



THE SCOURGE OF GOLDEN CULTIVATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DRUG PRODUCTION IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE AND GOLDEN CRESCENT

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ABSTRACT

The Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent stand as infamous symbols of the global drug trade. Encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran in Southwest Asia (Golden Crescent) and Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand in Southeast Asia (Golden Triangle), these regions have been responsible for a staggering portion of the world's illicit opium and heroin production for decades. This rampant drug cultivation fuels addiction epidemics, fuels organized crime and destabilizes regional security. It also has a huge role to play in making India prone to the vicious circle of drug trafficking and addiction. India's proximity with the two regions can be called a sandwich situation for India where it finds itself standing just in between the two regions, with the golden crescent on the north-western front and the golden triangle on the northeastern side. This also poses a direct threat to India's national security. This research employs a comparative analysis framework to dissect the Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent. By examining historical trends, geographical factors, and the sociopolitical landscapes of each region, the paper identifies the root causes that perpetuate drug production.

Further analysis will delve into the specific trafficking routes these networks employ, their target markets, and the impact on global drug consumption patterns. Finally, the article explores potential solutions to dismantle these entrenched drug production zones. Drawing upon case studies of past international interventions and ongoing eradication efforts, the paper evaluates their effectiveness and proposes alternative strategies. The research aims to identify a more comprehensive approach to combating drug production in the Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent by analyzing successes and failures, ultimately leading to a safer and healthier global community.

Keywords: Drug Trafficking, Addiction, Heroin production, Regional security, Drug consumption, National security

INTRODUCTION

The global epidemic of opium cultivation finds its epicenter in the enigmatic regions of the Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent, where the cultivation and trafficking of illicit drugs flourish. Renowned as the largest opium-producing region worldwide, these areas serve as pivotal hubs for drug production and distribution, perpetuating a cycle of addiction and criminal activity. The Golden Crescent, often referred to as the Silk Route of Drugs, holds a distinguished position as the oldest drug trafficking region in Asia. By 2007, it had consolidated its dominance by producing a staggering 90% of the world's opium, exceeding 8,000 tons, and establishing an unprecedented monopoly in the narcotics trade (*What Is Golden Crescent - Know Its Routes And Impact on India, 2023*)¹. In contrast, the Golden Triangle emerged as the second-largest opium production region, with the term "Golden Triangle" coined by US Secretary of State Marshall Green in 1971, signifying its growing significance in opium cultivation and trafficking. Historically, China reigned supreme as the principal producer and distributor of opium worldwide. However, the advent of the Chinese Communist Party post-World War II marked a pivotal shift, leading to stringent crackdowns on the opium trade and the implementation of rehabilitation programs for addicts (*Golden Triangle - Origin, Impact on India, and Security Concerns!*, 2024)². This political upheaval paved the way for the rise of the Golden Triangle and Crescent regions as dominant players in the global narcotics trade, displacing China from its erstwhile position of influence.

The Golden Crescent, comprising Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, emerged prominently in the 1980s as a major opium-producing region. Among these nations, Afghanistan stands as the primary producer, accounting for approximately 90% of the world's non-pharmaceutical grade opium. Despite heightened vigilance on trafficking routes, drug cartels have adeptly circumvented national guards, perpetuating a complex web of anonymity and secrecy within the drug trade. This clandestine nexus operates as a well-knit structure involving various individuals at different stages of trafficking, each possessing limited knowledge about the overarching network. Such compartmentalization affords anonymity to those orchestrating the drug cartel operations, rendering them elusive to law enforcement authorities. Geographical factors further compound the challenges faced by anti-narcotics forces in the Golden Triangle and Crescent regions. In the Golden Triangle, comprised of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, dense forest cover and seasonal road disappearances during monsoons pose formidable obstacles to transportation and surveillance efforts.

Similarly, the mountainous terrain of the Golden Crescent, spanning Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, provides natural cover for drug traffickers, facilitating their escape while hindering efforts to trace their movements. The

¹ [Golden Triangle - Origin, Impact on India, and Security Concerns! \(testbook.com\)](#)

² [What is Golden Crescent - Know Its Routes And Impact on India \(testbook.com\)](#)

nexus between drug trafficking and insurgency exacerbates the issue, with the Taliban in Afghanistan and Myanmar-based insurgent groups exploiting the drug trade to finance illegal activities, including the acquisition of arms and weapons. This convergence of narcotics trade and insurgency perpetuates instability and violence within these regions, posing significant challenges to global security and public health. In light of these complexities, this research article endeavors to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of opium production and trafficking dynamics in the Golden Triangle and Crescent regions. By delving into the geographical challenges, and socio-political factors influencing drug cultivation and trafficking, this study aims to elucidate the multifaceted nature of the issue and inform policy responses aimed at mitigating its adverse impacts.

GOLDEN TRIANGLE

The region located at the meeting point of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand along the Mekong River, encompassed by mountainous terrain, has long been notorious for drug trafficking. Alongside the Golden Crescent, it stands as one of the oldest routes for trafficking drugs to North America and Europe, dating back to the 1950s (Chandrika, 2022)³. In terms of production, the Shan State of Myanmar is the area where most of the opium is produced and smuggled through Laos and Thailand ultimately to the consumer states. Even though Myanmar produces large amounts of opiates it is one of the biggest producers and distributors of synthetic drugs in the world. This production takes place at a very large level in the hills of Shan State in northern Myanmar. The synthetic drug majorly comprises methamphetamine tablets also called yaba pills and crystal methamphetamine or “ice” (Besser, 2021)⁴. After the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, it was reported that there has been a significant growth in drug trafficking through the Golden Triangle to various high-end markets that include Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, India, etc. This whole trade in drugs has been fueled by the militant groups and organized crime syndicates in all three regions. Along with the coup the onset of Covid-19 also helped illegal drug trafficking thrive in the region. The combination of well-developed infrastructure, convenient access to precursor supplies sourced from China, and the security provided by both pro-government militias and rebel-controlled territories have collectively elevated this area into a prominent global supplier of exceptionally pure crystal methamphetamine. Each year, significant amounts of the drug, valued at tens of billions of dollars when sold on the streets, are confiscated in Myanmar, neighboring countries, and across the Asia-Pacific region.

The rise of the drug trade in Shan State can be attributed, in part, to the longstanding ethnic conflicts within the region. Over many years, the Myanmar military has negotiated ceasefires with various armed factions and formed alliances with pro-government militias. These groups operate with a degree of independence and are granted significant freedom to engage in illicit endeavors (*Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*,

³ [How does Drug Trafficking in the Notorious Golden Triangle Threaten India's Security? ▶ The International Prism](#)

⁴ [Asia's infamous Golden Triangle and the soldiers tracking down the drug smugglers who rule its narcotics trade - ABC News](#)

2019)⁵. The prerequisite items for the production of these synthetic drugs are usually sourced from across the border with China to the Shan State while some of the items are also sourced from India. The trade is predominantly controlled by pro-junta businessmen as well as ethnic militia, the government of Myanmar should stop assaulting local pedlars and consumers who are just at the dead end of this whole drug trafficking and consumption process, it should get into the field and find out about the actual kings of this whole trafficking system.

According to reports, following the military coup in Myanmar, Thailand's Office of the Narcotics Control Board has confiscated over 30 million Yaba pills. Estimates suggest that following the coup, the manufacturing of "ice" (crystal meth) from the Shan State has surged to approximately 250 million tons (*Increased Drug Trade in Golden Triangle: Security Implications | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, 2022)⁶.

The price of these synthetic drugs substantially increases once they reach the extremely lucrative markets of the outside world, and hence millions of dollars of this illicit money is collected outside Myanmar and then some of it is laundered back for the involved resistance groups and terrorist organizations to use the money to buy arms and weapons.

GOLDEN CRESCENT

The area known as the Golden Crescent, spanning across Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, stands out globally for its rampant illegal trade in narcotics and weapons. Within this region, both drugs and arms cover identical routes, often employing similar smuggling methods. Many smugglers operate in both these illicit trades, with traffickers dealing in different other goods readily accepting either narcotics or weapons for exchange. Additionally, insurgents, terrorists, and even state backers play significant roles in overseeing this clandestine traffic, offering protection to traffickers, acting as customers, or even directly participating in smuggling operations.

All of this has a history to be looked into, all of it starts with Christmas Eve of 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and the whole country through the students and madrassas formed a part of the Taliban movement which slowly started capturing the whole country in 1993-1994 until the rise of the United States in Afghanistan in 2001. The war that the Taliban fought against the Soviet Union was about a decade long and during this period the peasants in Afghanistan suffered huge destruction in terms of crops and land. All of this resulted in a recurring thought of which crop should be planted to earn more profit with lesser material used, the answer to the question was simple: Poppy plantations. The opium plant needs less water and gives huge profits in return. Therefore this was the start of the opium plantation in Afghanistan. Also whatever profits these farmers gained so part of it was contributed to the Afghani resistance against the Soviet Union in the country.

Gradually, the country started seeing a sharp increase in the production of opium in the 1980s-1990s. But this steady growth was hindered in 2000 by a fatwa that was passed by the then Taliban leader Mullah Omar who banned opium production. But this was short-lived as the year 2001 saw the downfall of the Taliban and hence the

⁵ [Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State | Crisis Group](#)

⁶ [Increased Drug Trade in Golden Triangle: Security Implications | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses \(idsa.in\)](#)

opium trade resumed as soon as the Taliban lost control of Afghanistan. According to the records between 2002-2008, the farmers earned \$6.4 Billion while the drug traffickers earned \$18 Billion (Farooq et al., 2017, #)⁷.

A significant amount of these profits went to the landowners and the Taliban who used it to fund their terror-related operations. This was not just the case of those times but this is the case of today as well. Today also the Taliban is heavily funded by this illicit drug trade and trafficking all over the world from Afghanistan.

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, insurgents opposing the Soviet forces, along with their supporters in Pakistan, significantly escalated opium production as a means to finance their war efforts. This period saw the rapid expansion of opiate cultivation and the establishment of routes that are still in use today. President Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan indirectly endorsed the cultivation of poppies as a strategy to raise funds and redirect resources towards militant groups targeting India, leveraging the proceeds from the drug trade to sustain the insurgency against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Consequently, this era marked the emergence of the "Golden Crescent" region, where Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran became major players in opium production. The transportation routes forged during this time have persisted, contributing to the enduring challenge of drug trafficking and addiction in the region and beyond (Watson, 2024)⁸.

During the peak of Pakistani opium production, annual output surged to 800 tons, with approximately 70 percent of the processed heroin being distributed across global markets. President Zia-ul-Haq's administration also established the National Logistics Cell, primarily tasked with transporting weapons to support the Afghan Taliban and facilitating the transportation of opiates back to the port city of Karachi. With the Iran-Iraq war disrupting overland routes through Iran, drug traffickers shifted their focus to maritime channels, using southern Pakistan as a gateway to reach European markets. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, poppy cultivation in Pakistan declined, leading to the country being declared "poppy-free" by the United Nations in 2000. However, in recent years, poppy cultivation has resurged along the Afghan border, covering approximately 2,000 hectares of land. This resurgence underscores the persistent challenges of narcotics production and trafficking in the region.

As of now the recent Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has resulted in a surge in the illicit drug trade, In 2021, as reported by TASS News, the chief of the Tajik Drug Control Agency stated that the quantity of seized heroin and hashish had increased twofold compared to the previous year, rising from 2.3 tonnes in 2020 to 4 tonnes in 2021 (*The Growing Narcotrafficking in Central Asia*, 2022)⁹. The source of these narcotics is Afghanistan where it is produced in large quantities. It is also affirmed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime that 80 percent of the heroin that is circulated all over the world is sourced from Afghanistan. The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed largely to the expansion of the opium trade and its huge production. Despite it being a growing concern the international communities are not taking the necessary steps to curb illicit drug trafficking and hence it is growing at a fast pace.

⁷ [\(PDF\) Opium trade and the spread of HIV in the Golden Crescent \(researchgate.net\)](#)

⁸ [Guns, Drugs, and Thugs: Smuggling in the Golden Crescent — THE INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS REVIEW \(iar-gwu.org\)](#)

⁹ [The growing narcotrafficking in Central Asia \(orfonline.org\)](#)

CONCLUSION

The research sheds light on the entrenched issues surrounding drug production and trafficking in the Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent regions. Through a comparative analysis, it becomes evident that these areas serve as major hubs for opium and heroin production, fueling addiction epidemics, organized crime, and regional instability. The historical, geographical, and socio-political factors intricately woven into the fabric of these regions contribute to the growth of the drug trade, posing significant challenges to global security and public health.

The Golden Triangle, comprising Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, has emerged as a key player in the production and supplier of synthetic drugs, particularly crystal methamphetamine. The recent political turmoil in Myanmar has further exacerbated the situation, leading to a surge in drug trafficking activities. The nexus between drug trade and insurgency complicates efforts to combat the issue, necessitating comprehensive strategies that address both the supply and demand sides of the problem.

Similarly, the Golden Crescent, spanning Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, has a long history of opium cultivation dating back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The opium trade has been intertwined with insurgency movements, with proceeds from the drug trade funding terrorist activities. Despite efforts to curb production, the recent Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has led to a resurgence in the illicit drug trade, posing a significant threat to regional and global security.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges posed by drug trafficking, facilitating its expansion and exacerbating existing addiction epidemics. It is imperative for the international community to prioritize coordinated efforts to dismantle drug production networks, disrupt trafficking routes, and address the root causes of addiction. Effective strategies must involve cooperation between governments, law enforcement agencies, and non-governmental organizations, with a focus on holistic approaches that address socio-economic disparities, governance issues, and rehabilitation efforts.

In conclusion, combating drug production and trafficking in the Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent regions requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the complex interplay of factors contributing to the issue. By learning from past interventions and adopting innovative strategies, it is possible to mitigate the adverse impacts of the drug trade and create a safer and healthier global community.