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Potential of ASEAN-India Partnership in Managing Drug Trafficking

Akash Sahu*

Drug trafficking is one of the most pertinent non-traditional security threats both India and ASEAN have been facing. Given the transnational nature of the problem, multilateral efforts are required to apply curbs on narcotics production, manufacturing and trafficking in the region. This commentary argues that India and ASEAN need to strengthen cooperation to develop joint mechanisms for increased surveillance and policing of the border areas and sea routes, as well as social and rehabilitation programmes need to be widened to effectively address the issue of drug trafficking in a holistic manner.

Introduction

Drug abuse and illicit drug trafficking have emerged as one of the most pertinent non-traditional security threats globally. In the last one decade, production and consumption of drugs has increased, creating a public health crisis. India and ASEAN face the same challenge. As per '2023 Report on Drug Trade in Asia' by The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), production and abuse of drugs in the region is rising.¹ Moreover, an alternate maritime route, via the Andaman Sea, is now increasingly being used for trafficking among the peripheral countries.² Hence the threat of proliferation of illicit drugs is imminent on India and ASEAN as they have large population vulnerable to drug abuse, especially as synthetic drugs like meth 'yaba' pills become cheap and accessible in the region.

Apart from Myanmar's Shan state, which is seen as the epicentre for global meth production, UNODC reports underscore rising production of ketamine from industrial-scale laboratories

*The author is an analyst in Indo-Pacific geopolitics and Southeast Asian studies. He leads an independent policy and strategy consulting practice from New Delhi.

in Cambodia's forested areas. Some estimates suggest that Myanmar's opiate and heroin production may be steering illicit economies worth \$2 billion and \$10 billion respectively.³ The military government in Myanmar does not control large territories governed by ethnic groups, and thus has negligible authority over major production sites.⁴ Given an increased crackdown in China's Yunnan province and Thailand's border areas, smugglers have resorted to using alternative routes through the Golden Triangle area of the Laotian territory, where limited government control means that drug transfers go largely unchecked.⁵

India struggles with increasing drug abuse in urban areas, and more particularly in border territories. Given lax regulatory standards, precursor chemicals for synthetic drugs, like ephedrine, pseudo-ephedrine and fentanyl, are being transported from India to the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia as well as to Africa and Mexico for preparation of methamphetamine and other narcotics.⁶ Moreover, Indian youth are increasingly turning to darknet markets to access synthetic drugs.⁷ India was one of the prime destinations for darknet drug stimulants through 19 such markets from 2011 to 2020 as reported by the UNODC.

Multilateral and Regional Approaches

Most nations align on having a coordinated international approach against illicit narcotics in addition to having the domestic laws and regulations. The 1988 UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, and subsequent setting up of the UNODC in 1997 have been the pioneering efforts.⁸ However, implementation was lagged due to differing domestic laws, expertise, and political will among nations. That calls for a more regional approach driven by key countries facing the problem.

ASEAN has taken several measures over the years to restrain drug trafficking in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) has been held since 1984 and led by five working groups of Preventive Education, Treatment & Rehabilitation, Law Enforcement, Research, and Alternative Development. The ASEAN Airport Interdiction Task Force was set up in 2011 and ASEAN Seaport Interdiction Task Force in 2015 for joint investigations and operations aimed at combating drug trafficking at airports and international seaports respectively.⁹ The ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center was set up in 2014 as a focal point for coordination among drug enforcement agencies and development of database for related information.

A Mid-Term Review of the "ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities against Illicit Drug Trafficking 2016-2025" was undertaken in March 2021 to identify progress among various member nations. The 10th ASEAN Drug Monitoring Network Meeting (ADMN) was held in April 2021 to share information on evolving drug supply, demand, and addiction trends in the region. The 5th ASEAN Seaport Interdiction Task Force (AAITF) was also held in 2021 and chaired by Brunei to share information and expertise among members in order to combat drug trafficking syndicates in ASEAN's maritime spaces.¹⁰ The 7th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD) was held in Cambodia in October 2021 to take note of progress towards "drug free ASEAN aspiration" and achievements of related agencies in that regard, whereas the 8th AMMD will be held in Laos in 2023.¹¹ The ASEAN-led East Asia Summit facilitated alignment of leaders on this significant issue as a comprehensive joint statement was adopted in its 14th summit in 2019.¹² Notably it mentions

encouraging “viable economic alternatives” for illicit crop cultivation, and strengthening rehabilitation for victims.

India set up the Narco Coordination Centre in 2016, under the aegis of Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), to facilitate better coordination among its drug enforcement agencies. India’s NCB engages with a number of multilateral groups that target drug trafficking, like SAARC, BRICS, Colombo Drug Advisory Program, BIMSTEC, and agencies such as ASEAN’s ASOD, UNODC and International Narcotics Control Board.¹³ The government has launched the “National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction” to financially assist voluntary organisations working in counselling and rehabilitation of drug addicts.¹⁴ Given shared concerns and potential impact, collaborative India-ASEAN efforts, like elaborate mechanisms to share resources and expertise, can be more effective.

Potential Areas of Action

An NCB report indicates that about 70 percent of incoming narcotic substances into India enter through maritime routes of Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.¹⁵ Large amounts of seizures by Indian authorities affirm that Indian Ocean is a hotspot for narcotics activity and poses a non-traditional security threat. On the southern peninsular tip of the Indian mainland, the strait between India and Sri Lanka is susceptible to illegal activities due to the presence of several small fishing vessels that may be untracked and unmonitored. Additionally, boats from Myanmar containing illegal drugs have been found in Andaman Sea headed to Southeast Asia.¹⁶

The identification and tracking of small vessels in maritime areas complicates the problem of drug trafficking. Due to constant re-routing of distribution networks, India and ASEAN would benefit by constituting information sharing mechanisms for better surveillance and possibly real-time updates. India’s Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) and similarly IFC Singapore are aptly suited to elevate the cooperation to greater information sharing. Although a more specific focus on some areas, such as Andaman Sea, Palk Strait, Makran Coast, Gulf of Thailand would be useful.

Another potential area for anti-narcotics cooperation is the fight against financing of drug production and distribution. Money laundering and cash-based businesses like casinos, hotels and entertainment businesses make it easy for drug money to be integrated into regional banking circuits.¹⁷ Regulatory standards can discourage inclusion of drug money into formal banking. One ground-level approach to do that is by empowering local administrations through tax revenues, which can improve policing capacities as well as disincentivize money laundering that benefits drug traffickers.¹⁸

As most workers or farmers involved in drug production and cultivation, peddlers and transporters may be from low-income backgrounds with no better alternatives, it may be useful to devise schemes for their employment and transition to legal occupations. Local civil society groups can be engaged in crafting such programmes and delivering desired outcomes.¹⁹

Most recently, India and ASEAN have engaged on the issue of drug trafficking at “The 9th ASEAN-India Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crimes” where both sides sought to strengthen cooperation by increasing institutional linkages and capacity building.²⁰ As ASEAN-India maritime cooperation gathers momentum²¹, a sustained focus on addressing

drug trafficking via oceanic routes will allow both sides to take necessary steps in that regard. Information sharing and enhanced security protocols at sea ports can be important areas to build upon existing cooperation in the area²².

Conclusion

Despite government measures and strict anti-drug abuse laws, trafficking in the region has persisted. It may be useful to devise a combination of traditional and innovative approaches, such as in the case study of Portugal, to achieve desired results. The rates of drug abuse and addiction in Portugal declined even as decriminalisation of drug possession and consumption were seen as radical measures.²³ The success could be attributed to dedicated public health professionals and infrastructure, and consistent funding which could reduce the demand side, thereby drastically making the supply redundant.²⁴

India and ASEAN constitute an area of robust economic activity within the Indo-Pacific. This area also hosts significant proportion of the world's youngest population which will play crucial roles in the development of the region in coming decades. Drug trafficking and abuse can diminish the capabilities of their people, and instigate criminal, insurgent or terrorist activities. A conjoined effort, which includes strengthening traditional approaches to curbing narcotics activity and addressing social causes of its sustenance, can help alleviate the problem.

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About AIC



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Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC works with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and undertakes evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

AIC Commentary Series Editor: Dr Pankaj Vashisht, AIC at RIS, New Delhi

Contact us at:

ASEAN-India Centre (AIC)
Research and Information System of Developing Countries (RIS)
Zone-IV-B, Fourth Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi – 110003, India
Tel. +91-11-24682177-80
Fax: +91-11-24682173-74
E-mail: aic@ris.org.in
Visit our website at: <http://aic.ris.org.in>

@AIC_aseanindia

