

ASEAN IN ADDRESSING DRUG TRAFFICKING IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE



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From the Editor:

Drug Trafficking, Youth Vulnerability, and the Impact Paper

Global drug trafficking trends, as flagged consistently by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), reveal a disturbing reality: cannabis continues to dominate the illicit market worldwide. Yet behind these data points lies a far more disquieting social story—how traffickers increasingly target youth populations, capitalizing on their aspirations, vulnerabilities, and exposure to trend-driven consumption. For many adolescents, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, the seduction of drugs is less about rebellion and more about a systematic entrapment orchestrated by criminal networks. This editor was engaged in reporting a few thrilling drug smuggling cases in South Asia and a recent report from the UNODC is attached in the footnote.

During a ground investigation around 2014 along the Indo-Bangladesh border, this trend was sharply evident. Both Rapid Action Battalion (Bangladesh) and India's Border Security Force (BSF) mounted intensive search operations to dismantle local trafficking chains — raids that underscored not just the porousness of borders but also the adaptability of peddlers who exploited local grievances, poverty, and youthful curiosity. Despite these enforcement actions, the persistence of parallel economies highlights how trafficking thrives as both a cross-border criminal economy and a social disruption strategy.

Today, as Southeast Asia ascends economically, the surge of narcotics represents a big blockade to human capital development. Alarmingly, school-going children in some regions are drawn into this underworld— either as consumers seduced by peer networks or even as couriers, recruited with the promise of quick money. The cultural normalization of drug use among subsets of youth networks, amplified by online subcultures and transnational supply chains, has made consumption disturbingly commonplace in specific geographies.

UNODC has been vigilant in mapping these patterns and in supporting state agencies. Yet localized enforcement, unless systematically strict and institutionally insulated from corruption, struggles to keep pace. The reality is that a “parallel system” of illicit governance often runs alongside state structures— traffickers co-opting informants, leveraging social vulnerabilities, and at times outmaneuvering overstretched security forces.

Civil society, therefore, emerges as an indispensable counterweight. Awareness campaigns must go beyond perfunctory messaging; they should be participatory, peer-led, and rooted in the digital cultures where youth increasingly spend their time. Community organizations, schools, and youth associations can transform prevention into a social movement, ensuring that deterrence is not left to enforcement alone.



A particularly instructive lens is provided by the recent impact paper authored by Muhammad Indrawan Jatmika and Adrian Naufal Rizqullah from our esteemed partner International Relations Department of UPN Jawa Timur Veteran University, Surabaya, Indonesia. Their case-study-based approach offers grounded solutions—ranging from community resilience frameworks to rehabilitative engagement strategies that view youth not as passive victims but as active partners in prevention and recovery. It underscores the value of context-specific, socially embedded interventions rather than overly securitized one-size-fits-all responses.

In sum, the narcotics challenge in South as well Southeast Asia is not only a law-and-order issue but also a civilizational development barrier. The region's economic trajectory and demographic dividend risk being undermined unless synthesis emerges between enforcement, community activism, and sustained multi-stakeholder vigilance.

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ASEAN in Addressing Drug Trafficking in the Golden Triangle Region

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Introduction

Drug trafficking is a significant threat that has garnered substantial attention in Southeast Asia. Classified as a form of transnational crime, drug trafficking poses a severe threat to international security and stability (Anggraini, 2016). The issue of illicit drug trade has been a long-standing problem in the region, making Southeast Asia one of the areas most affected by this global challenge. Central to this issue is the Golden Triangle, a region recognized as a major hub for drug production and trafficking. The Golden Triangle spans parts of Eastern Myanmar, Northern Thailand, and Western Laos, making it a focal point for the cultivation, production, and distribution of opium on a global scale. During the 1970s and 1980s, this region emerged as the world's largest opium producer (Anggraini, 2016). The Golden Triangle remains one of the largest narcotics-producing regions globally, contributing approximately 60% of the world's opium and heroin supply (BNN, 2018). The thriving drug trade in this region is facilitated by international drug cartels and syndicates, which have established extensive networks with groups operating in Iran,



Pakistan, and Afghanistan. These networks are instrumental in smuggling narcotics into Southeast Asia through the Golden Triangle, further establishing the region not only as a production hub but also as a strategic transit route for drug trafficking (Othman, 2004). The countries within the Golden Triangle—Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos—are often characterized by weak border controls, which exacerbate the problem of transnational crime. This lack of effective oversight has been exploited by non-state actors, who pose significant threats to regional security. These actors utilize the Golden Triangle as a transit point to supply narcotics to other Southeast Asian nations. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Southeast Asia's narcotics trade is one of the busiest globally, rivaling the Golden Crescent region (comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran) in the Middle East (Yanuarizki, 2016).

In addition to serving as a trafficking route, the Golden Triangle is a leading producer and cultivator of opium (Yanuarizki, 2016). Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos are the primary contributors to drug production in Southeast Asia. In northern and western Laos, local farmers cultivate opium extensively for distribution, predominantly within the region. Due to its strategic location, Thailand often serves as the initial destination for drugs transported from Myanmar and Laos before being distributed to other areas. Beyond opium, the Golden Triangle is also known to produce various narcotics, including methamphetamine, amphetamine, heroin, kratom, and marijuana (Anggraini, 2016). The repercussions of drug trafficking extend beyond the borders of the Golden Triangle, impacting other countries across Southeast Asia. This issue demands the attention of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organization that has taken an active role in addressing transnational crime, including drug trafficking (Anggraini, 2016). Many Southeast Asian countries are characterized by weak governmental institutions, which contribute to the prevalence of transnational crimes, including drug trafficking. The rapid evolution and increasing scale of the drug trade necessitate immediate and coordinated responses from ASEAN as a regional organization. ASEAN has actively facilitated collaboration among Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos to address these challenges (Aryani & Leksono, 2017). Furthermore, the organization has consistently encouraged its member states to take proactive measures to combat



transnational crime and drug trafficking. This study aims to analyze the developments in addressing drug trafficking issues in Southeast Asia, particularly within the Golden Triangle, from 2018 to 2020, with a focus on the role of ASEAN as a regional organization. Specifically, it explores ASEAN's institutional responses and collaborative frameworks in tackling the drug trade in this region. By examining ASEAN's work programs and initiatives, this study builds upon prior research to provide a comprehensive understanding of ASEAN's role as a facilitator and motivator in the fight against drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle.

Theoretical Framework: Neoliberal Institutionalism and ASEAN's Role as an International Organization

To analyze ASEAN's role in combating drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle region, this study adopts Neoliberal Institutionalism as its primary theoretical framework. It also incorporates the concept of transnational crime to offer a comprehensive understanding of the issue and ASEAN's efforts in addressing it. Neoliberal Institutionalism highlights the importance of international institutions in fostering cooperation among states to tackle shared challenges. As Keohane (1989) argues, institutions help reduce transaction costs, enhance transparency, and provide a structured platform for dialogue. Within this context, ASEAN, as a regional organization, plays a pivotal role in promoting collaboration and coordinated action against transnational issues like drug trafficking. Key institutional mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD), facilitate cooperation among member states (ASEAN, 2016). These frameworks help ASEAN navigate the challenges of sovereignty concerns and diverging national interests by creating a platform for negotiation and fostering shared objectives, exemplified by initiatives like the "Drug-Free ASEAN" vision.

Neoliberal Institutionalism underscores the importance of interdependence and the establishment of norms and rules to guide state behavior. ASEAN's cooperative strategies, including the ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs



(2016–2025) and initiatives like the Safe Mekong Joint Operation, exemplify how the organization facilitates collaboration to address drug trafficking (ASEAN-NARCO, 2017). Through the institutionalization of such efforts, ASEAN fosters a unified commitment among member states to reduce drug production, trafficking, and abuse in the region. However, as Neoliberal Institutionalism points out, the effectiveness of institutions is often constrained by factors such as state compliance and capacity. This limitation is evident in the Golden Triangle, where challenges like weak governance, corruption, and conflicting national interests obstruct the full implementation of ASEAN's policies (Anggraini, 2016). Despite these challenges, Neoliberal Institutionalism emphasizes the potential of institutions like ASEAN to mediate disputes, build trust, and coordinate collective responses to transnational threats.

Neoliberal Institutionalism and the Roles of International Organizations

Neoliberal Institutionalism provides a valuable lens for understanding the role of international organizations in addressing complex global issues. This theory emphasizes the importance of cooperation among states, facilitated by international institutions that reduce transaction costs, promote transparency, and foster trust. International organizations, as central actors in the global governance framework, play critical roles in encouraging collective action and addressing transnational challenges effectively.

According to Harun & Fuadi (2020), international organizations fulfill several key functions in addressing global problems, which align closely with the principles of Neoliberal Institutionalism:

1. As a Motivator

International organizations serve as motivators by providing encouragement and impetus for states or groups to take action to resolve pressing issues. In line with Neoliberal Institutionalism, they achieve this by offering platforms that incentivize participation, align member states toward common goals, and reduce uncertainties surrounding cooperative efforts. ASEAN's initiatives, such as the ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs (2016–2025),



exemplify this role, motivating member states to collectively tackle drug trafficking.

2. As a Communicator

Acting as communicators, international organizations disseminate valid, reliable, and actionable information to guide decision-making processes and coordinate responses. Neoliberal Institutionalism underscores the significance of transparency in fostering cooperation, and international organizations play a crucial role in ensuring accurate information is shared among stakeholders. For example, ASEAN facilitates intelligence sharing among its member states through mechanisms like the ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center (ASEAN-NARCO), which enhances regional efforts to disrupt trafficking networks.

3. As an Intermediary

International organizations also function as intermediaries, bridging differences and mediating conflicts between states or groups to foster collaboration. This aligns with Neoliberal Institutionalism's focus on institutions as platforms for dialogue and negotiation, helping states overcome sovereignty concerns and conflicting interests. ASEAN exemplifies this intermediary role through frameworks such as the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD), which provides a platform for member states to collaborate on policy development, harmonize strategies, and coordinate joint operations to combat transnational drug trafficking.

Through these roles, international organizations like ASEAN embody the core principles of Neoliberal Institutionalism by fostering interdependence, building trust, and creating institutionalized mechanisms that enable states to cooperate more effectively. This theoretical framework highlights how ASEAN, as a regional institution, leverages its roles as motivator, communicator, and intermediary to address the shared challenge of drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle and beyond.

Transnational Crime and ASEAN's Regional Response



Drug trafficking is a prime example of transnational organized crime, defined by its cross-border operations and intricate networks. As Mueller (2001) notes, transnational crime poses profound threats to state sovereignty and regional stability. The Golden Triangle exemplifies these challenges, functioning as both a production hub and a key transit route for narcotics bound for markets across Southeast Asia and beyond (Othman, 2004). ASEAN's response to transnational crime is grounded in the principles of shared responsibility and collaborative enforcement (Aryani & Leksono, 2017). Initiatives such as the Safe Mekong Joint Operation and partnerships with international organizations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) illustrate ASEAN's commitment to addressing the cross-border nature of drug trafficking. These efforts emphasize strengthening border security, enhancing intelligence sharing, and conducting joint operations aimed at dismantling trafficking networks (ASEAN-NARCO, 2017).

Despite these initiatives, addressing transnational crime remains a complex task, hindered by challenges such as jurisdictional disparities, corruption, and resource constraints. ASEAN has sought to mitigate these issues by developing norms and frameworks that promote harmonized policies and practices among member states. For instance, the ASEAN Cooperation Plan to Tackle Illicit Drug Production and Trafficking in the Golden Triangle (2017–2019) highlights the importance of coordinated action to address drug production and trafficking at a regional level (ASEAN, 2018).

Drawing on the perspectives of Neoliberal Institutionalism and the concept of transnational crime, this study emphasizes the multi-dimensional nature of ASEAN's efforts to combat drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle. Neoliberal Institutionalism serves as a theoretical foundation for understanding ASEAN's role in fostering regional cooperation, while the lens of Human Security highlights the need to address the social and economic drivers of the drug trade. Concurrently, the transnational crime framework underscores the critical importance of collaborative enforcement mechanisms to tackle cross-border challenges effectively. The interplay between these frameworks demonstrates ASEAN's ability to adopt a comprehensive approach that integrates institutional cooperation, people-centered development, and transnational enforcement.



However, persistent challenges—ranging from limited state capacity to uneven policy implementation—underscore the need to further strengthen regional institutions and enforcement mechanisms to enhance ASEAN’s effectiveness in combating drug trafficking.

ASEAN’s Role as Motivator and Communicator in Addressing Drug Trafficking in the Golden Triangle

Drug trafficking is a major transnational crime that poses serious threats to international security, driven by intricate networks that operate across national borders. The Golden Triangle, spanning parts of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, continues to be a significant hub for narcotics production and trafficking, accounting for up to 60% of the global opium and heroin supply (BNN, 2018). As a regional organization, ASEAN plays a pivotal role in tackling this issue and safeguarding the collective security of its member states. This role is reflected in ASEAN’s dual functions as a motivator and facilitator, promoting collaboration among member states to address the pervasive problem of drug trafficking effectively.

ASEAN as a Motivator

ASEAN has long recognized the threats posed by drug trafficking, initiating its engagement with this issue in 1972 through the *ASEAN Drugs Experts Meeting on the Prevention and Control of Drug Abuse* in Manila, Philippines. This effort culminated in the establishment of the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) in 1984, which was designed to enhance and implement the ASEAN Declaration of Principles to Combat the Drug Problem (Anggraini, 2016). ASOD serves as a key institutional mechanism, tasked with overseeing drug-related challenges, designing and evaluating ASEAN’s drug prevention programs, and fostering inter-state collaboration. ASOD’s comprehensive approach is embodied in the “ASEAN Regional Policy and Strategy in the Prevention and Control of Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking,” which outlines a framework centered on policy, strategic planning, and program implementation (Harto & Sebastian, 2013). For example, the *ASEAN Plan of Action on Drug Abuse Control* (1994) introduced initiatives



focused on rehabilitating drug users, conducting research on narcotics, and fostering preventive education. These programs have been further reinforced by partnerships with international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which supports sustainable development as a strategy to reduce drug dependency and trafficking in Southeast Asia (Bakker, Putra, & Putri, 2020).

The ambitious *Drug-Free ASEAN 2020* initiative, later accelerated to *Drug-Free ASEAN 2025*, reflected ASEAN's commitment to eradicating narcotics production, trafficking, and consumption in the region. Although the goal of a drug-free ASEAN has yet to be fully realized, the establishment of such programs has significantly influenced national policies within the Golden Triangle. For instance, Myanmar implemented the *15-Year Narcotics Elimination Plan (1999–2014)*, which involved systematic eradication of opium cultivation, reducing the cultivated area by 7,800 hectares between 2018 and 2020 (ASEAN, 2021). Similar strategies have been employed in Laos and Thailand, focusing on demand reduction, law enforcement, and alternative development.

ASEAN as a Communicator

In its role as a communicator, ASEAN provides a platform for dialogue and coordination among its member states. This role is institutionalized through forums such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD), which bring together policymakers to discuss and address transnational threats, including drug trafficking. Established in 2015, AMMD focuses exclusively on narcotics issues, distinguishing it from the broader AMMTC (ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime). These forums facilitate knowledge sharing, policy alignment, and joint initiatives, such as the *Safe Mekong Operation Project* and the *ASEAN Cooperation Plan to Tackle Illicit Drug Production and Trafficking in the Golden Triangle (2017–2019)* (ASEAN-NARCO, 2017).

The AMMD plays a pivotal role in monitoring member states' progress in combating drug trafficking, as demonstrated through its regular agendas, which include the presentation of country reports, reviews of previous recommendations, and the



development of regional strategies. These activities foster accountability and encourage member states to implement effective national and regional policies. For instance, the *ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs (2016–2025)* emphasizes preventive education, law enforcement, and international cooperation, ensuring a holistic approach to addressing the drug problem in Southeast Asia (ASEAN, 2016).

ASEAN's role as a communicator is particularly significant in the Golden Triangle, where cross-border collaboration is essential to disrupt narcotics production and trafficking networks. The *ASEAN Cooperation Plan to Tackle Illicit Drug Production and Trafficking in the Golden Triangle (2017–2019)* highlights the importance of joint operations at border regions and partnerships with international organizations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). These initiatives not only address immediate threats but also strengthen regional capacities to tackle transnational organized crime.

ASEAN's Role as an Intermediary in Addressing Drug Trafficking in the Golden Triangle

ASEAN plays a critical role as an intermediary in combating drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle, a region encompassing Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. The transnational nature of drug production and trafficking in this region necessitates collaborative efforts among stakeholders. Recognizing the limitations of unilateral approaches, ASEAN has actively facilitated agreements between member states and neighboring countries, such as China, through its ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD). ASEAN also collaborates with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to address the global dimensions of the narcotics issue. The Golden Triangle, historically one of the world's largest producers of opium and amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), poses significant challenges due to porous borders and geographical proximity to China. The Mekong River, which traverses Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China, has long been exploited as a trafficking route by drug



cartels. ASEAN, recognizing China's vulnerability to drug inflows from the region, initiated a partnership that underscores the importance of a collective response to drug trafficking.

The formalization of ASEAN-China relations began in 1997 with the ASEAN Plus One Meeting, which established a framework for addressing non-traditional security threats, including drug trafficking. This collaboration was further institutionalized in 2000 through the ASEAN-China Cooperative Operations in Response to Dangerous Drugs (ACCORD) initiative. ACCORD's objective was to create a drug-free region by emphasizing education, information sharing, joint enforcement, and community-based alternative development programs. The program's four pillars—raising awareness, reducing demand, strengthening enforcement, and curbing production—served as a blueprint for tackling the root causes of drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle.

ASEAN's intermediary role is further exemplified by its capacity to coordinate joint operations like the Safe Mekong Joint Operation (SMJO), which began in 2013. This initiative brought together Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and China to conduct joint patrols along the Mekong River, exchange intelligence, and implement shared enforcement measures. The SMJO has yielded tangible results, including the interception of millions of methamphetamine tablets, tons of precursor chemicals, and the arrest of thousands of traffickers. The inclusion of Cambodia and Vietnam in later years expanded the operation's reach and bolstered regional cooperation.

By bridging the interests of member states and external partners, ASEAN has positioned itself as a pivotal actor in addressing the complexities of drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle. Its ability to mediate and foster multilateral collaboration highlights its effectiveness as a regional organization capable of addressing transnational threats. However, the continued success of such initiatives requires sustained political will, resource allocation, and adaptive strategies to address the evolving dynamics of drug production and trafficking. Through these efforts, ASEAN reaffirms its commitment to fostering regional security and stability while working toward the vision of a Drug-Free ASEAN by 2025.



Impact of the Safe Mekong Joint Operation and ASEAN-China Collaboration

The Safe Mekong Joint Operation (SMJO) has demonstrated significant progress in combating drug trafficking across the Golden Triangle region, solidifying ASEAN's role as a regional intermediary and China's commitment to addressing transnational crimes. Since its inception in 2013, the SMJO has disrupted the production and trade of narcotics, particularly Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS), opium, and cannabis. Key outcomes include the interception of substantial quantities of illicit drugs, such as 32 million methamphetamine tablets and 22.5 tons of crystal methamphetamine in 2019 alone, underscoring its operational effectiveness (ASEAN, 2020).

This collaborative initiative has also contributed to capacity building among participating nations through the exchange of information, joint patrols, and shared enforcement strategies. The establishment of joint command centers has enabled real-time coordination and enhanced law enforcement capabilities, reducing the permeability of regional borders for drug traffickers. Notably, the inclusion of Cambodia and Vietnam in subsequent years expanded the geographic scope of operations, ensuring broader coverage and increased deterrence along the Mekong River.

Beyond its quantitative achievements, the SMJO has strengthened ASEAN-China relations by fostering mutual trust and shared responsibility. The commitment to tackling non-traditional security threats such as drug trafficking has positioned ASEAN as a proactive actor in fostering regional stability while emphasizing its role as a mediator. Consequently, the SMJO's outcomes highlight the importance of multilateral approaches in addressing transnational challenges, particularly in areas with complex geographical and socio-economic dynamics like the Golden Triangle.

Challenges and Sustainability of the Program

Despite its achievements, the Safe Mekong Joint Operation and broader ASEAN-China cooperation face several challenges in ensuring the program's sustainability and alignment with long-term goals, such as Drug-Free ASEAN 2025. One of the most



significant obstacles is the resurgence of drug production and trafficking activities, as evidenced by the sharp increase in ATS seizures in 2020, with over 45 million methamphetamine tablets intercepted (ASEAN, 2021). This uptick indicates that while operational successes have disrupted supply chains, they have not fully eradicated the systemic drivers of drug production in the Golden Triangle.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant challenges to the ongoing efforts against drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle. Restrictions on mobility and disruptions in patrol operations created gaps in border security, allowing traffickers to exploit weakened controls. The pandemic also strained law enforcement capacities, with limited personnel availability and delayed coordination hampering real-time responses to illicit activities. This period of reduced enforcement underscored the adaptability of organized crime groups, which took advantage of the situation to strengthen their networks and expand their operations across porous borders. Consequently, the pandemic served as a reminder of the vulnerabilities in existing anti-trafficking mechanisms and the importance of resilient, adaptive strategies in combating transnational crimes.

Beyond the operational setbacks, the pandemic further highlighted the structural issues underlying the region's drug production and trade. The intricate network of organized crime groups operates within a broader context of persistent socio-economic disparities, which continue to fuel the cycle of narcotics production and trafficking. Poverty, lack of economic opportunities, and limited access to education in marginalized areas create fertile ground for these criminal networks to thrive. Addressing these deep-rooted challenges requires a more comprehensive approach that goes beyond traditional law enforcement. Integrating socio-economic development initiatives—such as community empowerment programs, economic diversification, and access to education—can disrupt the supply chain at its roots and offer sustainable alternatives to communities vulnerable to exploitation by criminal organizations. This holistic strategy is critical for achieving long-term success in mitigating drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle.



Maintaining the sustained commitment of all stakeholders presents a significant challenge to the ongoing success of the Safe Mekong Joint Operation (SMJO). Ensuring the initiative's momentum requires steady financial support, continuous capacity building, and unwavering political will from ASEAN member states and China. However, differences in legal frameworks, varying levels of law enforcement capability, and inconsistent political dedication across countries have occasionally disrupted the fluidity of collaboration, complicating the overall effectiveness of joint efforts.

To address these challenges, the development of a unified framework is essential to harmonize national priorities with broader regional objectives. Such a framework would establish clear guidelines and foster greater alignment among participating nations, enabling more seamless coordination in combating drug trafficking. By bridging gaps in legal and institutional capacities and ensuring a consistent commitment to shared goals, this approach would strengthen the foundation of the SMJO, enhancing its ability to effectively address the complexities of transnational crime in the region.

To address these challenges, ASEAN and China have embraced strategic plans such as the ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs (2016–2025), which emphasizes reducing both supply and demand through public awareness campaigns, alternative development programs, and strengthened legal frameworks. The continuation of the SMJO under the ASEAN Cooperation Plan to Tackle Illicit Drug Production and Trafficking in the Golden Triangle (2017–2019) and beyond demonstrates a commitment to refining operational strategies and adapting to emerging threats.

For the vision of a Drug-Free ASEAN 2025 to be realized, ASEAN and China must not only maintain but also scale up their collaborative efforts. Integrating new technologies for surveillance, enhancing cross-border intelligence sharing, and addressing the root causes of drug production—such as poverty and governance deficits—are imperative. Furthermore, fostering stronger partnerships with international organizations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) can provide additional expertise and resources to tackle the evolving landscape of transnational drug trafficking effectively.



Conclusion

The efforts of ASEAN to address transnational crime, particularly drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle, highlight its role as a pivotal regional organization in Southeast Asia. The Golden Triangle, encompassing Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, has long been recognized as one of the world's largest hubs for drug production and trafficking, contributing to significant challenges for the region and beyond. Given its strategic location and porous borders, the area facilitates the trafficking of various illicit substances such as methamphetamine, heroin, and opium, posing threats to regional security and public health.

ASEAN has demonstrated its commitment to tackling these issues through various roles as a motivator, communicator, and intermediary. The establishment of the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) underscores its dedication to formulating and evaluating regional programs to curb drug trafficking. ASEAN's efforts to encourage collective action among member states and external partners have been instrumental in fostering collaboration, as evidenced by initiatives such as the ASEAN-China Cooperation in Response to Dangerous Drugs (ACCORD) and the Safe Mekong Joint Operation (SMJO).

These initiatives have yielded measurable successes, including the interception of significant quantities of illicit drugs and the apprehension of traffickers, showcasing ASEAN's capability as a facilitator of cross-border cooperation. However, the persistence of drug trafficking activities in the Golden Triangle, particularly the resurgence of Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS) production, underscores the limitations of current approaches and the need for continuous adaptation. While ASEAN has laid a strong foundation for addressing this transnational crime, its effectiveness is contingent upon sustained political will, resource allocation, and enhanced coordination among member states and external stakeholders.



Recommendations

To further enhance ASEAN's efforts in combating drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthen Regional and International Cooperation**

ASEAN should deepen its collaboration with neighboring countries, particularly China, and international organizations like the **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**. Enhanced intelligence sharing, capacity-building programs, and joint operations can help address the evolving dynamics of drug trafficking networks. Expanding the membership and participation in initiatives like SMJO to include more stakeholders, such as border security forces and international agencies, will ensure a comprehensive approach.

2. **Adopt Technology-Driven Solutions**

The integration of advanced technologies, such as satellite surveillance, blockchain for supply chain monitoring, and artificial intelligence for data analysis, can improve the efficiency of operations and border control measures. ASEAN member states should invest in modernizing their law enforcement capabilities and facilitating the transfer of technology across borders to counteract sophisticated trafficking networks.

3. **Promote Alternative Development Programs**

Addressing the root causes of drug production in the Golden Triangle requires holistic strategies that focus on socio-economic development. ASEAN should advocate for and support alternative livelihood programs for communities dependent on the drug trade, such as sustainable agriculture, vocational training, and community-based initiatives. These efforts can reduce reliance on illicit crop cultivation and promote long-term economic stability in the region.

4. **Enhance Public Awareness and Community Engagement**

ASEAN should intensify public awareness campaigns to educate communities on the dangers of drug abuse and trafficking. Programs targeting youth and vulnerable populations, coupled with community participation in monitoring and



reporting suspicious activities, can foster a culture of vigilance and resistance against the drug trade.

5. **Harmonize Legal and Policy Frameworks**

The disparity in legal systems and enforcement capacities among ASEAN member states poses challenges to unified action. ASEAN should work toward harmonizing drug-related laws and policies, ensuring consistency in penalties, extradition agreements, and judicial processes. Establishing a regional legal framework that aligns with international standards will enhance the effectiveness of cross-border collaborations.

6. **Monitor and Evaluate Policy Implementation**

Regular assessment of the progress and impact of ASEAN's initiatives, such as ACCORD and SMJO, is critical for identifying gaps and areas for improvement. ASEAN should establish a robust monitoring and evaluation mechanism to ensure that resources are allocated efficiently and that programs align with the overarching goal of **Drug-Free ASEAN 2025**.

7. **Institutionalize Multi-Stakeholder Approaches**

ASEAN should formalize partnerships with non-governmental organizations, academia, and the private sector to leverage their expertise and resources in addressing drug trafficking. Collaborative research on trafficking patterns, the socio-economic impact of drugs, and innovative policy solutions can inform evidence-based decision-making and drive comprehensive strategies.

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