Afghan Drug Trail & the Indian Drug Syndicates

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Abstract

Recurrent arrests of Indian drug smugglers and Afghan nationals have brought renewed focus on the increase in smuggling of heroin from Afghanistan into India. The nefarious trade has not only grown in sophistication, but could be paving way for direct linkages between India’s own drug lords and compatriots in Afghanistan. Orders placed from India are getting delivered through a variety of means using sea, air, and land routes that crisscross different continents. Efforts of Indian law enforcement agencies need to be innovative and more importantly, supplemented by a regional cooperative mechanism to control this illegal trade.

New Models of Nexus

On 25 July, a special cell of Delhi Police arrested 35-year-old Tifal Nau Khez, an alleged drug lord along with an Afghan national Ahmad Shah Alokozai with 130 kilograms of heroin from Navi Mumbai in Maharashtra state. The drug, soaked and dried on 260 jute bags, originated from Herat in Afghanistan, travelled in a container to Bandar Abbas in Iran, before taking the sea route to Mumbai. In addition to the drug seizure, arrest of Tifal Nau Khez, described by the police as the kingpin of the drug network in the national capital, brought to light the relatively little-known world of drug smuggling and organized crime in Indian urban centres. This special report, based on monitoring of incidents of drug seizures in India over the past one year, attempts to unravel the modus operandi of some of these Indian drug syndicates and their links with Afghanistan.

Three models of nexus between the Indian and Afghan drug syndicates have emerged in recent times. The first model consists of Afghan drug lords and smugglers operating through their Indian contacts. Drugs reach India through Pakistan or travel the longer route through Iran or Africa before reaching India. The second model consists of Afghan drug lords using multiple Afghan carriers to smuggle drugs to their Indian counterparts. Unlike the first model, here Afghans as well as African carriers are involved. And in the third model, the Indian syndicates reach out to their Afghan contacts to import drugs. The latter use a variety of means and routes to deliver the consignments.

Afghan Drug Lords and Smugglers

In spite of years of international counter-narcotics efforts, the smuggling networks in Afghanistan remain functional and complex. Deeply rooted in the nation’s tribal societal structure, drug lords and smugglers in Afghanistan have operated through contacts which include Afghan expats in various countries. For instance, deals are struck during Haj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. The smuggling network manages to seamlessly export tonnes of opium across the national borders ‘plugging into the Turkish, Iranian, Pakistani and Russian gangs that refine the drug into heroin for sale in Europe’.

Media reports in the past have pointed at some of the techniques that the drug lords employ to move narcotics. From the southern province of Helmand, for instance, ‘at night high-speed convoys laden with narcotics move across the desert towards the border with Pakistan. The frontier is effectively controlled by the Baloch tribe which has long experience of smuggling. From the unmanned border, a part of the contraband is moved to Karachi or Makran, a coastal strip along Balochistan’s Arabian seacoast. Another part moves west by road into Iran.’

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3 Ibid.
Drug lords of Afghanistan are known to maintain distribution offices within Pakistan, run by cartel bosses. The latter, in symbiotic relations with the law enforcement agencies, could have been responsible for smuggling of 150 tonnes of Afghan drug, according to an estimate in 2015. From Karachi and Makran, drugs were boarded on boats and shipping vessels and sent to the high seas, where it was picked up by the syndicates of different countries. The cartels in Pakistan, according to the UN, made a whooping US$1.2 billion by simply transshipping the contraband to different parts of the world. Among the recipients of these narcotics, mostly consisting of heroin, is India.

In the recent years, as India’s ability to disrupt largescale smuggling has improved. Several seizures have taken place either on the high seas or when drug carrying vessels enter the Indian waters. To counter this, smugglers have attempted to tap into the hundreds of Afghans who travel by air to India on a daily basis. The strategy is shifting from attempting to smuggle huge consignments at one go, to transporting relatively small quantities on a recurrent basis. The quantum of loss, in case of an arrest, is minimal.

Afghan Carriers and Indian distributors

A modified version of the earlier strategy is to use of Afghan nationals coming to India on medial visa or those with residence permit in India by the Afghan drug lords. These men, usually from poor families, are lured by a promise of money and are asked to swallow pills containing fine quality heroin of 15 to 20 grams each. They are asked not to eat or drink anything till they reach India. Once they pass through the security check and reach their destination, they excrete these pills and hand them over to designated persons who could be Indians or even African nationals. In March 2019, three Afghans were arrested for being part of such a network. Each of them had swallowed about 15 to 20 capsules. In the same month, four more Afghans were arrested after their arrival from Kabul at Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi. They had swallowed capsules containing a net weight of 920 grams of heroin which were extracted in a hospital. On 2 August, another Afghan, 30-year-old Mohammadi Roohullah, was arrested from the Lajpat Nagar area of New Delhi with 2.97 kilograms of heroin. Roohullah revealed that few months back in Afghanistan he had met two smugglers who promised him US$2000 to smuggle heroin to India by swallowing them. Roohullah had been instructed to wait for unknown persons to collect these capsules from his residence in Delhi.

People like Roohullah are also coerced to peddle the capsules to meet their medical expenses. On 24 July 2018, a 36-year-old Afghan national Mohammad Nadir Khadim was arrested in New Delhi with two kilograms of heroin. Khadim was on his third visit to India for Hepatitis B treatment. He told his investigators that he was lured into a trade by a fellow Afghan named Mustafa, who is a resident of New Delhi’s Lajpat Nagar area.

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In addition to Afghans, other arrests in New Delhi have indicated that Afghanistan-based Nigerians and their South African connections could be involved in bringing heroin capsules into India. While small quantities are mostly swallowed by these carriers, bigger quantities are often carried in concealed packets or camouflaged baggage. On 17 August 2019, a South African woman was arrested at the Indira Gandhi International Airport with nearly five kilograms of heroin. She had reached New Delhi from South Africa via Qatar.9

Indian Drug Lords & Organized Crime Groups

Although drug smuggling from Afghanistan and Southeast Asia has a long history in India, involving several Mumbai-based organized crime groups, the epicenter of such operations appears to be shifting gradually towards the national capital. In this context, arrest of Tifal Nau Khez represents a relatively new phenomenon of an Indian national attempting to run a narcotic empire by establishing contacts with the Afghan drug syndicates. Khez hails from Bulandsahar in the state of Uttar Pradesh. He lacks formal education. Working as an auto driver, in 2013, he was arrested in Punjab for possessing 250 grams of heroin and served a prison term in Amritsar. During his stay in jail, he not only established contacts with other criminals, but seems to have picked up the finer points of smuggling drugs. After his release, Khez got in touch with Afghan nationals staying in Delhi asking for heroin capsules. An Afghan reportedly offered him few capsules to sell. The small business grew phenomenally over time leading to his direct contact with an Afghan drug lord, identified by his pseudo name Haji.

Afghan national Ahmad Shah Alokozai, who was arrested along with Khez is a wholesale dry fruit importer, who has been living in Delhi for the past few years. The dry fruit consignments he received from Afghanistan, through Iran, contained heroin. He, the police believe, has also used his business to set up a network of dry fruit dealers in the city, who were involved in the distribution of drugs. Under Khez’s directions, reconstituted heroin was being delivered to distributors in Punjab.

Khez’s arrest may have provided a setback to similar aspirations of individuals involved in the trade. But the trend of consolidation of a smuggling network that has connections across several countries is apparent. Unless controlled, from here it can only grow in sophistication.

Afghan Dry Fruits, Spices, and Jute Bags

On 23 July, two Afghan nationals were arrested in New Delhi and 50 kilograms of heroin was recovered from them. Hailing from Kandahar and Helmand provinces in Afghanistan, they had smuggled drugs into the country via the Attari-Wagah border between India and Pakistan. Drugs were concealed inside dry fruit cartons which had been imported.10

The difficulty in bringing in processed heroin into the country has constrained the smugglers to attempt setting up chemical reconstitution factories in India in recent times. The term ‘factory’, however, is a bit of a misnomer. These units are meant to be non-descript small facilities, operating out of apartments in busy residential areas. Khez had bought an apartment in New Delhi’s Zakir Nagar area where he had set up a similar ‘factory’.

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The modus operandi of smuggling heroin in this manner is complex. In Afghanistan, jute bags, used to export dry fruits and spices like cumin to India, are soaked in liquid heroin and dried. After the consignment reaches India, the imported products are removed and the jute bags are kept aside. Subsequently, these bags are collected by a group of men from various traders, who bring them to these ‘factories’ for processing. Each processed bag can yield approximately a kilogram of high-quality heroin.

Since Indians are yet to master the trade of reconstituting heroin from jute bags, they are seeking the help of Afghan nationals with experience to teach them the technique. In July, five members of an international drug cartel including two Afghans were arrested along with 150 kilograms of heroin in Delhi. The arrested Afghans- 30-year-old Shinwari Rehmat Gul and 31-year-old Akhtar Mohammad Shinwari-- tuned out to be chemical experts who were attempting to set up a reconstitution ‘factory’ in Delhi. Gul had experience of working in a drug processing unit in Afghanistan and had been sent to India by the Afghan syndicate to handle operations of this newly-established unit. The Indian partners were in charge of the distribution network.

Breaking the Nexus

While the involvement of Afghan nationals in the drug smuggling especially heroin into India remains small, the new trends are worrisome. According to a Statement of Hansraj Gangaram Ahir, Minister of State for Home Affairs in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Indian Parliament) on 28 March 2018, “99 percent of the 127180 persons arrested” in drug related cases between 2015-2017 are Indian nationals. This, however, points at the consolidation of the drug syndicates in India, with Indian mafia, smugglers, and agents seeking to find ways to smuggle narcotics. Arrests and busts do provide a setback, but do not deter the people in the trade from innovating and expanding their trade to cater to the growing demand. Police and drug enforcement agencies, who struggle to control the trade that is growing in sophistication exploiting the anonymity provided by India’s bourgeoning metropolises, underline the importance of better human intelligence (HUMINT) and other counter narcotic mechanisms. Since the menace involves and affects other countries in the region, a regional mechanism for cooperation through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) could be useful to supplement their efforts in breaking the growing nexus.

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