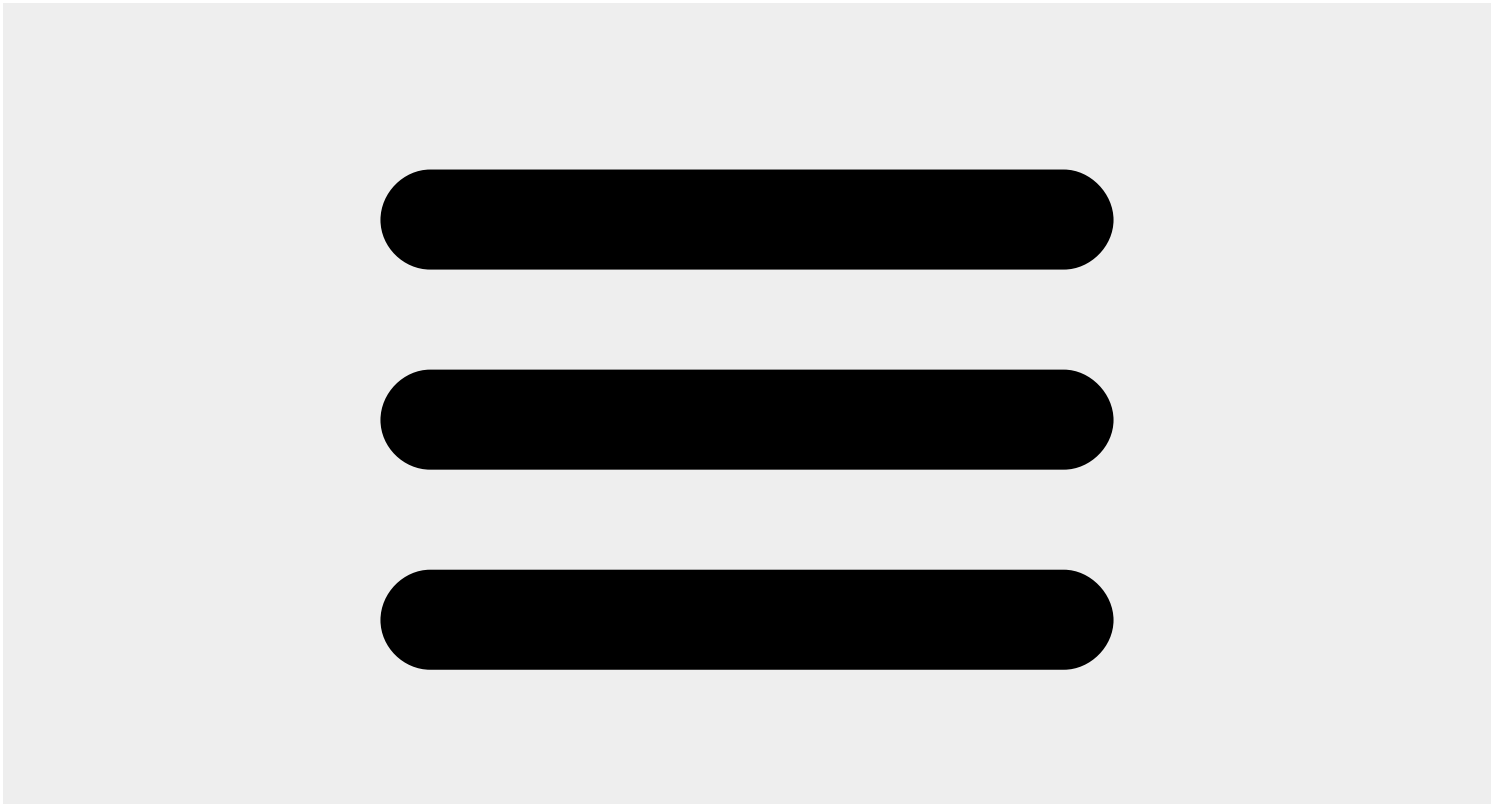
EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES OF CONTROLLING ILLICIT DRUG TRAFFICKING ACROSS THE MEKONG SINCE THE START OF THE PANDEMIC

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Diversification and the change of operations in the trafficking of opium, cannabis and cocaine and the appearance of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) and new psychotropic substances (NPS) continue to support the conclusion that narcotics trafficking is a global, as much as a transnational, crime. In recent years, drug-related crimes have become a debated topic within the scope of healthy, economic, and society and seemingly, as no nations and regions across the world have been immune from these negative influences. At the regional level within Asia, as the spread of the COVID-19 unpredictable transmission has continued to expand, the situation of drug trafficking in the Greater Mekong

Sub-region (GMS) has increased at a complex level.

The Mekong has a Drug Pandemic: A Different Concern

The GMS shares the water resources of over 3,000 miles of the Mekong River and covers the Golden Triangle areas, including Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, reportedly with the top-ranking production of illicit drugs in the world. With the best climate for poppy cultivation that rivals only Afghanistan, this area has been notorious for drug production, consumption, and trafficking since the 1880s when the British colonizers introduced opium cultivation and related production technology (International Crisis Group, 2019; Lintner, 2020). To date, the Mekong River has become a new symbol of unity in a region emerging out of decades of civil wars escalating into regional and global conflicts. With assistance from the Asian Development Bank, the six GMS countries have launched a program in 1992 of sub-regional economic cooperation, a GMS program that aims to transform Asia's last frontier into an integrated free-trade zone. After 30 years of development, the program has promoted regional integration and has further consolidated economic interactions between China and mainland Southeast Asia. Amidst these achievements in regional and economic integration, the GMS has encountered several social challenges ranging from poor infrastructure, high rates of illiteracy, money laundering, migrant smuggling and human trafficking (Luong, 2020a, 2020c). However, the most persistent non-traditional security challenge remains the ATS drug trafficking into China and the rest of Southeast Asia and beyond (Cachia & Lwin, 2019; Coyne, 2019a; Luong, 2020b).



Figure 1: A sack of methamphetamine tables with an estimation of 20 million baht, around US 640,000

(Source: https://thethaiger.com/hot-news/drugs/mekong-drug-bust-20-million-baht-worth-of-methamphetamine-seized)

After more than two decades of research and evaluation by several law enforcement agencies across the GMS, it has been revealed that the drug trafficking and transit routes of the GMS area have been proliferating and dynamic, with most drug traffickers changing routes and tactics to exploit any available vulnerable points along the various borders (Luong, 2019a, 2019b). Many countries of this region have weak and/or difficult to implement border controls where customs services must monitor the heavy volume of people and vehicles crossing certain land boundaries. Most nations in this region have porous, inaccessible, and mountainous areas, some with extensive waterways and coastlines where traffickers have taken advantage to transport illegal drugs and other contraband from one country to the next while using diverse modus operandi. Some external observers thought the COVID-19 pandemic had likely caused travel restrictions and that closed borders might have affected the production and supply of illicit drugs. However, in fact, the statistics of UNODC's regional office in Asia reaffirmed that drug trafficking via the Western Maritime Routes and the

Straits of Malacca has been continuing with increasing trends since the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020 (Salleh, 2020). At the same time, illegal drug consumption has been driving new forms of risk, vulnerability, public health crises, and social conflict that have created an overwhelming set of challenges. Furthermore, the current political instability and chaos in Myanmar have appeared to have resulted in a surge in meth and other synthetic drug production across the Golden Triangle, as several ethnic militias quickly took advantage of the situation to maintain their powers across lawless borderlands following the coup (UNODC, 2021). Accordingly, both drug lords and rebel groups in Myanmar's ungovernable border zones with Laos, Thailand, and China have been seizing large amounts of ATS across the GMS. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic does not reflect the true perspective of the booming drug trade in this region, particularly involving Myanmar, where its conflict-affected borderlands show a high rate of illicit drug trading and the related illicit revenues (UNODC, 2021).

It is obvious that the potential and often proven high profits of the drug trade continue to lure thousands more into this and other criminal enterprises. Recent research from the UNODC calculates that criminals and insurgents in the GMS who coordinate the drug trade are making enormous profits from their operations, with annual income estimated to be $61 billion USD for trafficking ATS. The lucrative nature of the illicit drug trade highlights the significant resources that transnational criminals have at their disposal and to continue to offend with impunity. This highlights the difficult challenge in combatting these crimes and indicates the urgent requirement for regional and transnational cooperation to combat drug trafficking among the GMS countries, even despite the actions of the governments of Southeast Asia and China to enhance narcotics control efforts since 1990s (Coyne, 2019b; Horsey & Douglas, 2020).

Regional Responses to Control the Illegal Drug Trade

On 5th October 2011, when Thai river police investigated reported gunshots on the middle reaches of the Mekong River, they discovered 2 cargo vessels and their 12 Chinese crewmembers, all of whom had been executed and their bodies dumped in the river. Through a joint investigation, including police officials from China and Thailand, it was found that the vessel had been hijacked to transport illicit cargo with more than 920,000 amphetamine tablets. After one decade, stories like this have become commonplace in the notorious GMS. Furthermore, this also affirms that no single country can respond to this challenging situation involving the increasingly sophisticated drug trafficking entities without close international and transnational cooperation (ASEAN-NARCO, 2019; UNODC, 2019).

As a geographical proxy with the Golden Triangle's borderland areas, China has been impacted directly by the devastating scale of drug production, consumption, and trafficking. As a result, Chinese authorities have sought ways to support and develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation with their counterparts in the Lower Mekong areas rather than relying solely on unilateral approaches (Luong, 2019b, 2020b). By establishing a joint memorandum of understanding (MOU) in 1993, these countries have agreed to eradicate opium poppy cultivation through alternative development, reduce the demand for local consumption of narcotics, and focus on eliminating trafficking in narcotic drugs and chemicals used in the production of illicit drugs. Alongside this process, during the period of 1999-2001, China

has also signed separate joint statements and MOUs with Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, declaring their unrestrained intentions to cooperate on drug demand reduction, management of narcotics, alternative development, preventive and rehabilitation programs, technical cooperation, and information sharing. These priorities have been continuing in Operation 1511 throughout the 4-year period (i.e. 2019 to 2022) of the Safe Mekong Operation Plan, particularly in precursor and chemical control and the interception of illicit drug smuggling via land routes and border checkpoints.



Figure 2: Six Ministerial leaders and UNODC representative of the Mekong MOU

(Source: https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/1799089/6-ministerial-leaders-and-unodc-representative-of-the-mekong-mou)

Despite significant efforts during the twenty years since the first ministerial meeting in May 1995 in Beijing until the latest meeting in May 2019 in Bangkok, all of the government parties to the MOU continue to face challenges in stemming the flow of illicit drugs and precursor chemicals in, to and from the GMS, particularly with practical challenges resulting from the increase in illicit cultivation of opium poppy in Myanmar and Laos following a decade of steady declines since 2006.

Yet, booming synthetic drugs, particularly ATS and the emergence of NPS, have emerged as the primary drug threat in the GMS now more than ever. The latest confirmations of UNODC re-affirmed that the COVID-19 did not impact significantly on the trends and patterns of drug trafficking via maritime and land routes in the region (UNODC, 2021). Certainly, official ministerial meetings continue to emphasize closer coordination and consultation at both the highest level and across the working levels of government. They have announced a grand partnership in public awareness, illicit drug control and enforcement, information exchange, personnel training, criminal investigation, and the elimination of illicit drugs and drug chemical production along the Mekong River. However, the measurable effectiveness of the MOU remains questionable, especially as the partner countries have failed to effectively establish a drug-free zone as their rhetoric ambitions have described since 2000s. Besides, the trustworthiness and its mutual assistance among Mekong's countries in sharing intelligence sources are still under criticism and need 'more organized, systematic, and efficient.'

Final Thoughts

Advances and developments in regional integration will create huge benefits and practical advantages to boost economic changes in the GMS, but these changes are also likely to provide opportunities for those who would exploit them for illegal purposes. The increasing ease of transporting illicit narcotics and the improving communication technologies used by criminal groups present a strong challenge to the national LEAs across all GMS countries. The diversity of drug production, consumption, and trafficking discussed above reflects the complexity of this region and neighboring countries. As Jeremy Douglas, UNODC Regional Representative conveyed: "We don't know what's about to happen, but we all know it's not going to be good. We don't know how many drugs are coming, but they're going to come."The UNODC is also calling for further actions in an all-in-one framework among supply-and-demand-and-harm reduction plans, rather than only focusing on combating drug trafficking in the GMS. It is obvious that a multinational and multifaceted approach will likely lead to the most successful deterrence results.

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