

Impact of Golden Arc and Death Triangle on India

Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary	1
II. Introduction	1
A. Golden Crescent	2
B. Death Triangle	4
III. Global Impact of Drug Trafficking	5
IV. Menace of Drug Trafficking	5
A. Social and health impacts	5
B. Proliferation of the darknet market	5
C. Increase in crime and terrorism	6
D. Threat to national security	6
V. Why 'India'?	6
A. Two-way trafficking	7
B. Suitable geographical location	7
C. Strong backing	8
D. Weak security	8
E. Darknet	8
VI. Impact on India	8
A. Adverse effects on the health of consumers	8
B. Social impact	9
C. Threat to national security	9
D. Economic impact	9
VII. India's Approach towards Drug Trafficking	10
VIII. Recommendations	10
IX. Conclusion	11
X. References	12

I. Executive Summary

The Golden Crescent and the Death Triangle—the two have become extremely significant to India, with a focus on the very intricate dynamics of drug trafficking and far-reaching consequences. The Golden Crescent comprises Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, and the Death Triangle concerning Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos— all are major centres of production and narcotics distribution. The immediate challenges of this phenomenon for the nation are increasing addiction cases, public health crises, and organised crime, as 70% of contraband drugs enter India through maritime routes¹. The paper highlights historical trends, current policy responses, and socio-economic and security implications of drug trafficking in India. Based on a thorough analysis, it underscores the need for greater regional cooperation and multifaceted strategies toward addressing the growing menace of drug-related issues. Ultimately, this research serves value in informing the policymakers and stakeholders about the critical interplay between these regions and India, emphasising collaborative efforts that may further stability and improve public health outcomes.

Keywords: *Golden Crescent, Golden Triangle, Drug Trafficking*

II. Introduction

‘Drug Trafficking’ has emerged as the new evil of the 21st century. It encompasses the production, distribution, and sale of substances that are otherwise prohibited as per law.² 70% of the total contraband drugs that illegally enter India reach the country through sea routes in the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal³. The Golden Crescent mainly consists of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, a notorious hub for opium production. Meanwhile, there is the Death Triangle, which has been formed by Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, which is a critical route for narcotics distribution. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime World Drug Report, 2024⁴, it was observed that India is one of the world’s leading opiate markets in terms of users. This paper therefore examines the huge impact these regions have on India, i.e., the economic, social, and security implications.

India, of course, is a neighbour to high-risk countries like Pakistan, Myanmar and Afghanistan, and, as such, it has had to face the shadow drug economy’s many problems—escalating addiction rates, public health crises, and violent, organised crime. The flow of narcotics puts pressure on individual lives but also on public health services and law enforcement efforts. The political consequences of drug trafficking can destabilise communities and create challenges for governance.

This study aims to illuminate the complexities of such a scenario using historical trends, current policy responses, and ill effects of the drug network among these regions. A critical understanding of the impact of the Golden Crescent and Death Triangle is crucial for devising effective prevention strategies to fight drug-related problems in India and for regional cooperation for improved security and stability.

¹ [NCB Annual Report, 2022](#)

² [UNODC](#)

³ [NCB Annual Report, 2022 \(Page 9\)](#)

⁴ [World Drug Report, 2024](#)



Image 1: Southern Route (including ‘Eastern’ Southern Route off the Indian coast) and Trafficking Areas⁵

A. Golden Crescent



Image 2: Geographical Representation of Golden Crescent⁶

The Golden Crescent is approximately 0.15 crores km², embracing mountainous Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran regions. Traditionally, it was associated with conflict and instability, especially since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which further empowered the drug trade as a source of funding for resistance groups. Strategically located, this region has played a pivotal role in the world’s geopolitics, between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. There are numerous clandestine

⁵ [Southern route and trafficking areas](#)

⁶ [Golden Crescent](#)

labs in the Golden Crescent countries that process opium into morphine and heroin. The primary trafficking routes include the Balkan route through Iran to Europe, the northern route to Russia, and the southern route to South Asia and beyond. The production of opiates in the Golden Crescent has grown by leaps and bounds since the 1980s. Afghanistan is the epicentre of opium growing, and its share in the world's illicit opium production is high, affected by internal strife and foreign interventions, thereby contributing to the instability that fosters drug production. This led to rampant drug trafficking, funding insurgent groups, and, as an effect, created violence and lawlessness. These fluctuations raise security concerns for the neighbouring countries, facing the spillover impact of drug-related crime and terrorism.



Image 3: Northern, Balkan and Southern Routes of Trafficking⁷

Economically, the trade provides livelihoods for many in impoverished areas but simultaneously fuels corruption, violence, and social instability to the detriment of legitimate economies. It cuts across critical trade routes and energy corridors, influencing relations among regional powers and beyond. For instance, countries like Russia, China, or the U.S. have a vested interest in maintaining stability in such a region while pursuing strategies that impact the drug trade and security. The interplay between drugs and other violent crimes also has major implications for governance and state authority within these states, complicating broader international efforts to address narcotics and regional stability.

⁷ [The Northern, Balkan and Southern Routes of Trafficking](#)

B. Death Triangle



Image 4: Geographical Representation of Death Triangle⁸

The Golden Triangle is a region that covers the areas of Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Laos, which meet at the confluence of the Mekong River and Ruak River. “It is a stunning part of South-East Asia, but its beauty belies a dark underbelly.”⁹ It is renowned for being the second-largest opium producer in the world after Afghanistan. These South Asian countries are the production bed for a quarter of the world’s total opium produce, of which 90% is produced by Myanmar alone¹⁰; Thailand and Laos, are responsible for the distribution of these drugs

To combat drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle, joint patrols are conducted regularly to counter trafficking. The opium trade has declined marginally, but the cross-border movement of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine, has grown substantially.

Today, methamphetamine production and trafficking serve as the financial lifeline of global organised crime and their ethnic armed allies who collude in the efforts to gain control over Myanmar’s de facto state territories, fuelling the country’s conflicts and along the entire border, including into Thailand. This is primarily because the Golden Triangle’s rural, mountainous landscape is poorly patrolled and largely governed by armed rebel groups. As a result, the Government responds with its military to the area. However, members of state-backed militias frequently traffic drugs themselves and enjoy immunity from prosecution.

⁸ [Death Triangle](#)

⁹ [ABC News, December 2021](#)

¹⁰ In 2023, the resulting estimate of potential dry opium production in Myanmar was 1,080 mt, the highest since 2001 (1,100 tons of opium were estimated that year). This represents a substantial increase of 36% compared with the 2022 estimate.

The core market for supplies from the Golden Triangle includes South Korea, China, India, the Philippines, the USA, Mexico, New Zealand, and many other states.

III. Global Impact of Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking has taken a significant toll on human life all around the globe. To understand the depth of the ill effects caused by the illicit drug trade, let us first understand the underlying cause behind it. What has made these hidden powers establish control over the rest of the world? Some of the major factors are:

A. Economically rewarding

There is a huge demand for drugs in the global market due to various reasons, such as addiction, coping mechanisms, easy accessibility, social norms, and recreational purposes. Many unsocial elements see this as an opportunity to seek illegal financial gains. This is further supported by advanced technologies that make coordination possible for traffickers around the globe.

B. Weak law enforcement and growing corruption

As seen in the case of Myanmar and Afghanistan, inadequate monitoring and under-the-table support furthers the drug trafficking network. The legal framework of many nations is weakly designed and fails to capture and deter this act fully. Collusion between the administration and the hidden powers deepens this dark economy in the long run, thus dismantling public trust.

C. Geographical factors

The topographic conditions of certain regions are well-suited for the cultivation of drugs. The locals thus try to extract maximum benefit from this boon and further their careers in this direction. Moreover, countries all over the globe are connected through porous international borders that make it difficult to control the inflow of drugs. Smuggling through waterways is not a new affair for us; it has been taking place since time immemorial.

IV. Menace of Drug Trafficking

A. Social and health impacts

The social implications of drug trafficking are quite detrimental to a developing society. It creates an atmosphere of fear and violence because rival gangs and traffickers fight to acquire territory and market share, with the consequence being a high rate of crime and insecurity in the community. Instability breaks the family structures, where in many cases, children often grow up in an atmosphere of trauma and neglect. Healthwise, the intake of drugs results in increased instances of addiction, which calls for greater pressure on public health systems and services. The cycle affects individuals, families, and communities, and poverty and unemployment cases become more frequent. The consequences of drug trafficking are intertwined with well-being and public health, creating dangerous challenges that require comprehensive responses.

B. Proliferation of the darknet market

Broadly, the proliferation of the darknet market has been driven by drug trafficking, where illegal transactions may be safely carried out, thereby providing traffickers with an anonymous avenue through which they can operate, buy, and sell drugs without having to meet face-to-face, using cryptocurrencies and encrypted communication. The ease and anonymity of the appeal factors have increased the number of users, with many young adults being more technically adept and willing to experiment with these options. The darknet, as a result, has expanded the available market for drugs, bringing in a broader array of drugs than ever, within reach. This complicates law enforcement tasks but also brings about serious public health challenges in that most users are unaware of the quality and potency of drugs they use, which increases the risks of addiction and overdose. Therefore, the drug trafficking-darknet nexus puts an element of grave necessity over the invention of comprehensive strategies that atone to this new area of substance abuse within society.

C. Increase in crime and terrorism

The nexus between the trafficking of drugs and a rise in crime and terrorism is a growing cause of concern. Drug cartels and trafficker organisations aim to expand their influence over profitable markets by force and violence, which leads to more criminal activity, including homicides, kidnappings, and extortion. Such lawlessness disrupts community harmony, which burdens the law enforcement apparatus. The second is that drug trafficking can support the financing of terrorist operations. Such a symbiotic relationship between drug trafficking and organised crime or terrorism increases insecurity, weakens governance, impedes economic development, and creates a vicious cycle that is hard to break.

D. Threat to national security

Drug trafficking presents a serious threat to national security because it affects not only social stability but also public safety. The illegal drug trade often promotes organised crime, which leads to violence, corruption, and weakened governance. Traffickers frequently affiliate with other criminal organisations that are an affront to state authority, creating an atmosphere of fear and lawlessness. Such illegal revenues often further feed into other criminal activities, because some groups use drug money to sustain their operations and expand their influence. This ploughs resources away from necessary services and complicates law enforcement as agencies are frantically trying to deal with such a well-funded and entrenched network.

V. Why 'India'?

India's strategic geographical location in Asia, with a prime focus on proximity to the great Indian Ocean and its ever-growing demand, makes it a key player in the drug trafficking cycle all across the globe. In the words of Alfred Thayer Mahan, ex-US Naval Admiral and historian, "*Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia.*". Being sandwiched between the two most notorious drug-producing regions, the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle, India has become a hub of illicit drug trade. This kind of illegal drug trade generates money that is used to finance terror activities on Indian soil.

A. Two-way trafficking

Drug trafficking is being carried out in two ways: narcotic drugs, a major proportion of opiates come to India from various countries, whereas various other psychotropic drugs, pharmaceuticals like lorazepam, nitrazepam, phentermine, diazepam, zolpidem, etc. and precursor chemicals like acetic anhydride, ephedrine, etc are illegally exported from India to the rest of the world. Ephedrine, pseudoephedrine, corex, buprenorphine, etc. are illegally exported from India to Myanmar. In contrast, cough syrup, in which codeine is the principal component, is exported from India to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. Similar to the western parts of India, drugs are trafficked by air, land, and sea routes. Illicit cultivation of cannabis is carried out in various states of India, among which the Malana cream that is produced in the Valley of Malana of Himachal Pradesh, is well known due to its hallucinogenic effects, which have increased its demand among drug peddlers and tourists visiting nearby attractions and has come to focus recently. The border of India and Pakistan is a prominent route for the illegal trafficking of heroin and charas in India.

B. Suitable geographical location

Long frontiers with Pakistan, Nepal, and Myanmar are both extensive and porous, which serves to facilitate the covert trafficking of drugs. Access to the great Indian Ocean provides an edge to India for sea trade. Its long coastline along the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal offers a crucial conduit for maritime smuggling. According to Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) reports, drug trafficking through sea routes in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal accounts for around 70% of the total illegal drugs smuggled in India. Its quite diversified terrain, the mountains and dense forests, provides cover to the traffickers and already established smuggling networks further compounding the problem of law enforcement. Factors that make India a major hub for illicit drug trade are a crumbling import and export economy coupled with fast-growing domestic demand for drugs.



Image 5: India's Proximity to the Golden Crescent & Death Triangle¹¹

¹¹ [NCB Annual Report, 2023](#)

C. Strong backing

Radical militants in the North Eastern Region and Jammu and Kashmir, at different times, have had big-time drug syndicates as their sponsors. In the North Eastern region, small militant groups often engage in drug smuggling to amass some quick money. The big militant organisations instead demand huge protection money from the drug traffickers to safely smuggle their consignments through secret tunnels and ways, fooling the security forces.

D. Weak security

The India-Myanmar border is weak in terms of security; apart from that, because of a bilateral agreement reached between the two governments of India and Myanmar, there is a Free Movement Regime, which ensures that Indian citizens, as well as citizens of Myanmar, can travel visa-free in the vicinity of 16 km of the borderline, thereby helping people on both sides of the boundary to move easily through the boundary. Smugglers take advantage of this provision and are further supported by densely wooded areas, allowing them to go about their unobserved business. The various tribes that inhabit the area, along with the rest of the local population, commit crimes mainly due to sympathy and compassion towards the deep and widespread poverty, massive unemployment, and illiteracy prevalent in the North Eastern regions.

E. Darknet

The spread of the dark net has further complicated the scenario of drug trading in India. Consumption of drugs has a detrimental effect on the consumer. Anonymity and low risk for online transactions make illegal drug trade easy through the darknet, as a majority of darknet activities are connected to this market. Users are increasingly shifting to services like cryptocurrency payments and doorstep delivery through courier services, making such propositions more attractive than traditional drug markets.

VI. Impact on India

India is a developing country, and leakages into such things take a heavy toll on the economy. Drug trafficking not only diverts individuals' funds from resourceful domains but also hampers the quality of human capital by degrading their potential to work.

Here are some other ways in which the Golden Arc and Death Triangle impact the country:

A. Adverse effects on the health of consumers

In recent times, Punjab has become the prime focus state while talking about the drug menace. Around 40% of the youth (15-25 years old) are entrapped; 48% of labourers and farmers have become addicted to regular and frequent drug consumption.¹² Drugs discussed in the previous sections have serious effects on the consumer's nervous system, slowing it down for a couple of hours and even leading to cognitive decline and major organ failure if consumed in huge quantities regularly. Individuals who face serious health problems afterwards require medical assistance. Given India's healthcare infrastructure,

¹² [Sharma, B., Arora, A., Singh, K., Singh, H., & Kaur, P. \(2017\). Drug abuse: Uncovering the burden in rural Punjab. Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care](#)

having a population that is forced into deteriorating health conditions would add an extra burden on the already overburdened healthcare system. The status of unemployment and poverty in the country also discourages a major proportion of drug consumers from seeking medical help. Although there is a cure for drug addiction, there is no cure for the damage it causes due to the reduced working efficiency of individuals. Another critical issue is that drug consumers also act as HIV carriers in the population. If not taken care of immediately, a single carrier can affect an entire community.

B. Social impact

Drug trafficking not only trickles down its detrimental effects to an individual's level but also affects society as a whole. In a survey conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, it was revealed that the intake level of drugs in India increased from the last survey carried out in 2004¹³. Narcotics proliferation has been responsible for an increased rate of addiction cases, mainly among the youth, causing various health diseases and putting pressure on the public health system. Once addicted, it breaks families apart with members undergoing economic hardships and social disintegration. Children living in such environments often suffer from mental trauma. Also, narcotics trafficking feeds on crime and violence, while gangs and militant groups fight for control of the lucrative market, causing deterioration in community safety and stability. Stigmatisation and criminalisation further marginalize affected individuals, which would yet again compromise the ability of victims to seek help and reintegrate into society.

C. Threat to national security

Proximity to important drug-producing regions makes it easy to have narcotics supplied regularly into India, further fuelling organised crime and violence. Besides drugs, there is constant smuggling of illegal weapons and black money into the country, further posing a grave risk to the internal security of the nation. Other regions, such as Jammu and Kashmir and parts of the North East often use the proceeds from drug trafficking to finance their other nefarious activities that directly affect national security. Narco-terrorism gangs are a potential source of violence against each other as well as among innocent civilians. The aftermath would be a fertile ground for the seeds of fear and lawlessness to germinate at the cost of public safety. Punjab and Himachal Pradesh contribute most to India's opioid crisis, while Gujarat has now taken the third worst place in heroin overdose deaths. Recently, approximately 3000 kgs of drugs were seized at Mundra port of Gujarat.

D. Economic impact

The financial implications of the Golden Crescent and Death Triangle drug trafficking in India are very complex. First, the illicit drug trade causes significant financial loss due to increased security costs (police force, law enforcement systems, etc.) and health expenditures associated with addiction and illness. Further, drug trafficking will discourage legitimate business activities and also deter foreign investment, since crime and corruption may create an unstable business environment.

The drug trade is said to raise substantial amounts of money for traffickers that can be invested in funds for organised crime and terrorism, thus destabilising local economies even further. In those regions

¹³ [MoSJE Report, 2019](#)

most affected by drug trafficking, like Punjab or the North East, agricultural and employment opportunities may decline as communities get entangled in the drug trade. Since legitimate economic opportunities are absent, the economy is instead channelled toward other illegal modes of earnings. It only perpetuates poverty and retards economic development, therefore becoming a long-term burden to the economy of the nation.

VII. India's Approach towards Drug Trafficking

India's policy approach towards dealing with issues of drugs involves a triad of supply reduction, demand reduction, and harm reduction anchored in its constitution as well as various international agreements.

- A. After the UN Convention of 1971 on Psychotropic Substances, **the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare formed an Expert Committee that resulted in the launching of the Drug De-addiction Programme in 1985**, which was largely for demand reduction. At the same time, the **Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act** was enacted to counter drug abuse and trafficking, with a special focus on supply reduction. The NDPS Act has been amended from time to time. This led to the formation of a consultative committee that paved the way for the emergence of a national policy regarding control over drug abuse, actively involving key partners from different ministries.
- B. Over the years, the government has expanded treatment and rehabilitation services significantly. **Integrated Rehabilitation Centres for Addicts** and drug treatment centres have been established within general hospitals; outpatient care is being provided free of charge.
- C. **Harm reduction was introduced in 2005 through opioid substitution therapy**, or OST, which was initially supported by the Department for International Development and later by the Ministry of Health, with **lowering adult incidence of HIV among drug users**. Though much has been done, OST and other services must be expanded further; new psychoactive substances, along with treatment gaps remain as agents of stressors in the system. Further, the **Mental Health Care Act of 2017** has strengthened the legal framework by recognising alcohol and drug use disorders with enhanced rights and access to care. Though India has a well-developed framework for addressing drug abuse, continuous efforts are necessary to improve accessibility, inter-agency coordination, as well as the quality of care.

VIII. Recommendations

A. Need to strengthen coastal border security

India's extensive coastline must be equipped with cutting-edge narcotics detection apparatus such as advanced radar systems, satellite monitoring and automatic identification systems. The coast guards should practice underwater patrolling using 'Offshore Patrol Vessels' more frequently in strategic hotspots to track any suspicious activity in real time. The authorities should also engage local fishermen communities to get insider information.

B. Multilateral approach with the support of international collaborations

We should engage in active coordination and cooperation among the nations of the Indian subcontinent. This approach focuses on developing robust collaborations with neighbouring countries. We can also set up 'Joint Task Forces' and multilateral maritime security cooperation with nations and formulate joint plans of action against traffickers.

C. Raising awareness among potential victims of constraint demand

The Government of India must launch nationwide anti-drug campaigns on social media platforms. They can also impart training to localities in the coastal region (under the Coastal Security Scheme) to identify and report illicit trafficking of drugs. Anti-drug sentiments should also be inculcated in the curriculum of growing teenagers in schools and colleges.

D. Regulatory measures to constrain supply

The Government must tighten the regulations about the distribution and delivery of chemical substances and pharmaceuticals so that the unauthorised use of drugs can be prevented in the future. Regular uninformed audits must be conducted for imported chemical supplies. The teams deployed for the same must work in rotation to minimise the chances of corruption. Border security concerning imported trade transits must be dealt with cautiously.

E. Adoption of intelligent tracking systems

We can also take help from modern technology such as drones and biometrics to track the chain and catch hold of the illegal distributors. We can also track crop cultivation hotspots and other channels through the same. All shipments should be screened before and after crossing state borders, airways, and, most importantly, waterways. We can integrate AI into smart surveillance systems to locate the transit points and common routes. Cybersecurity cells can also collaborate with the concerned authorities to track online transactions and crypto payments that are made in return for the delivery of illegal drugs.

F. Increasing the magnitude of rehabilitation programs

Drug rehabilitation centres can be made accessible within the proximity of 5 km of every major district in the country, with a special focus on regions with high trafficking records in the past. Personal and community counselling can prove instrumental in preventing relapse conditions and reintegrating the individual back into contemporary society. The Government can collaborate with NGOs and other Non-Profit Organisations to reach the grassroots level and provide support to the affected individuals.

IX. Conclusion

In short, the Golden Crescent and the Death Triangle constitute a complex relationship between India's socio-economic fabric, public health landscape, and security scenario. While the increased flow of drugs from these regions fuels addiction and health crises, organised crime and violence escalate, thereby increasing tolls on enforcement and public health forces. It can destabilise communities and complicate governance.

This paper calls for a multidimensional approach to fighting against these drug-trafficking challenges. So, effective policy responses should include improved regional cooperation in the border areas, measures to hinder the demand and supply of drugs, backing security systems with modern technology and reiteration of mass sensitization and rehabilitation programs. By engaging in collaborative efforts amongst all stakeholders within affected regions, India can reduce the adverse impacts of this international problem and strive towards a safer and more stable future. A collective endeavour is necessary not only for securing the nation but also for long-term regional security and stability.

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