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The Afghanistan-India Drug Trail



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Abstract

Proximity to the Golden Crescent, steady rise in domestic demand, and the thriving illicit networks' ability to exploit the ungoverned spaces and porous borders are among the factors that are making India a new destination of drugs from Afghanistan. The contraband is entering India both through land as well as the maritime route. In this 'nexus' that has led to the growth of the drug trade, organized criminal networks, smugglers, local policemen, and politicians are tied in a symbiotic relationship. The situation may have improved marginally, according to the claims of the Indian authorities. However, to curb the growing trade and to break the 'unholy nexus' that sustains it, a regional counter-narcotics strategy combined with beefing up domestic laws and law enforcement capacities would be necessary.

Introduction

India's geographical proximity with the 'Golden Crescent'- the area comprising Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, which is infamous for illicit production as well as transnational smuggling of drugs, is often cited as the reason for the rise in the drug trade that uses India as both a destination of narcotics as well as a transit point. According to the 2018 annual report of the International Narcotics Control board (INCB), India is rising as one of the major hubs for illicit drug trade.¹ The Trump administration has put India along with its other South Asian neighbours among the list of 21 countries that are major drug producing or transit nations.² However, over the years, even as the Afghan drug production has shown a marginal decrease, the drug cartels, organized criminals, smugglers, and peddlers across several countries have innovated in several ways to increase the consumer base in India. The 'nexus' with the law enforcement agencies and politicians has facilitated the trade, whereas lax counter-narcotics strategies have thwarted state efforts to curb it.

The 'Narco Economy' of Afghanistan

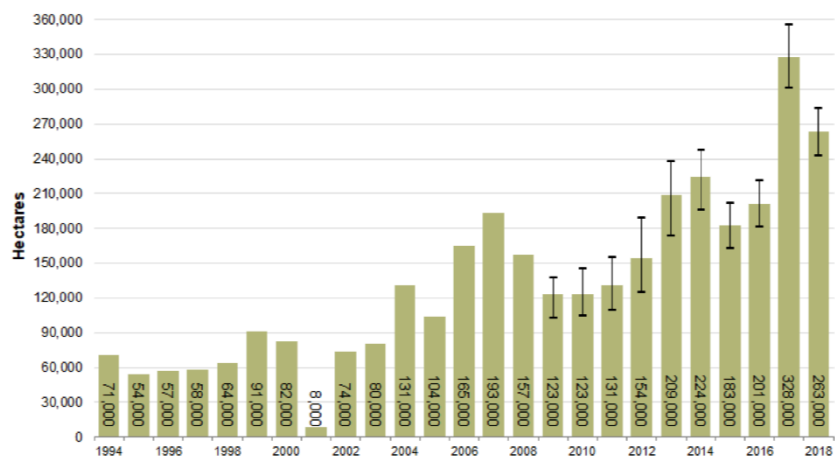
In November 2018, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime reported a 20 percent decrease in the total area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan compared to 2017. The potential production of opium decreased by 29 percent in 2018 compared to 2017, while farm-gate prices hit an all-time low.³

¹ Kshitij Bhargava, "The Chitta economy: How the business of drugs works in Punjab", *Economic Times*, 1 September 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/et-explains/the-chitta-economy-how-the-business-of-drugs-works-in-punjab/articleshow/65634397.cms>. Accessed on 29 July 2019.

² "Trump identifies India among 21 major illicit drug producing, transit countries", *Business Today*, 12 September 2018, <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/world/trump-identifies-india-among-21-major-illicit-drug-producing-transit-countries/story/282270.html>. Accessed on 31 July 2019.

³ UNODC, *Sharp drops in opium poppy cultivation, price of dry opium in Afghanistan, latest UNODC survey reveals*, November 2018, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2018/November/sharp-drops-in-opium-poppy-cultivation--price-of-dry-opium-in-afghanistan--latest-unodc-survey-reveals.html>. Accessed on 28 July 2019.

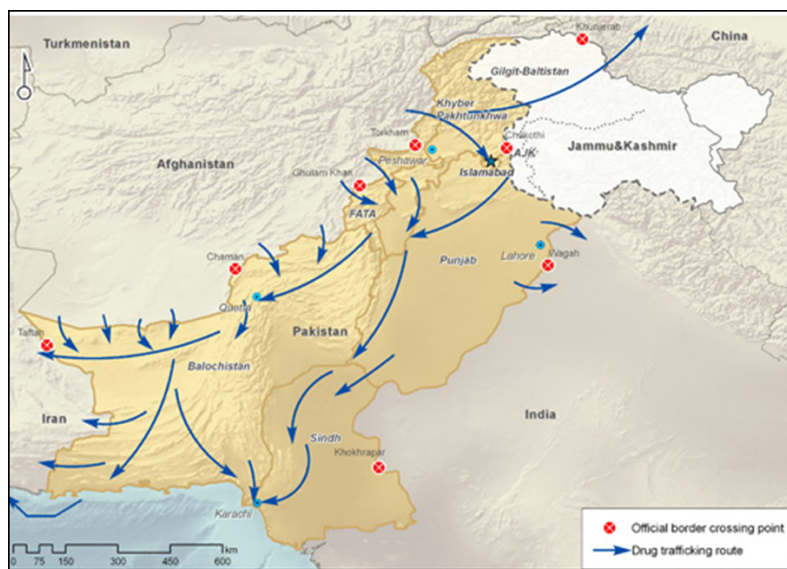
Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, 1994-2018 (Hectares)



(Source: UNODC, November 2018)

The decreases, in the northern and western regions of the country, were mostly attributed to the severe drought that affected Afghanistan. The intensity of the problem, however, continues to be grave, due to the sheer expanse of the land in which such cultivation is still carried out. The area under opium poppy cultivation in 2018 was 263,000 hectares compared to 328,000 hectares in 2017. The drug economy in 2018 is estimated to be US\$60 million⁴, which feeds generously the ongoing Taliban-led insurgency and a host of other players, including organized criminals, smugglers and terrorist groups.

The Land Route: Pakistan



(Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Drug Route, Source: UNODC, 2015)

⁴ The potential opium production was at around 6,400 tons in 2018 and the farm-gate prices of dry opium, is an average of US\$ 94 per kilogram. Ibid.

On 28 July 2019, Indian Customs department seized 532 kilograms of heroin at the Attari Integrated Check Post on the Indo-Pakistan border. The heroin was concealed in 15 gunny bags of a rock salt consignment that was coming from Pakistan. The authorities described the seizure as “the biggest achievement in the annals of the Indian Customs history”⁵. Pakistan acts as an important trans-shipment point in the illicit drug trade from Afghanistan into India. Whereas several entry points exist on the Pakistan and Afghanistan border depending largely upon the source of narcotics within Afghanistan, most of the illicit heroin and opium enter India through the 550-kilometre Pakistan-Punjab border. Opium and poppy husk enter Punjab through Rajasthan. Rivers and streams along the Indo-Pakistan border are popular routes for smuggling drugs into the villages located along the border. Other modes of smuggling include sliding in drugs in plastic pipes through the barbed wire at the international border. Cross-border smuggling of drugs involves three kinds of players: (i) Drug dealers in the border region who provide the drugs, (ii) Agents like poor farmers, labourers, addicts etc. who transport the drug in small quantities and (iii) Mafia bosses in various parts of the country who distribute and sell them further within the country and outside.

The drug packets from the Pakistani side are picked up by the couriers on the Indian side who work in close coordination with their Pakistani counterparts.⁶ Once the package is received on the Indian side, the courier waits for further instructions from the Indian handler before moving the contraband. The handler is in charge of ensuring that the drugs, now packed in small packets of one gram each does not run into a check-post. In Punjab, the drug peddlers have developed ‘Chitta’, a cocktail of heroin and other chemicals, which has become enormously popular with the addicts, for its low cost and effect. A pack of ‘Chitta’ weighing less than a gram costs Rupees 500. The smugglers use poor farmers, migrant labourers, drug addicts, and unemployed youth to transport drugs from border areas to cities and villages. On occasions, even policemen and local politicians were found to be part of this distribution network. More than a hundred Punjab police personnel have been arrested for smuggling or helping to smuggle drugs from border regions between 2014 and 2018.⁷ Those arrested included two Deputy Superintendents of Police indicating the extent of the nexus between the smugglers and the law enforcement agencies.

Following the ‘Drug trail’

From Punjab, drugs flow seamlessly into other states, taking advantage of the almost non-existent inspection mechanism on the inter-state borders. According to a media report, youths in Kashmir are getting hooked on to drugs from Afghanistan that flow into the state from Pakistan. On 26 November 2018, heroin worth Rupees 40 crore was recovered from Rajouri. The consignment bore Afghan labels which indicated that the drugs were smuggled into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) from Pakistan before it crossed borders and entered J&K.

Whereas the earlier smuggling route was through Punjab, since early 2018, the source of 80 percent of drugs seized in the state are from Pakistan.⁸ According to officials, the Ramban-Banihal National Highway, one of the two road links between Kashmir and mainland India, has turned into a major route for the drug mafia that has connections to Pakistan-based smugglers. Here too, incidents of policemen facilitating the drug trade have started to emerge. In July 2019, four policemen were arrested from Jammu and Kupwara and heroin packets were seized from their possession.

⁵ “In all-time high, over 500 kg heroin seized at Attari”, *India Today*, 30 June 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/in-all-time-high-over-500-kg-heroin-seized-at-attari-1559308-2019-06-30>. Accessed on 31 July 2019.

⁶ Kshitij Bhargava, “The Chitta economy: How the business of drugs works in Punjab”, op.cit.

⁷ “Punjab police battles ‘drug-taint’”, *Tribune*, 6 July 2018, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/punjab-police-battles-drug-taint/615877.html>. Accessed on 29 July 2019.

⁸ Pooja Shali, “How drugs from Pakistan are ruining Jammu gennext”, *India Today*, 6 June 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/drugs-pakistan-jammu-1543545-2019-06-06>. Accessed on 30 July 2019.

The problem has assumed serious proportions in the state of Himachal Pradesh where 1622 cases of drug smuggling were registered in the first 6 months of 2019 and 789 people were arrested.⁹ In Himachal Pradesh, one of the few Indian states where poppy is grown locally and legally, drug peddlers have specifically targeted school and college students with 'Chitta' packets. According to an estimate by a drug rehab and counselling centre in the state capital Shimla, 55-60 percent of youths of that city are addicted to drugs.¹⁰

Since 2015, Rann of Kutch in Gujarat too has emerged as a route for drug smuggling from Pakistan. On 21 May 2019, six Pakistani nationals were arrested and around 200 packets of heroin were seized in an operation by the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence off Jakhau port in Kutch. Investigation revealed that the accused were carrying 336 packets of heroin and had dumped around 100 in the sea. On 28 July, a team of Gujarat Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) arrested two persons for allegedly carrying one kilogram of brown sugar, near Mandvi Koday of Kutch.¹¹ Police said the duo received the contraband from a fisherman in Kutch who found it on the shore. The fisherman handed over the contraband to his nephew who then tried to sell it in the black market. Although few details are available regarding the modus operandi of smugglers in the area, a 2015 report had referred to the active role of Thai-Pakistan drug syndicates¹² in narcotics smuggling off Gujarat coast. In April that year, Indian Coast Guard and Indian Navy personnel had seized 230 kilograms of heroin from a boat and arrested eight Pakistani nationals. Previously on 31 December 2014, smugglers believed to belong to the same syndicate had set their own boat carrying drug afire resulting in the death of four crew Pakistani members, 365 kilometres off Porbandar.¹³ The boat was initially suspected to be carrying terrorists on board.

The Maritime Route: Iran & Africa

Due to government regulation along the Indo-Pakistan border, especially the effort of the Border Security Force (BSF) and the local police that claimed to have choked the heroin supply lines into Punjab, drug dealers have been using alternate routes that pass-through Iran and Africa before finding their way to Punjab and Delhi. In July 2017, India's National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) spotted a suspect vessel 380 kilometres off the coast of Gujarat and alerted the Coast Guard which pressed its ships and aircraft to intercept the Panama registered merchant ship, the Prince. When the vessel was brought to the port of Porbandar, sleuths recovered 1500 kilograms of heroin on board. Eight Indian crew members were arrested. The last port of call for Prince was Chabahar in Iran from where it had picked up the contraband of Afghan heroin meant for an Indian cartel. This, till date, remains the biggest single haul of narcotics in India.

According to new modus operandi, drug cartels are increasingly using the maritime route to bring heroin from Afghanistan to the Makran coast, where the coastlines of Pakistan and Iran meet. From there, the consignments are taken across the Indian Ocean to western markets via east Africa, where the coastline is inadequately policed. As the drugs head towards India from Africa, the African smugglers who have their bases in cities like Delhi become involved. Bulk consignments arrive in Delhi either by air or even postal services before being distributed further to

⁹ Ashwani Sharma, "5 northern states suggest NIA-type agency to deal with drugs", *Millennium Post*, 25 July 2019, <http://www.millenniumpost.in/nation/5-northern-states-suggest-nia-type-agency-to-deal-with-drugs-365489>. Accessed on 30 July 2019.

¹⁰ Ashwani Sharma, "Udta Himachal: Is Shimla set to be the new drug capital of the country?", *Citizen Matters*, 26 June 2019, <http://citizenmatters.in/drug-abuse-rehabilitation-and-police-action-in-punjab-shimla-himachal-13126>. Accessed on 29 July 2019.

¹¹ "Police probing if recently-seized drugs came from Pak smugglers", *Indian Express*, 31 July 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/police-probing-if-recently-seized-drugs-came-from-pak-smugglers-5864932/>. Accessed on 31 July 2019.

¹² Josy Joseph, "Thai-Pakistan drug syndicate active off Gujarat coast", *Times of India*, 29 May 2015, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Thai-Pakistan-drug-syndicate-active-off-Gujarat-coast/articleshow/47464748.cms>. Accessed on 31 July 2019.

¹³ "4 feared killed as explosives-laden Pakistan vessel sinks off Gujarat", *Hindu*, 2 January 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/explosivesladen-pakistan-vessel-sinks-off-gujarat/article6748641.ece>. Accessed on 31 July 2019.

other cities like Mumbai. While small quantities are usually transported by postal services, large quantities are transported by using a variety of illegal means like concealing drugs inside vehicles, furniture, bags or specially designed luggage to be aired to other countries. Smugglers also swallow drug capsules or specially designed packets or insert them into their body cavities surgically or otherwise to be transported via air. Drugs are also routed through Sri Lanka. In December 2018, Sri Lankan authorities seized 800 kilograms of cocaine worth Rupees 4,000 crore from an India-bound ship docked at the Colombo port. The ship had sailed from Ecuador.

Even as the consumer market in India is on a rise, a portion of drugs transiting India appear to be mainly bound for European countries, US, Canada, and West Africa. Fishing vessels are being used as mode of transport of drugs largely from India to Sri Lanka and its other neighbours.

Growing 'Nexus'

The huge narco-economy with enormous potential to bring about financial windfall explains the involvement of a range of agents including unemployed youths, law enforcement personnel and politicians in the trade, particularly given the high corruption levels that permeates the state structures. As previously mentioned, the Afghan narco-economy in 2018 is estimated to be US\$60 million. It increases by leaps and bounds as the contraband leaves the soil of Afghanistan and travels the distance. There is no estimate of drugs that enter the Indian market. However, according to a report in 2018, one gram of heroin costs more than Rupees 2500 in international border areas in India. As the drug reaches districts like Gurdaspur, Amritsar, Tarn Taran and Fazilka, the price is doubled. A gram of heroin costs Rupees 8000 in cities such as Ludhiana and Chandigarh. Reduced supply further leads to skyrocketing of prices. For instance, the cost of heroin in Mumbai went up from Rupees 2.9 million in 2016 to Rupees 9.8 million in 2017.¹⁴ This translates to Rupees 9800 per gram. By 2019, however, in national capital Delhi, the asking price for a kilogram of heroin (from either Afghanistan or Myanmar) had reached Rupees 40 million, i.e. a staggering Rupees 40,000 per gram.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, improvised drugs like 'Chitta' are becoming more popular and play a key part of the burgeoning narco-economy.

Fighting the Menace: Coordination deficit

According to India's Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), 27231, 31535 and 46959 cases were registered by various drug law enforcement agencies in the country during 2015, 2016, and 2017 respectively. Frequent arrests of Afghan and African nationals with drugs in various Indian cities often creates the impression of their large-scale involvement in the trade. However, according to the Indian Home Ministry, "99 percent of the 127180 persons arrested"¹⁶ in these three years, are Indian nationals. It is safe to conclude that Indian mafia, smugglers, and agents dominate the trade within the country with only a minor participation of foreign nationals.

The NCB claims that steps taken by it has led to a reduction in the quantity smuggled Afghan drugs in India. However, the ground situation portrays a different picture. The fact that both central and state level efforts have remained uncoordinated and dissipated has aided the smugglers.

The state government in Punjab has struggled to deal with the drug problem in spite of its promise to wipe it out in few months. It is hard pressed for resources and the nexus of smugglers with the police and politicians are creating problems. However, the realization that the problem needs to be dealt with by inter-state cooperation has led

¹⁴ Virendrasingh Ghunawat, "Heroin, cocaine, marijuana, synthetic drugs put India's narcotics market on a high", *India Today*, 21 December 2017, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/synthetic-drugs-push-indias-narcotics-market-to-a-high-1113532-2017-12-21>. Accessed on 29 July 2019.

¹⁵ Ajay Kumar and Chayyanika Nigam, "Exposed! Massive drug peddling rackets in Delhi-NCR with global links", *India Today*, 8 April 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/exposed-massive-drug-peddling-rackets-in-delhi-ncr-with-global-links-1496439-2019-04-08>. Accessed on 29 July 2019.

¹⁶ 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.

Punjab and Himachal Pradesh to form a joint force to tackle the interstate network of drugs smugglers. Such mechanism, however, does not include the government of J&K, where efforts to tackle the menace remain minimal. According to a media report, the state-level de-addiction panel constituted by the Governor in March 2019 had not met even for a single occasion till July.¹⁷ Both Haryana and Himachal Pradesh are moving towards strengthening legal mechanisms to arrest the chaos. Both are reportedly considering a legislation on the lines of the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) to tackle the drug menace in their states.¹⁸

Realization that efforts of individual states will always be limited and affected by politics has led to calls for the establishment of a national agency to deal with the problem. In July 2019, for instance, state governments of Haryana, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh asked New Delhi to set up a specialised agency on the lines of National Investigation Agency (NIA) to against the drug mafia who run high profile rackets. The meeting which was also attended by official representatives from Delhi, J&K, and the union territory of Chandigarh also agreed to initiate a series of measures including joint operations at the inter-state borders, information sharing and implementation of the best practices of the participating States. The states also appeared to move towards strengthening the information sharing mechanism on drugs and drug dealers-smugglers, for a more effective crackdown against them. The implementation of all these measures would be crucial in controlling the menace.

Need for a Regional Counter-Narcotic Strategy

The decrease in opium cultivation in Afghanistan, mainly due to drought unfolds a false sense of promise. Both the area under cultivation and amount of production remains large enough to meet the demands of the increasing clientele. Worse still, shortage of supply merely leads to a rise in prices and not necessarily a dip in demand. Increase in the ability of the respective governments to act against the smugglers notwithstanding, the problem requires a bilateral /and regional collaboration to supplement the efforts of domestic agencies. This aspect is either absent or nascent. In April 2018, for instance, Indian and Afghan officials met in New Delhi for a day long bilateral meet to discuss issues related to drug trafficking and narcotics abuse. According to an issued press note, “the meeting discussed exchange of ideas, sharing of best practices and furthering areas of cooperation in the drug crime domain”¹⁹. No further meeting has taken place since then. The Indo-Pakistan counter-narcotics cooperation mechanism is largely non-functional due to the difficulty in the bilateral relationship. There is a need to reactivate such cooperation between countries on the smuggling routes. This is particularly important given the impact that this epidemic has on the youth of all three counties which are witnessing rising numbers of drug addiction. The drug trade continues to fuel the conflict in Afghanistan and facilitates linkages between organized crime and terrorist groups. Sharing of real time information as well as sharing of best practices are the need of the hour. In addition to interdiction and sharing information, a trilateral mechanism between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India can help curb the growing menace.

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¹⁷ Dinesh Manhotra, “Drug mafia spreads tentacles, authorities in deep slumber”, *Tribune*, 26 July 2019, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jammu-kashmir/drug-mafia-spreads-tentacles-authorities-in-deep-slumber/808502.html>. Accessed on 30 July 2019.

¹⁸ “Drug menace: Haryana, H.P. mull law on lines of MCOCA”, *Hindu*, 26 July 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/drug-menace-haryana-hp-mull-law-on-lines-of-mcoca/article28714789.ece>. Accessed on 30 July 2019.

¹⁹ “India, Afghanistan to hold bi-lateral meet on drugs this week”, *Money Control*, 18 April 2018, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/economy/india-afghanistan-to-hold-bi-lateral-meet-on-drugs-this-week-2551801.html>. Accessed on 28 July 2018.

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