Myanmar's Shan state.

Tatmadaw: Myanmar's military, which has a long history of collaborating with militias involved in the drug trade so long as they fight ethnic rebels. They were in full control of the country from 1962 to 2011 and are so again since the 2021 coup d'état.

Burmese Civil War: The conflict raging on since the days of Myanmar's independence, a fight for control between the government of Myanmar, the Tatmadaw and its associated militias and many different Ethnic Armed Organizations demanding independence or autonomy.

Militias: In the context of Myanmar, armed organizations or paramilitary groups which are not under direct control of the Tatmadaw, but still collaborate with it or are supervised by it. Many fund their operations through criminal activities including the drug trade.

Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO): In the context of Myanmar, armed organizations which fight for autonomy and freedom of their ethnic group, some of them may be allied with the government in exchange for some degree of autonomy, and in that case become militias, while others continue to fight against it, in which case they may also be known as rebels or insurgents.

Ka Kwe Ye (KKY): A type of militia which predominantly existed from the late 50s or early 60s to 1973 in Shan state, consisting of previous armed groups brought under Tatmadaw control, known for being heavily involved in the trade of opium and having powerful drug lords of dubious allegiance to the Tatmadaw as leaders.

Triads: Criminal Organizations of Chinese ethnic origin, the most prominent of which is Sam Gor, also known as the Company, which is thought to control a majority of drug production in Myanmar.

Drug mules: People employed to smuggle drugs by carrying drugs on their bodies across borders, caught often but of little importance to criminal organizations.

Golden Crescent: An area that spans some of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, the world's largest producer of opium, though production is concentrated in Afghanistan.

Soviet-Afghan War: Occupation of Afghanistan by USSR troops which lasted most of the 1980s after the USSR was dissatisfied with the rule of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

Many militias were formed to resist this occupation and received foreign support. Ended with the withdrawal of Soviet troops in the late 80s

Afghanistan War: The war for control of Afghanistan between the USA and its allies and the Taliban after the US invaded the country following the 9/11 attacks. Ended in 2021 with the withdrawal of foreign troops which let the Taliban recapture the country.

Taliban: A fundamental Islamist movement which appeared in the 1990s in Afghanistan out of the students of Islamic schools called "madrasas". They were in control of Afghanistan from approximately 1996 to 2001, and yet again led an insurrectionist movement until taking control of the country again in 2021.

Mujahideen: Mostly Islamist militias which operate in Afghanistan at a fairly regional level, led by local warlords.

3. HISTORY

3.1 General

The poppy flower used to produce opium (*Papaver somniferum*) originates in the eastern Mediterranean, and there is evidence of its use for both medical and recreational purposes since ancient times. It spread along to Asia through trade routes and saw a small amount of use. Beginning in the 17th century, all European colonial powers started to see the commercial potential of opium and began trading opium to many Asian countries, often under state monopolies, or establishing state opium dens, which provided a significant part of the tax revenue in many of these colonies and caused the rise of opium use in Asia. Particularly successful was the trade of opium from where it was grown in British India to China; even though the Qing Dynasty banned opium due to its harmful effect on its population, it was often smuggled in through China's southern ports like Guangzhou, in what could be seen as the beginning of the illegal drug trade. Due to the fact that the Qing Dynasty made efforts to fight British merchants from trafficking in opium, and they saw it as an affront to their right to free commerce, the United Kingdom declared war on China twice, in 1839 and 1858, in what's known as the Opium Wars. The UK won both of the Opium Wars, which allowed them to force China to open up its ports and loosen its protectionist policy in order to allow the UK to sell opium to its population of addicts.

In the Western world, during the 19th century opioids such as heroin began to be sold as pain relief medication, and soon abuse spread, particularly among middle class women, and talk of regulating drugs soon began around the beginning of the 20th century, with many countries taking steps to restrict opioids to use only with prescription. In 1912 and 1925, countries convened for two International Opium Conventions, where it was agreed to heavily restrict the production of opioids, marking the beginning of heavy prohibition on drugs. Prohibition had as an immediate consequence, however, that an enormous illicit economy soon appeared, driven by organized crime to supply the demand for opium, funding all manners of warlords and terrorists and unfazed by the many attempts at prohibiting drugs. The economy had shifted from legal to illegal but had not diminished.

After World War II, the Cold War would massively shape the way the drug trade worked as many political actors became involved. While some countries had success in eliminating opium, such as China once it was under the control of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party), which successfully rooted out the problem which had exponentially grown after the opium wars and removed China as an important consumer and producer of opium, many covert operations during the Cold War provided protection for traffickers. Notably, the CIA, established in 1947, often allied with drug merchants in its fight against communism. As long as they fought against the communists and financed themselves through the opium trade, the CIA provided support to tribal armies in its many covert wars during the Cold War. Many of the major drug lords that have existed initially established themselves through collaborations such as these, using the CIA's arms and logistics to become such powerful figures, even after foreign involvement ceased in the area. Opium production in Asia became concentrated in three areas, only two of which are still active today: the Anatolian plateau, Central Asia, and the Highlands of Southeast Asia. Both of the existing areas today were the site of heavy conflict with massive foreign involvement.

Also following World War II, the United Nations inherited the League of Nation's previous efforts to eradicate the drug trade, approving numerous treaties such as the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (SCND) in 1961, which improved on the regulations established the International Opium Conventions in order to include many of the new drugs synthesized since then and make it possible to easily add new ones so regulation could keep up with the fast-moving drug trade. Numerous additions were made to the SCND to cover for areas in which it was still lacking, such as the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances (CPS), which banned many of the synthetic hallucinogens that had appeared around that time, but also the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances in 1988 and the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime in 2000 to more specifically target trafficking. Besides these treaties which imposed obligations upon all countries to combat drug trafficking and production, the USA in particular also attempted to take matters upon its own hands after declaring a "war on drugs" in the 70s, by means of aggressive international enforcement through the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and later on the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). Despite massive international involvement by US operatives trying to disrupt the supply, these policies were mostly ineffective, costing vast amounts of money while drug production continued to grow exponentially, and in fact, many anti-drug operations were undermined by previous or present CIA involvement. Prohibition as a whole has been mostly unsuccessful at eradicating illicit drug trafficking. Even when it was successful in eliminating drug production in the region, such as Turkey in the 1970s, this often only served to stimulate production elsewhere, and prohibition is what allows drug syndicates to become rich on the deal by charging such high prices. Killing crops through fumigation also proved to be very ineffective, as it just drives farmers into debt and poverty and forces them to increase or displace drug production.

3.2 Golden Triangle

The Golden Triangle, which consists of a 200 000 square kilometer area encompassing northeastern Myanmar, most notably Shan state, northern Thailand, and northwestern Laos,

is a fairly recent apparition, as both it and its name only date back to the second half of the 20th century. Historically South-East Asia has little history of trafficking opium, as it was mostly traded in from India and West Asia. Before World War II, there were small quantities of opium grown in Shan state in northern Myanmar, though it was controlled by a colonial government monopoly. Similarly, the king of Thailand (which was never colonized), the colonial authorities of French Indochina (which consisted of nowadays Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), and the rest of the European colonies allowed the import of opium under government monopolies through state-licensed opium dens leased to private contractors, which were very important from an economic point of view and came to constitute a significant part of government revenue, but did not cause the widespread flourishing of drug *production* in South-East Asia, only of *consumption*, though some trafficking did exist to circumvent the high prices imposed by the government.

At the beginning of the 20th century, some illicit production began to appear around the Golden Triangle, but was fairly successfully controlled by governments. The real boom in production, however, happened after World War II. Due to the interruption of the trade routes that had supplied South East Asia with opium from West Asia, India and China, opium was cut off, and people turned en masse to local opium production. French authorities encouraged the cultivation of opium in northern Vietnam and Laos and cultivation also began in northern Myanmar and Thailand. During World War II, the Japanese invaded much of Southeast Asia and allied with Thailand, promising them a claim to Shan state, which the Thai Army did invade. During the Thai occupation of Shan state, many alliances were formed between influential people in Shan state, Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers and Thai officials, and opium began to be imported to Thailand from Shan state. Even after the end of the war, this connection between Shan state and Thailand would persist, and form one of the main routes of drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle, through the Burmese-Thai border. Also following the end of World War II in 1945, decolonization began across the world, leading to the independence of India, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam through various degrees of conflict. The independence of India, which had been the main supplier of opium, and many countries agreeing to make the opium trade illegal caused a sharp decrease in opium supply to the region which exacerbated the need for growing it locally. In Myanmar, which used to be a British colony, soon after decolonization a democratic republic was established, however, from the moment it became independent a civil war broke out. Myanmar is home to a myriad of ethnic groups, most of which want autonomy or independence and numerous insurgent movements have been fighting the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military, ever since.

Furthermore, the end of World War II also led to the end of the Japanese occupation of China and the continuation of the Chinese Civil War, which led to the defeat of the KMT, also known as the nationalists, by the communists of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As the KMT was forced to flee China, it occupied parts of South-East Asia in order to continue to fight the CCP from outside China's borders. While fleeing from Yunnan province in southern China, one of the main places the KMT settled was Myanmar's Shan state, and while there, in order to finance their operations, began forcing local farmers to grow opium. This fact, the KMT occupation of areas of Myanmar, was what truly set off a massive increase in opium production in the region which would become the Golden Triangle. Furthermore, the CCP effectively ended opium cultivation in China, reducing outside supply even more since Yunnan had been an important producer. While Myanmar demanded to the UN that the KMT soldiers leave the region, as they wished to remain neutral to the CCP's China and being home to KMT soldiers right on China's borders was against that goal,

it took a long time and a lot of reluctance to be able to evacuate all of the KMT troops, which were only able to persist in the area and establish the opium trade due to US interests in the region, as the CIA considered the KMT soldiers useful in the region as a buffer against a possible Chinese invasion of Southeast Asia and therefore along with its allies Thailand and Taiwan provided support and supplies to the KMT troops. While all KMT troops eventually did leave northern Myanmar, this had profound consequences for the area. Whilst before the invasion it had seemed as though the democratic government might be able to bring the ethnic rebels under control and negotiate peace, the KMT invasion severely destabilized the region causing the government to have several crises, and as the Tatmadaw encroached on some of the areas the KMT occupied this caused further hostilities with ethnic rebels. This ensured the area would long continue to be beset by conflict and the right conditions for the drug trade to flourish would persist. Similar complicity of intelligence agencies in the drug trade also existed in Vietnam and Laos, as both France's intelligence service during the Indochina War and the CIA during the Vietnam war employed Hmong and Tai hill tribe guerrillas funded by opium to wage war against their enemies. In 1962, soon after the last KMT soldiers left, a military coup ousted the democratic government and installed a military dictatorship in Myanmar.

The new military government took a far more militaristic approach to deal with insurgent groups, which after having mostly subsided under the democratic government made a strong comeback. However, it had little to no funds available, and therefore strongly favoured a policy of using self-funded militias in order to fight against the rebels. This had been done previously by the Tatmadaw under the democratic government but took place in full effect during this period. There are many different types of militias, among them the Pyi Thu Sit, which consisted mostly of local villagers who were given training to defend their towns and were mostly under Tatmadaw control and operated in mostly government-controlled areas. An important type of militia was also the Ka Kwe Ye (KKY). The KKY were existing armed groups which had reached an agreement to be overseen by the Tatmadaw and receive support in exchange for them fighting the rebels in more remote areas which the Tatmadaw had less power over. The KKY did not receive direct financial aid, however, and therefore needed to fund themselves. For this purpose, *with* the approval of the government, many KKY turned to opium production for money. Due to the remote nature of the areas where they operated and, being previously existing groups and therefore having their own allegiance, the KKY operated mostly to further their own goals without much direction from the Tatmadaw, as the situation suited it so long as the KKY continued to clash with the rebels. It is among these KKY that some of the most prominent drug lords from the region arose, including Lo Hsing-Han and Khun Sa. As an example, Khun Sa was for extended periods of time the region's most prominent drug lord, and controlled a vast majority of all the heroin that was exported out of Myanmar. He received very basic military training at a young age from the KMT soldiers in the region and formed a small armed group which grew bigger and bigger and became independent of the KMT. After the coup d'état in 1962, he accepted for his militia to become a KKY, which grew in power more and more until it controlled swathes of land in Shan state along the Thai border, through which he smuggled the heroin he produced. He dominated the drug trade throughout the late 60s as he was given free rein to do as he pleased so long as he and his army continued to fight the Shan rebels. He was hardly loyal to the Tatmadaw, however, and in 1969 he was arrested not on charges of drug trafficking but rather accused of treason, as he had been holding negotiations with Shan rebels to form a possible allyship. He soon escaped prison in exchange for the release of soviet doctors held hostage by his army, however, and returned to the borderlands of Thailand

and Myanmar where he had always operated, this time on the Thai side, and yet again came to control most of the region's drug trade, this time claiming to be a group fighting for the liberation of the Shan peoples, though it's doubtful he was really loyal to that cause too. In 1982 he was pushed out of Thailand due to US pressure but quickly regrouped again in Myanmar and merged his army with another Shan rebel group to form the Mong Tai Army, one of the most powerful militias to have existed in Myanmar. Despite nominally fighting for Shan liberation, he continued to collaborate with the Burmese government, and remained untouchable even as increasingly large bounties were put on his head by the US government. Eventually, his power waned and as international pressure was put on Myanmar to remove him, the Tatmadaw made a big show of pretending to fight him, but due to his many contacts and co-opted officials in the Tatmadaw, he agreed to a negotiated surrender to the Burmese government, and in exchange got to live out his days in a cushy life as a prominent businessman in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, escaping unscathed from all his crimes. Lo Hsing-Han similarly became a businessman after having been an important drug lord. The Ka Kwe Ye were eventually officially disbanded in 1973, but many refused and instead allied with insurgents. Despite this, other similar militias such as the Pyi Thu Sit or the Border Guard Forces exist and operate to this day, built with similar purposes of integrating existing militias into the Tatmadaw's command structure or creating new ones, but still operating to some degree independently from the Tatmadaw. Furthermore, while many of the ethnic insurgents have a political agenda they fight for, they are also very much involved in the drug trade, there is not a single side in Myanmar's conflict which is the one involved.

Though nowadays the main drug exported from Myanmar is methamphetamine rather than heroin, Myanmar is still the world's 2nd largest opium producer, and the drug lords of today are less well-known, the mechanism by which the drug trade operates remains essentially the same as before. Poor farmers in the highlands of the Golden Triangle continue to be forced to farm poppies since rice can't be grown there and it's their only way to obtain money. Local militias or insurgent groups collect tax inside the areas they control and protect the poppy plantations and collect the raw opium grown, usually through agents who collect it while having a legitimate business as a front. The opium is smuggled along to refineries and processed mainly into heroin. In the case of methamphetamine manufacturing, legal or illegal chemicals, notably the precursors ephedrine and pseudoephedrine from India and China, are trafficked into the drug production facilities where they are made into methamphetamine. When the drug has been processed, with the help of transnational organized criminal groups it then gets smuggled, in the case of the Golden Triangle mostly through the Thai border with Shan state, and from there it spreads down to the rest of Southeast Asia and onwards to Oceania, Japan and South Korea, and across the Pacific Ocean to America. Northern Laos and Vietnam are other common routes and also up to Yunnan for the Chinese market or from Yunnan to Hong Kong to also get shipped overseas. The organized crime groups in the case of the Golden Triangle consist mostly of Chinese ethnic "gangs" called triads, stationed out of southern China, Hong Kong, the Philippines and other places: They are the ones who provide support for the refineries and also handle the distribution, often employing couriers or mules, people desperate for money, to carry drugs on their own bodies, but with hardly any links to the actual triads which makes them very hard to trace. These triads also more often than not have connections to the upper echelons of society, including politicians and businessmen, which helps them conceal their activities and allow the drug trade to continue to develop no matter how much people try to oppose it.



Fig. 2: Main drug trafficking routes from the Golden Triangle. Sourced from: “2022 Regional Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia.” *United Nations : Office on Drugs and Crime*

Today drug production in the Golden Triangle is almost all concentrated in Myanmar, however, in the past, there was also far from insignificant poppy farming in Thailand and Laos, with similar histories as those of Myanmar. Amidst the conflicts that popped up following decolonization in Southeast Asia, especially during the Vietnam War, armed groups began producing opium as a way of financing themselves and if they opposed the communist insurgencies, they often received support from the CIA much like the KMT did. These eventually were mostly eliminated as the government's consolidated power unlike in Myanmar, and nowadays Laos and Thailand serve mostly as the beginning of the trafficking routes flowing from Shan state rather than as actual drug-producing regions.

Myanmar also recently had a coup d'état which might yet again threaten to destabilize the situation. After having a period of tentative democracy starting around 2010, in 2021 the Tatmadaw yet again took control of the government in a coup which ousted the elected leader, Aun Sang Suu Kyi, after her party won against the military's subsidiary party by a landslide. While the Tatmadaw promised it would take steps against drug production, due to its long history of collusion with drug lords it is very dubious that the Tatmadaw being in power will contribute positively at all. In fact, during the chaos ensuing from the coup, it seems as though yet again drug production soared, and the future is uncertain.

3.3 Golden Crescent

The Golden Crescent is the world's leading producer region of opioids, nowadays mostly concentrated in Afghanistan though historically also in Pakistan and Iran. Though there is evidence of poppy cultivation in the area ever since the flower made its way to Asia from Greece in ancient times, a series of political circumstances have caused the region to be a hotbed of instability,

leading to the establishment of many a criminal group there. Afghanistan used to be a poor but relatively peaceful monarchy without a political affiliation in either World War II nor the beginning of the Cold War. Up until the 1940s, some provinces produced a limited amount of opium for opioid production, which was exported under a government monopoly. Demand for Afghan opium grew in World War II due to supply from other opium-producing countries being cut off, and this caused production to grow, including illegal production. With growing concerns about illicit production and new international regulations in place, opium was banned in 1945, though this had hardly any effect on stopping illegal production.

In 1973 the king, Zahir Shah, was deposed by his cousin, Daud Khan, with the support of the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), abolishing the monarchy. Daud Khan became the first Afghan president and set about consolidating his power, shunning the communists who had helped him to power, which led eventually to the Saur revolution of 1978, which brought the PDPA to power and Afghanistan into an alliance with the Soviets. The ineffective and oppressive policies of the PDPA led to increasing discontent among the population, and, eventually, the USSR intervened in 1979, sending troops across the border and installing Babrak Karmal as president, beginning the Soviet-Afghan war. As the country sunk into civil war, opium production began to dramatically increase, since farmers turned to growing poppy as it was a hardy crop that could survive through disruptions in water supply and continued to accrue demand no matter how bad the situation was. Opium farming began to spread beyond its historical regions of cultivation into more and more territory throughout the 80s, also being taken up by many poor unemployed youths with no other opportunities for income who worked as sharecroppers in other properties, as many landowners did not have enough manpower to farm it all by themselves. Some landowners at this time also began to gain more and more power due to being able to trade opium for a profit, often in collaboration with militias which opposed the government like the mujahideen, redistributing power more and more away from the central government.

Despite the fact that Babrak Karmal repealed some previous policies, the presence of Soviet troops only ended up causing more discontent, and promoted the growth of a mostly Islamist resistance movement, consisting of mujahideen militias, which received support from the US and Pakistan in their fight against the USSR. The Soviet-Afghan war was bloody, but the situation hardly progressed, and in 1986 the USSR began withdrawing its troops. Babrak Karmal was eventually replaced in 1987 by Mohammad Najibullah, whose government did manage to survive the Soviet withdrawal, but eventually collapsed when the USSR fell in 1992 and all aid to Afghanistan ceased. The country again descended into civil war with infighting among the many parties which had originally opposed the Soviet occupation together. Though there were attempts to control the drug trade, most were completely ineffective, and mostly there for show in order to appear like the state had enough control over the territory to warrant receiving aid.

In 1994, the Taliban, a Pashtun nationalist fundamental Islamist movement appeared, originating from people who studied Islam in religious schools called "Madrasas". They began, supported by Pakistan, to take more and more territory and captured Kabul in 1996, effectively taking control of the country, though their sovereignty over the more rural areas was feeble at best. The Taliban implemented increasingly radical and dysfunctional policies, and failed to address the problems its population had after so many years of war. They put pressure on the UN and NGOs to deliver

basic services which they weren't providing. Drug production largely continued to grow even more under the Taliban, provided they removed some of the controls the previous governments had put in place and the limited economic opportunities that existed. By 1999, production had approximately quintuplicated since 1987, solidifying opium as an essential part of Afghanistan's economy. Though the Taliban did not control the drug trade as a whole and the expansion of it when they came into power was mostly a result of changes in the socio-political landscape, that did not mean they weren't involved at all, and depending in the region the Taliban may have tolerated or actively participated in the opioid trade.

In 2000, the Taliban decided to impose a brutally enforced ban on all cultivation of opium, which did effectively decimate that year's opium harvest, however, this backfired, as the skyrocketing of the price caused opium to be extremely profitable if it was managed to be grown and also fuelled further discontent among the population. The ban was considered to be economically unviable, and was rescinded in 2001. The Taliban has also been accused of having used the opium ban to sell its own opium stores at a premium. When the Taliban refused after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 to hand over Osama bin Laden, whose Al-Qaeda movement like many other terrorist organizations had established itself inside perpetually unstable Afghanistan, the US decided to invade Afghanistan to fight terrorism, marking the beginning of the Afghanistan War. Much of the discontent population rebelled against the Taliban, and many areas again fell under the control of the mujahideen just like during the years during and following the Soviet occupation, and after the brief drop of 2000-2001, the opium trade came back in full force. As the Taliban was removed from power, a republic led by Hamid Karzai was created, which attempted to centralize power and liberalize the country, but was already being undermined by the collaboration of the US army with many local warlords, whom they provided with weapons and support, in its "war against terror" and the establishment of many NATO Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which were essentially military bases which forewent central government control. This led to the interests of western nations and military contractors being prioritized much more than the rebuilding project of the central government, and the strengthening of regional rather than central rule. As in 2003 the Taliban yet again organized an insurgency against the democratic government of Afghanistan, the country entered a long and bloody war.

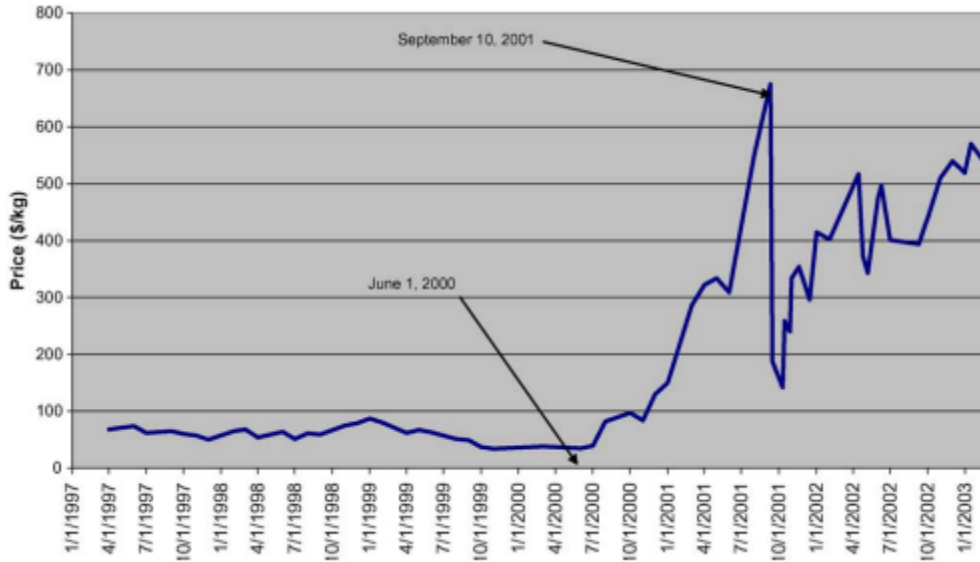


Fig. 3: Price of opium by date in Afghanistan, showing the spike that occurred after the Taliban opium ban. Sourced from: Farrell, Graham, and John Thorne. "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?: Evaluation of the Taliban Crackdown against Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan." *International Journal of Drug Policy*

All throughout the Afghanistan War, opium production continued to rise and rise, and though there was a brief downward trend from 2007 to 2010, it quickly surged back. Groups from all sides of the conflict have profited from the drug trade: Criminal organizations, the Taliban, mujahideen, local warlords and corrupt officials, whether allied with or against the US, all have taxed or made money out of growing and smuggling opium. Many counter-narcotic operations were conducted in the 2000s, some of which were successful in eliminating poppy farming from specific regions, particularly those with heavy foreign military presence. However, these were offset by the continued growth in militia-controlled regions and in 2011 yet again production rose overall, and some suggest that the downward trend was due much more to market trends than to the actual success of any counter-narcotic operation. Some of the operations include benefits for farmers who eliminated poppy, the money for which quickly disappeared to corruption, interdiction programs which attempted to eliminate traffickers and manufacturers, but this was used by drug lords to eliminate weaker rivals who couldn't bribe officials, and also crop eradication programs, which failed to provide an alternative source of livelihood, made many poppy farmers sympathetic towards the Taliban, and was also used by powerful elites to target the growing areas of rivals.

With the worsening security situation and drug control efforts overall failed, in 2021, as the last foreign troops withdrew from Afghanistan, the Taliban once again took control of the country, and though the Taliban has put a ban on opium, production rose sharply just after the takeover, driven by financial instability, and continues to be on the rise. It is also questionable how much the Taliban will enforce the opium ban, as, despite the fact that it nominally opposes its production, it has a long history of using it to finance their operations, ever since the first uprising in the 90s, it tolerated and taxed opium farmers, quickly rescinded the 2000 ban as it was unsustainable, and has used it throughout the Afghanistan War in its fight against the US and its allies.

Regarding the other countries of the Golden Triangle, which nowadays mostly don't produce opium, Iran used to be a major producer of opium, and has to this day a very significant opium addict population. However, after the monarchy was overthrown in the Iranian Revolution of 1989, the new government effectively managed to end opium production in Iran, shifting production to elsewhere in the Golden Crescent, though it did not end its opium use problem. Pakistan similarly used to produce some opium, however ever since its independence from the UK it has been slowly eradicating drug production within its borders. Though production has sometimes surged when there were shortages in other places, like after the Iran Revolution and the 2000 Taliban opium ban, opium production in Pakistan is nowadays mostly under control, and like Iran remains relevant only as the beginning of the trafficking routes flowing from Afghanistan, due to its porous border.

Opioids from the Golden Crescent make their way both to neighbouring countries, which have a high proportion of addicts, such as India, Pakistan, and Iran, but also farther west to Europe and America. The Golden Crescent mostly does not supply China and other parts of East Asia, as that market is mostly covered by the Golden Triangle. In order to make their way to Europe, drugs from the Golden Crescent take two main routes. The first and most prominent one is called the Balkan route, wherein drugs make their way through Iran, then on to Turkey, which has the highest number of drug seizures in Europe, then trekking up the Balkans on to the rest of Western Europe and America by crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Alternatively, drugs can take the Northern Route, going north from Afghanistan to Central Asia, then Russia, and then from Russia to Europe. A southern route also exists which has drugs travel by sea from the Persian Gulf around Africa to distribute the product throughout African coastlines and then Europe, and there's a small route which takes drugs that crossed into Iran through the Caucasus instead of through Turkey.



Fig. 4: Main drug trafficking routes from the Golden Crescent. Sourced from: *Opioid Trafficking Routes from Asia to Europe*. European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction

4. KEY ISSUES

4.1 Ensuring political stability and combating corruption

Before any effective action can be taken to fight organized crime and drug production, it is essential to first combat the political instability and corruption that plague the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle. It is not by coincidence that drug production is concentrated in the two areas of Asia with the longest-running conflict, as without a government with some degree of control over its territory, it's very hard for any action to be effective. Furthermore, Transnational Organized Crime has a long history of colluding with corrupt officials in the regions where they operate, and without tackling this first it's very unlikely for any efforts to be successful.

Criminal organizations like triads often have contacts among influential businessmen or politicians, which allows them to carry out dirty work in their interests through the street gangs or soldiers that criminal organizations control. Due to the nature of the way these organizations are structured, the people who get sent to carry out tasks, and in consequence are exposed to getting caught, are often foot soldiers with hardly any links to higher-ups, and it is extremely hard to trace who gave them the orders. Prosecuting these people who are desperate for money often doesn't cause a dent in the activities of criminal organizations, and the actual members of the organizations escape unscathed, and even more so the corrupt officials supporting them. Ensuring transparency in decisions relating to drug control, or lack thereof, and guaranteeing more accountability in government would be meaningful steps towards fighting the issue.

Militias which protect opium farmers and tax them tend to have good knowledge of the terrain and make use of both intelligence and military assets. This has led in the past to collaboration between some governmental organizations or officials and the militias in their fights against communism, for example between the USA and the KMT against the CCP or the USA and Lao tribesmen against the Pathet Lao, but also against Ethnic Armed Organizations, as is the case of the Tatmadaw with the KKY. This kind of collusion is what has led to the strength of many drug militias today, and though covert wars aren't fought nearly as much now, it would still be important to take steps to ensure that criminal organizations don't actually directly receive support from governments anymore.

With the end of the Afghanistan War, and the Taliban in control of most of the country, it is uncertain what can actually be done concerning this in the Golden Crescent, as many countries do not wish to deliver aid to the Taliban due to their human rights violations. There is a small resistance fighting mostly in Panjshir province, but it looks as though the Taliban won't go away any time soon. For now, it is important to continue surveying the situation and be aware of what the Taliban plans to do with drug production, as, despite of claims wanting to eradicate it, it has abundantly used it to finance its own operation. Should the Taliban be overthrown, ensuring transparency in a potential new government is essential.

In the Golden Triangle, continuing to ensure transparency in Thailand and Laos' northern provinces, which have overall taken great strides towards tackling the drug problem, will be important. In Myanmar, the conflict has been reignited following the 2021 coup d'état with the resurgence of EAOs in their fight against the Tatmadaw, and also the former government has reorganized in exile as the National Unity Government (NUG), and is organizing a fairly

successful resistance led by militias known as the People's Defence Forces (PDFs). It will be important to see what actions the Tatmadaw actually take against drug production, and just like in Afghanistan, should the situation turn against the current government, ensure the new one has strong mechanisms of accountability. Work to defuse the tensions between the government and EAOs, particularly in Shan state where militias like the United Wa State Army and Shan State Army South continue to grow strong, would also go a long way in promoting national unity and allowing Myanmar to build institutions and law enforcement which are effective nation-wide.

Always consider that any measure taken will fail to reach its actual goal if funds get used by officials to enrich themselves or undermine their rivals, or if corrupt officials fail to enforce policies. Consider that bringing political stability, something which many criminal organizations actively undermine, to a region might actually be much more valuable than fighting criminal organizations directly. Ensuring that states are able to build strong, transparent institutions in war-torn areas is key to combating organized crime.

4.2 Providing alternatives to farmers

A major reason why drug production persists as an issue despite many attempts at eradication is that the people who grow opium have no choice but to do so. Though some farmers may be coerced by local criminal organizations into growing opium, most opium farmers do it because they need the money to subsist. In the mountainous rugged and conflictive areas of the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent, opium is often the only crop which provides enough sustenance to acquire basic necessities or even the only crop which can be grown at all. Due to the constant demand for heroin in much of the world due to the addict population, opium generally accrues a decent price, and criminal organizations continue to buy up opium and offer loans and protection to farmers regardless of the ongoing situation, making it an essential source of sustenance and security for the people in war-torn areas. Many farmers are aware that the sap they extract out of the seed pods is turned into drugs, but they have no choice if they wish to sustain their households.

Myanmar and Afghanistan's economies are both highly dependent on the drug trade, and purely eliminating the opium crop would only serve to aggravate the situation. Policies of crop eradication tend to backfire as farmers are often just displaced to other areas, go further into debt with criminal organizations to continue farming poppy or the humanitarian situation just worsens overall due to poverty. The economic dependency on opium in these countries means that quitting cold turkey won't work, their economies will need to be reconstructed and weaned off opium slowly, otherwise, the crises will only worsen. Any measures which aim to suppress the amount of poppy cultivation must be coupled with those that provide an alternative livelihood for those who grow poppies.

4.3 Rising drug production

Finally, besides combatting the social issues that lead to the establishment of drug-producing regions, it's also important to tackle, in conjunction with social measures, the actual crime that drives the massive profits that criminal organizations make out of the situation. In both Afghanistan and Myanmar, drug production has essentially only been rising ever since conflict broke out in both countries.

In Myanmar, opium cultivation has somewhat died down, though it does still remain the world's second-largest producer, and has been partially replaced with an ever-growing methamphetamine manufacturing industry. Due to the fact that synthesis of methamphetamine does not require farming and is instead almost entirely chemical, it's not necessarily as tied to geography and environment as opium is, yet it continues to be produced mostly in Shan state just like opium did mostly because it is a difficult to access, secluded region where lawlessness prevails. Despite Shan state's dominance in drug production, it does look as though criminal organizations are also beginning to target other areas, such as Cambodia, and also possibly expanding into the manufacture of drugs other than methamphetamine and heroin, such as ketamine and MDMA.

UNODC reports show that drug seizures in the area continue to break records year after year, particularly of methamphetamine tablets, and Laos appears to be being hit particularly hard by an increasing amount of Burmese drugs being trafficked through their territory, though overall drug trafficking routes have remained mostly stable recently. This shift towards methamphetamine is also being reflected in usage trends in Southeast Asia, as it has in recent years become the main drug of concern in nearly all Southeast Asian countries. The recent Myanmar coup is also worrying, as it has caused a destabilization of the region leading to a surge in drug production, and the Tatmadaw has far from a good track record of prosecuting drug lords.

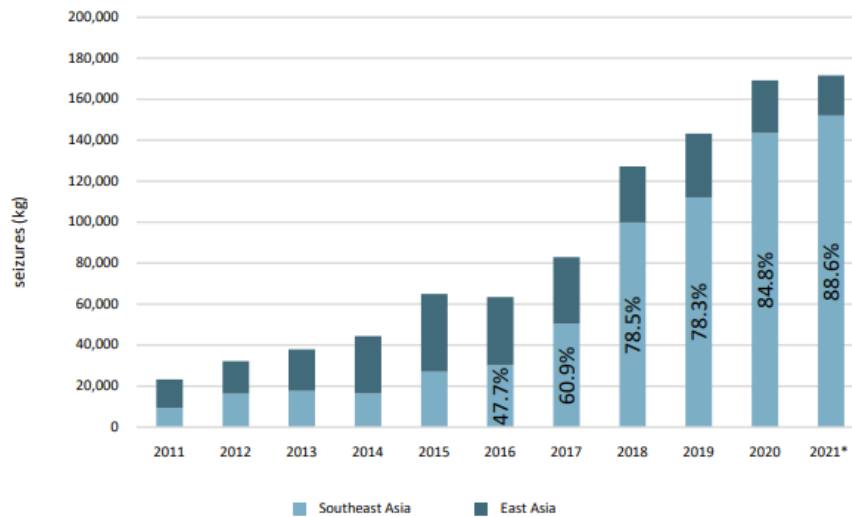


Fig. 5 Amount of methamphetamine seizures (kg) per year in East and Southeast Asia, showing a clear continued increase recently. Sourced from: "2022 Regional Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia." *United Nations : Office on Drugs and Crime*

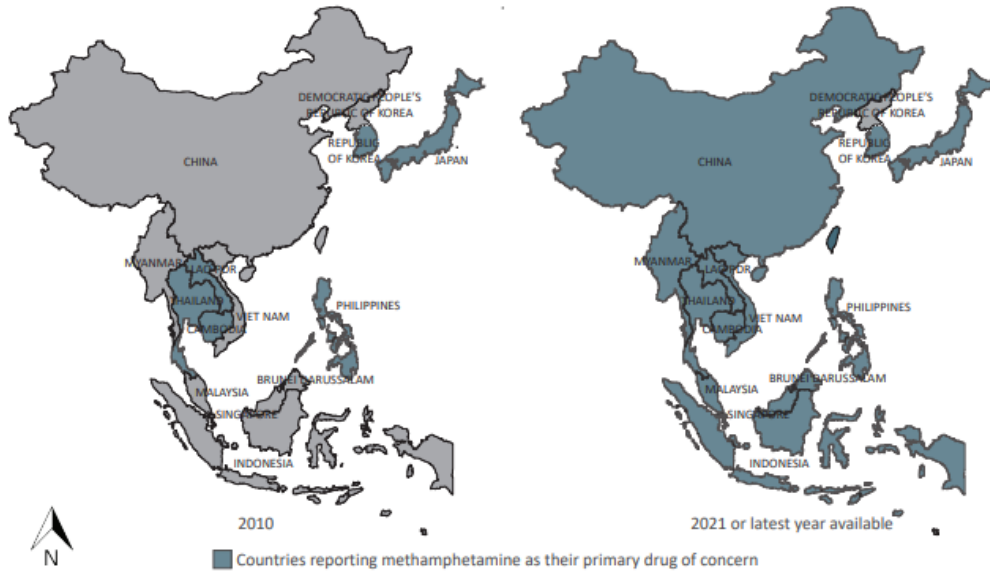


Fig. 6: Countries with methamphetamine as the main drug of concern in 2010 and 2021. Sourced from: "2022 Regional Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia." *United Nations : Office on Drugs and Crime*

Regarding Afghanistan, the situation is also similar to that of Myanmar. Though the reported increase in production isn't as high as in the Golden Triangle, there was a 32% increase in opium cultivation in 2022 leading to the third-highest area cultivated recorded, and production overall remains high, and seemingly unaffected by the Taliban takeover. Prices did spike during the Taliban takeover and after it announced a supposed ban on opium, but if anything it looks as though the Afghan economy is becoming more reliant on opium as the harsh conditions brought by the takeover make it harder and harder to gain a living any other way. Criminal organizations continue to operate and build connections to warlords and politicians.

The unstable political situations in both of the biggest drug-producing countries will make it hard for law enforcement to make real progress in fighting the chokehold criminal organizations have on these countries' economies. The situation will need to continue to be monitored, to keep track of what is going on in criminal networks, militia warfare and at a higher political level, so that efforts can continue to be made towards fighting this issue.

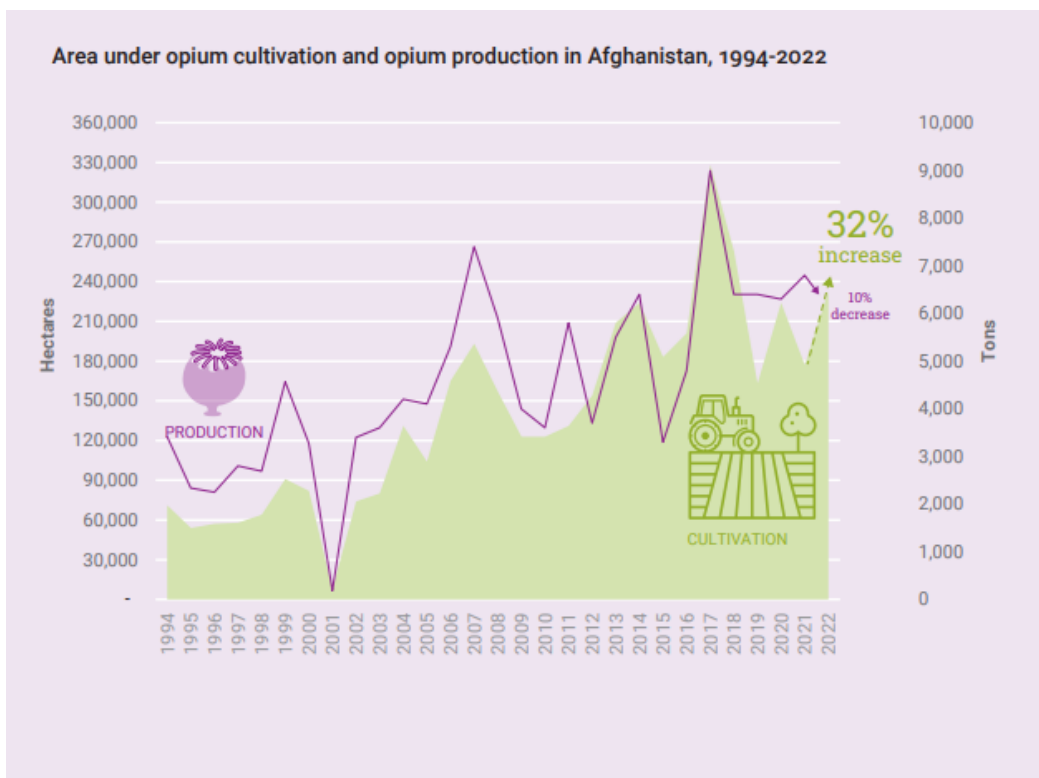


Fig. 7 Opium cultivation (hectares) and production (tons) per year in Afghanistan, showing a 32% increase in area cultivated last year, even after the Taliban takeover. Sourced from: *Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan*. Research and Trend Analysis Branch, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

5. MAJOR PARTIES INVOLVED

UNODC – The UNODC, and its subsidiary body the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), have made combatting illicit drug trafficking in Asia one of their major objectives. It has built up Programmes to combat it in the countries most affected, like Afghanistan, Myanmar and Thailand, and established numerous field offices in affected regions, providing support to the people affected. Since the beginning of the fight against drug trafficking, the UNODC has created branches, like the Mekong MOU, that manage to combat the issue even more directly and effectively. The UNODC continues to gather data and provide reports on the ongoing situation and provides aid and support in a variety of ways.

Myanmar – As part of the Golden Triangle, Myanmar is one of the most affected countries in Asia by drug trafficking. It is the world's leading producer of methamphetamine and second in opioids. Due to the ongoing conflict between its many Ethnic Armed Organizations and the central government, drug production has flourished, particularly in the northeastern Shan State. From October 2020 until September 2021, authorities seized 520 million methamphetamine tablets in Thailand, all of them being produced in Myanmar. Drugs originating in Myanmar dominate the Asian and Pacific territory and market. The 2021 coup d'état by the Tatmadaw appears to have only worsened the situation

Thailand – Part of the Golden Triangle, Thailand is deeply affected by criminal organizations that traffic drugs, though it hardly produces any itself anymore. On the 24th of January 2023, police seized over a tonne of crystal methamphetamine in only one week, after the country's reopening of borders after COVID-19. The key points of the transportation were the northern and north-eastern regions of the country, those closest to Myanmar where the drugs originate from. Thai authorities do not expect these shipments to stop or even slow down. Quite the opposite, they expect the country to be overwhelmed with the transportation of drugs, due to the market's low activity during the pandemic.

Laos – Laos is the third country of the Golden Triangle, once a producer of opium, production has now mostly died down, but Laos continues to be relevant for trafficking. On October 28th, authorities made the biggest drug bust in Asia ever, intercepting a truck carrying 55 million methamphetamine tablets and over 1.5 tons of crystal meth in Bokeo, near the Thai and Burmese borders. Laos, just like Thailand, has been suffering from the continued increase of drug production in neighbouring Myanmar.

Afghanistan – Afghanistan is part of the Golden Crescent alongside Pakistan and Iran, in which the past decades - that brought war terrorism and the shifting of political landscapes - have boosted the heroin trade in the region. In 2020, Afghanistan made up 85% of opium production around the globe and 29% of the value of the agriculture sector is represented by opium farmers. In Afghanistan, the drug trade is providing full-time jobs for over half a million people, despite the measures taken by the both democratic and, since the takeover in 2021, Taliban governments.

Pakistan – In the drug trafficking domain, Pakistan has two roles: mainly a transitway from Afghanistan, but also a pillar for the market itself. In May 2022, Pakistan's Anti-Narcotics Force seized more than a ton of opioids and 255 kilograms of methamphetamine, while the maritime forces intercepted 4.5 tons of drugs in the Arabian Sea. There are over 60 transport drug routes in Pakistan and the country possesses over 27 million drug users.

USA – As one of the largest economies in the world and due to its huge addict population, the United States of America is targeted by all types of criminal organizations as one of the main destinations for trafficked drugs. It has for a long while waged a “war on drugs”, aggressively targeting both drug users and suppliers, including abundant foreign intervention in a mostly failed attempt to curb the drug trade, though these efforts have mostly died down under current administrations. One of its intelligence agencies, the CIA, has been complicit in collaborating with drug lords mainly during the Cold War.

Russia – With the help of the Russian Federation and the Anti Narcotic Service of the Kyrgyz Republic's Ministry of Interior, UNODC conducted a five-day training on the "Specifics of recognizing, documenting, qualifying and proving offenses in the sphere of illegal drug trafficking, c" to improve the capacity of personnel of the Kyrgyz Republic's responsible authorities participating in the system of fighting drug trafficking and legalizing drug revenues. The Sustainable Development Goals are in danger of being accomplished because of crimes like cybercrime, terrorism, illegal drug use, human trafficking, and corruption. According to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, criminal organizations earn \$ 1.5 trillion annually from online crimes.

China – China has taken drastic measures against illegal drug trafficking, measures which have for the most part worked. At the end of 2021, there were 1.49 million addicts in comparison with 3.4 million at the end of 2020. Drug trafficking activities in China have significantly decreased as a result of the ongoing advancement of operation Border Clearance, interruption of the retail drug supply chain, clampdown on drug distribution by mail and logistics, etc. However, it is still host to many transnational organized crime organizations, and drugs do make their way from the Golden Triangle. It has committed to helping eradicate Southeast Asia’s drug trade.

6. TIMELINE

17th Century

European colonial powers begin importing opium to their Asian Colonies

1839 1st Opium War

1858 2nd Opium War

1912 1st Opium Convention

1925 2nd Opium Convention

1941 Beginning of the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia

1943 Occupation of Shan state by Thai forces

1947 Independence of India and Pakistan

1948 Myanmar gains independence

1949 End of the Chinese civil war

1950 A group of KMT soldiers led by general Li Mi flee Yunnan and enter Myanmar

1961 Last of the KMT troops leave Myanmar

1962 The Tatmadaw removes the democratic government in a coup d’état

1963 The Ka Kwe Ye are officially founded

1969 Arrest of Khun Sa

1973 Ka Kwe Ye are disbanded

1973 Fall of the Afghan monarchy, Daud Khan becomes president

1974 Khun Sa leaves prison

1978 Saur Revolution in Afghanistan brings PDPA to power

1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, beginning of the Afghan-Soviet War

1982 Return of Khun Sa to Thailand

1985 Founding of the Mong Tai Army

1986 USSR begins withdrawal from Afghanistan

1992 Fall of the USSR, Afghan government collapses as a consequence

1994 Appearance of the Taliban

1996 Kabul falls to the Taliban, which takes control of Afghanistan

1996 “Surrender” of Khun Sa

2001 9/11 Terrorist attacks

2001 Invasion of Afghanistan by the USA; the beginning of the Afghanistan War

2015 Myanmar holds the first free elections since before the coup

2021 The Tatmadaw yet again carries out a coup d'état and assumes power

2021 The Taliban takes back control of Afghanistan, end of the Afghanistan War

7. EVALUATION OF PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS

The UNODC has taken together with its branches, such as the Mekong MOU on Drug Control and the UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, several attempts at solving the problem of illicit drug trafficking in Asia.

7.1 The Regional Programme for Southeast Asia

The anticipated scope and focus of UNODC's efforts in Southeast Asia are outlined in the Regional Programme (RP). It provides a framework for delivering a synchronized work schedule to:

- Provide a distinct emphasis on assisting Member States and regional partners in attaining the region's top crime and drug control goals;
- Improve the UNODC's assistance to the region's responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency.

The RP aims to increase synergies with both new and existing programs in the area. It furthers the Inter-regional Drug Control Strategy and ensures strong connections with other UNODC Regional Programmes operating in areas affected by the trafficking of Afghan opioids, including precursors, particularly along the northern, southern, and Balkan routes.

The Regional Programme consists of the five following thematic sub-programmes, designed to help Member States address the most urgent regional issues, those being Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Trafficking, Anti-Corruption, Terrorism Prevention, Criminal Justice and Drug, Health and Alternative Development.

7.2 Integrated Solution for West and Central Asia

The UNODC created a coordinated strategy for Europe, West, and Central Asia with interventions at three separate yet intricately interwoven levels: country, regional, and inter-regional, with the goal of addressing the interconnected security, economic, governance, and development concerns in Afghanistan. The "UNODC One Concerted Strategy for Europe, West, and Central Asia" effort builds on lessons learned and focuses on key areas where UNODC is anticipated to have the greatest added value and impact from 2016 to 2019. It brings together the accomplishments and benefits of national, regional, and global programs in an integrated manner. The main areas of

attention are: Law Enforcement Collaboration, Criminal Justice and Judicial Cooperation and Social and Human Development. These three areas have been prioritized and have joint milestones. It is based on coordinated planning, execution, and monitoring among national, regional, and international level programs.

With the help of the Regional Programme for Afghanistan and Neighboring Countries, this "three-tier" approach combines the comparative advantages of each UNODC office in West and Central Asia (i.e., the Country Offices in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Pakistan as well as the Regional Office for Central Asia) in an integrated programming effort. Via its Policy Consultative Group Meetings and associated interactions with Member States, the Paris Pact Initiative offers strategic direction. The Afghan Opiate Trade Project, the Container Control Programme, the Global Programme on Money Laundering, and several Global Programmes on HIV/AIDS as well as Drug Use Prevention, Treatment, and Care are all full partners in the region.

Moreover, in order to combat the increased use of marine channels for the trafficking of illicit narcotics coming from Afghanistan as well as precursors intended for the synthesis of illicit drugs in Afghanistan, maritime regional cooperation is also strengthened.

The new phase of the Regional Programme is closely integrated with all relevant country and sub-regional initiatives, building on the UNODC mandate and experiences in Afghanistan and neighboring countries. Its strategy enables UNODC to guarantee that counter-narcotics and the rule of law remain major issues in the discussion of public policy and that regional governments receive the assistance needed to build the capacities they need. The UNODC's response to the complex reality in Afghanistan and the surrounding area aims to identify and address all significant aspects of the drug and crime situation, including strengthening regional cooperation in the law enforcement, judicial, and health sectors through advocacy in the policy arena and actual implementation in the field, as well as increasing capacity to more broadly analyze and counter the illicit narco-economy. The Regional Plan for Afghanistan and Neighboring Countries (2016-2019) is made up of four Sub-Programmes, all of which are built in a human rights-based, gender-responsive approach: regional law enforcement cooperation; international legal cooperation; drug dependence prevention and treatment among vulnerable groups; and trends and effect analysis.

7.3 The Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control

The Mekong Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Drug Control brings together six East and Southeast Asian nations to confront the threat posed by illicit drug production, trafficking, and use: Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), a non-state signatory and the MOU's seventh partner, offers secretarial and technical support to the MOU procedure. The Mekong MOU mechanism is effectively supported by the Regional Programme for Southeast Asia of the UNODC. For more than 25 years, the governments of the Mekong MOU have collaborated on challenges relating to illegal narcotics with the assistance of the international community and UNODC.

The MOU process is propelled by the Sub-regional Action Plan (SAP). It establishes action-oriented programs that help member Governments, both individually and collectively, to fight

illicit drug production, trafficking, and misuse. It also offers a strategic framework for coordinated activities of MOU signatories. The SAP addresses four theme categories in order to acknowledge the diversity of challenges pertaining to drug policy: Drugs and health, joint efforts between law enforcement and the courts, and sustainable alternative development.

The following actions, among others, can help build national and subregional capacities as part of the MOU process:

- Boost research efforts and the sharing of findings between MOU governments for the purposes of planning, monitoring, and gauging the success of drug prevention, harm reduction, and treatment and care activities.
- Strengthening prevention standards and improving national drug use and dependence treatment care policies are just a few ways to improve public health-oriented policies and programs for drug use prevention, harm reduction, and treatment and care in MOU countries. Other ways include improving national legislation and government policies to make sure they meet needs and adhere to the principles of community-based treatment, developing youth networks, and focusing on youth through various channels.
- Provide sound frameworks for the implementation of harm reduction, treatment, and care interventions for drug use;

The UNGASS's 2016 Special Session on the Global Drug Problem's proposals have been incorporated into SAP's tenth iteration (2017–2019), which also recognizes the significance of the drug policy spectrum to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals.

7. 4 Prohibition

When discussing drug policy as a whole, it should be considered whether even the fundamental right approach is being taken. While most countries and the UN support the prohibition of drugs, it is undeniable that despite countless efforts by the international community ever since the prohibitions on drugs became widespread in the first half of the 20th century, attempts to curb drug trafficking and consumption have been mostly futile, and in fact, may be thought to have even caused an increase in drug-related crime. Most military interventions to stop drug trafficking have been a total failure, and in fact, have caused criminal organizations to readapt or relocate and become more and more resilient. It is prohibition itself that causes drug profit margins to be so high and therefore encourages their production and trafficking. It might be good to reconsider whether perhaps a better-suited approach is to focus on harm reduction and diminishing demand or even raise prohibitions on drugs and attempt to find other ways to reduce use, though this will depend on each government's policy. Regardless, it's useless to deny that a militaristic, supply-side-focused approach has proven to be ineffective and other measures should be sought out.

8. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

- The first possible solution is to focus on giving people in drug-producing regions alternative livelihoods to growing opium. Some programs which have already had some degree of success are those of scholarships and better education, which may provide people with better job opportunities in order to escape the cycles of poverty, and also those of crop substitution, which provides farmers with alternative crops which may provide comparable levels of income to those of growing opium. Any initiative which may bolster the apparition of alternative economic opportunities to farmers will be useful towards reducing drug production, what specific ways are there to empower these communities?
- In many countries, the drug lords are so powerful due to a lack of effective legislation on corruption and drug trafficking or a lack of methods of accountability and transparency that ensure that such legislation is actually enforced. This allows people acting in this domain to either receive light punishments, no punishments at all, or just dodge the system and get away with it, never getting caught. New legislation which may be more effective at targeting corrupt officials complicit in the drug trade might be a good way of strengthening institutions and therefore ensuring the government doesn't passively or actively let the drug trade continue. When drafting legislation with the objective of punishing people involved in the drug trade, it's important to remember that targeting addicts, small dealers, or drug mules is ineffective at best and at worst worsens the addiction problem or ruins the lives of mostly innocent people. These new laws or ways of fighting corruption should target people with a higher degree of involvement in the criminal organizations that control drug trafficking. In which concrete ways can a government ensure accountability of its own regional officials in the drug trade when they are under immense threats or bribes?
- Another possible solution is the elimination of the consumers. It has been proven that funds invested in reducing demand rather than supply are many times more effective. That means, investing in campaigns that educate people on the side effects of consuming drugs, but also helping existing addicts through things like treatment centres, harm reduction policies like safe injection sites and decriminalization of possession. What measures can be taken to reduce the demand for drugs and therefore cut a significant source of funding to criminal organizations?
- Any measures which help reduce tensions and conflict will also prove useful. Easing ethnic tensions and promoting peace is key to ensuring the stability of countries, as only if they are stable will law enforcement be able to actually act effectively against criminal organizations. Agreements for ceasefires or allowing law enforcement to collaborate with local troops in rooting out criminal organizations would be a good step, though it may be hard if said troops are themselves complicit. How can the political situations of the Golden Crescent and Golden Triangle be stabilized to allow for all of the rest of the measures to be applied?

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10. APPENDICES

I - “The Politics of Heroin” by Alfred McCoy, gives a lot of historical context of how foreign involvement and wars in Asia shaped the way the drug trade operates today: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1psL_cdWJyf-0Imye5r44Lvp1z9mMcVhN/view?usp=sharing

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VI- “Militias in Myanmar” More in-depth explanation of the ways militias in Myanmar operate today and have operated in the past: <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/policy-dialogue-brief-series-no-13-militias-in-myanmar/>

VII “Investigating Organized Crime in the Golden Triangle”: Guide aimed at journalists with a lot of useful introductory information: <https://gijn.org/2022/11/28/guide-to-investigating-organized-crime-in-the-golden-triangle-introduction/>