

UNVEILING THE SHADOWLANDS: UNRAVELING THE COMPLEXITIES OF ILLICIT DRUG TRAFFICKING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Ludy Himawan

Kejaksanaan Negeri Kabupaten Bekasi
Komplek Perkantoran Pemerintah Daerah, Sukamahi, Kec. Cikarang Pusat, Kabupaten Bekasi,
Jawa Barat 17530, Indonesia
sang.diponegoro90@gmail.com

Abstract

The illicit drug trade continues to pose a significant risk in Southeast Asia because of its widespread impact, which can be seen in the lives of millions of people. Drugs are addictive and can have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of users if misused. In order to break free from the grip of this seedy underworld, it is essential to have regional collaboration, public awareness, and comprehensive approaches that target the underlying reasons for both the demand for and supply of drugs. This paper aims to show the dynamics of illicit drug trafficking in Southeast Asian countries. The main focus of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the current situation of illegal drug trade in the Southeast Asian region.

Keywords: *Illicit Drug Trafficking; Southeast Asia; Regional Collaboration.*

Abstrak

Perdagangan obat terlarang terus menjadi risiko signifikan di Asia Tenggara karena dampaknya yang luas, yang dapat terlihat dalam kehidupan jutaan orang. obat-obatan yang bersifat adiktif serta dapat menimbulkan dampak negatif terhadap kesehatan fisik dan mental pada penggunaannya jika disalahgunakan. Untuk dapat melepaskan diri dari cengkeraman dunia bawah yang gelap ini, sangat penting untuk memiliki kolaborasi regional, kesadaran publik, dan pendekatan komprehensif yang menargetkan alasan mendasar dari permintaan dan pasokan obat-obatan. Paper ini bertujuan untuk menunjukkan dinamika perdagangan obat terlarang di negara-negara Asia Tenggara. Fokus utama dari makalah ini adalah memberikan gambaran singkat tentang situasi perdagangan obat ilegal di wilayah Asia Tenggara.

Kata Kunci: *Perdagangan Obat Terlarang; Asia Tenggara; Kolaborasi Regional.*

A. Introduction

Southeast Asia is a significant producer of narcotics and has become a transit country for illegal drugs, later exported to North America, Europe, and other Asian countries.¹ Drug trafficking in Southeast Asia, notably opium, heroin, and amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), increased in the early 21st century. While opium production in the Golden Triangle has declined drastically since the early 2000s, the ATS boom has spread to almost all Southeast Asian countries. This is mainly because some of the methamphetamine production in Southeast Asia is

¹ Ralf Emmers, "The Threat of Transnational Crime in Southeast Asia: Drug Trafficking, Human Smuggling and Trafficking and Sea Piracy," *Revista Unisci*, no. 2 (2003): 1–11.

typically in tablet form, and reports indicate that the pills are primarily targeted at markets in that sub-region.²

Research conducted by Jacqui Baker and Sarah Milne.³ The study, entitled "Dirty Money States: Illicit Economies and the State in Southeast Asia", develops the idea of "dirty state money" by defining and exploring the financial problems of illicit countries in Southeast Asia. Most diagnoses of the dark economy developing in Southeast Asia focus on the prevalence of corruption and state "corruption." However, the authors of this essay develop a more nuanced explanation by exploring how states develop and sustain themselves through illegal extraction. Drawing from the emerging literature on the state and crime and fiscal sociology, they developed a new theoretical framework for six state case studies comprising these thematic issues. In Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, East Timor, and the Philippines, each study examines empirically how illicit state financing works. Whether income comes from gold, timber, opium, aid agencies, or business interests, the authors identify consistent patterns in the nature and behaviour of the state vis--vis illegally generated funds. These patterns include territorial dynamics and practices, the everyday social world of state actors and their entrepreneurial allies, and the paradoxical interaction between the formal and informal realms. Ultimately the authors argue that illicit money is fundamental to contemporary state development in the region, extending even to delivering public goods and services. These findings are uncomfortable for scholars, governments, and development practitioners, especially as they challenge conventional notions of how Southeast Asia's state strengths and weaknesses can be understood. Nevertheless, they demand attention because they are the product of ambitious and unconventional research efforts. Based on the above background information, the issue of this paper is how does the dynamics of illicit drug trafficking in Southeast Asian countries? This paper aims to show the dynamics of illicit drug trafficking in Southeast Asian countries.

B. Discussion

The development of political studies between countries today has changed issues from the concept of security which traditionally is still very focused on wars and conflicts between

² Hai Thanh Luong, "Drug Trafficking in the Mainland Southeast Asian Region: The Example of Vietnam's Shared Borderland with Laos," *International Annals of Criminology* 58, no. 1 (2020): 130–51, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cri.2020.19>; Klaus von Lampe, "Withdrawal Symptoms in the Golden Triangle: A Drugs Market in Disarray," *Trends in Organized Crime* 13, no. 1 (2010): 87–108, <https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs12117-009-9084-y>.

³ Jacqui Baker and Sarah Milne, "Dirty Money States: Illicit Economies and the State in Southeast Asia," *Critical Asian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2015): 151–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2015.1041273>.

nations, even focusing on international security issues such as the arms race to create dilemmas. Security has focused on non-traditional security (human security) in the global political arena. The concept of security explains the security conditions in the military at the highest level (high politics), namely the issue of state security (state-centric), which is the main focus, while in a non-perspective or point of view traditional, the boundaries of security issues are focused on military matters and began to evolve in more specific forms such as narcotics as security issues in international politics.⁴

Transnational crime is a type of crime whose operation or occurrence involves more than one country. This type of crime is increasingly growing and expanding, which is supported by globalization, which will make it easier to spread the network of this crime. Globalization has increased the international drug trade by expanding population mobility, market integration, and capital flows across national borders. In 1995, the United Nations (UN) defined transnational crime as an offence "where the origin, activity and direct or indirect impact involves more than one country". There are several types of these crimes, including illegal trade (drugs, weapons, people), smuggling (humans, drugs, weapons), money laundering, and so on.⁵

This crime is declared one of the greatest threats to sovereignty and economic development. How not? The income from this crime is estimated at around 1.6 trillion US dollars and 2.2 trillion US dollars per year.⁶ These crimes are also growing and expanding due to globalization which facilitates the dissemination of information, the movement of people and goods, technological developments, and the expansion of criminal networks throughout the world. These illegal activities can become "borderless". So that the international community takes various serious steps to deal with these transnational crimes, one of which is by

⁴ David A Baldwin, "Security Studies and the End of the Cold War," *World Politics* 48, no. 1 (1995): 117–41, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.1995.0001>; Kamrul Hossain et al., "Constructing Arctic Security: An Inter-Disciplinary Approach to Understanding Security in the Barents Region," *Polar Record* 53, no. 1 (2017): 52–66, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247416000693>; Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, "Broadening the Agenda of Security Studies: Politics and Methods," *Mershon International Studies Review* 40, no. 2 (1996): 229–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/222776>.

⁵ Geoffrey Garrett, "The Causes of Globalization," *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 6–7 (2000): 941–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001041400003300610>; Mitchel P Roth and Murat Sever, "The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 10 (2007): 901–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100701558620>; Kevonne Small and Bruce Taylor, "State and Local Law Enforcement Response to Transnational Crime," *Trends in Organized Crime* 10, no. 2 (2006): 5–17, <https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs12117-006-1033-4>; Greg L Warchol, Linda L Zupan, and Willie Clack, "Transnational Criminality: An Analysis of the Illegal Wildlife Market in Southern Africa," *International Criminal Justice Review* 13, no. 1 (2003): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/105756770301300101>; Phil Williams, "Transnational Criminal Networks," in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, vol. 1382 (Rand Santa Monica, CA, 2001), 61–97.

⁶ Channing May, *Transnational Crime and the Developing World* (Washington, D.C.: Global Financial Integrity, 2017).

establishing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) in 2000. This convention is significant to encourage countries to implement more comprehensive measures. Effectively deal with transnational organized crime by improving domestic criminal procedures and laws and cooperation in international law enforcement.

One type of transnational crime that has benefited from globalization is drug trafficking, where the operation of this crime requires a broad and diverse network. Drug networks are more often on the scale of systematic collaborations designed to promote transnational criminal activity based on motility and capacity flexibility. So that the operation of illegal drug trafficking crimes is a significant concern for the international community, especially countries, because there is a strong level of cooperation between various (trafficking) groups that transcend national, ethnic, and business borders.⁷ These criminal networks adapt quickly to new social environments, illustrating flexibility and dynamism. According to Williams,⁸ since 20 years ago, the most common and distinctive characteristic of the dimensions and scale of transnational crime is the unrestricted drug trade from one country to another. This illegal narcotics trade also hurts the countries involved, from source countries to market countries.

The drug trade is one of the illegal global trades which usually can produce tens of tons of illicit drugs, which will later be shipped across international borders from producer countries to destination countries. Its operations involve the production, manufacture, smuggling, and distribution of these illegal drugs. Thus, this crime requires a wide enough network to facilitate its operations. Not a single country is untouched by the grip of this various crime, from its production to its consumers. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the illicit trade in narcotics and illicit drugs is an illegal global trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances subject to drug prohibition laws.⁹ This type of crime can usually generate huge profits, so drug dealers will always look for ways to meet the demand for these drugs. Based on data from 2014, the global drug trafficking market ranges from US\$426 billion to US\$652 billion. They are opportunistic and are expected to market new drugs, find new routes to smuggle drugs, find new partners among organized crime groups in different countries, exploit new manufacturing and communication technologies, recruit vulnerable individuals into this criminal activity, and find ways to be able to launder the

⁷ Diana S. Dolliver, Steven P. Ericson, and Katherine L. Love, "A Geographic Analysis of Drug Trafficking Patterns on the TOR Network," *Geographical Review* 108, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 45–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gere.12241>.

⁸ Williams, "Transnational Criminal Networks."

⁹ UNODC, "Drug Trafficking," 2010, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/>.

proceeds of this crime. So it can be said that globalization, where the movement of people and goods, technological developments, and accessible transportation, has helped facilitate the passage of these drug trafficking activities. Therefore, it will be quite a challenge for countries worldwide to eradicate this crime of illegal drug trafficking. Moreover, in the process, these criminal activities usually involve both small organizations, guerrilla groups and terrorists, who typically use violence to maintain control of the territories and markets they have claimed to secure their profits.¹⁰

The global market value of this drug trade is derived from the sale of four main categories of these illicit drugs, namely Marijuana, cocaine, opiates, and amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS). The value of marijuana sales is the highest, worth 183 to 287 billion US dollars, while the lowest is ATS, with a value of 74 to 90 billion US dollars. However, this total market value does not include the value of new psychoactive substances (NPS), where this NPS is not included in the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs or the Convention on Psychotropic Substances 1971 because, at the time these two conventions were formed, the NPS was not used. Arbitrarily or did not exist at that time. Marijuana is the category of an illicit drug that has the most market value because it is widely grown, distributed, and consumed worldwide and tends to be less expensive than other types of drugs, such as cocaine and opiates.

Some researchers conclude several opinions about how drug trafficking is, such as Benson and Decker,¹¹ who find little evidence that drug dealers work in a formal organization. Still, they work in loosely connected networks where communication is informal. Several other researchers also revealed two types of drug trafficking organizations, namely those that are highly structured and those that are not too structured.¹²

One area that has become the centre of world attention is the cooperation of countries in the security sector in the Asia Pacific and the Middle East regions, especially in eradicating

¹⁰ Mangai Natarajan, Marco Zanella, and Christopher Yu, "Classifying the Variety of Drug Trafficking Organizations," *Journal of Drug Issues* 45, no. 4 (2015): 409–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022042615603391>; Letizia Paoli, "The Paradoxes of Organized Crime," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 37, no. 1 (2002): 51–97, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1013355122531>; Jackie Turner and Liz Kelly, "Trade Secrets: Intersections between Diasporas and Crime Groups in the Constitution of the Human Trafficking Chain," *The British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 2 (2009): 184–201, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azn079>.

¹¹ Jana S Benson and Scott H Decker, "The Organizational Structure of International Drug Smuggling," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 38, no. 2 (2010): 130–38, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2010.01.001>.

¹² Gisela Bichler, Aili Malm, and Tristen Cooper, "Drug Supply Networks: A Systematic Review of the Organizational Structure of Illicit Drug Trade," *Crime Science* 6, no. 1 (2017): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40163-017-0063-3>; Scott H Decker and David C Pyrooz, "Gangs: Another Form of Organized Crime?," in *Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199730445.013.008; Natarajan, Zanella, and Yu, "Classifying the Variety of Drug Trafficking Organizations."

transnational crime, which is driven by technological developments, ease of transportation and world economic developments, which have resulted in international organized crime proliferating. Extremely high speed and reached a very alarming stage. This transnational crime network has equipped itself with increasingly sophisticated technology and implemented a cell system organization that is increasingly difficult to trace.

Therefore, the phenomenon of various crimes, incredibly organized transnational crimes, can significantly reduce social security in social life. This crime also undermines domestic security, can interfere with state sovereignty and threatens the stability of a country's economic development. One form of threat that is quite potent in threatening the stability of state security today is the illicit trafficking of narcotics.

The problem of drug trafficking, both in production and use, is still a continuing problem in the Southeast Asia region even though ASEAN has been trying to eradicate this issue for a long time, starting in 1972.¹³ This crime usually uses violence to maintain control of its market and production. Usually, the Government is forced to spend more excellent resources on enforcing laws to counter this attack on domestic stability, resulting in funding directed away from sustainable development. This illegal drug trade is also growing in a somewhat fragile area, where the Government is still weak enough that this network of criminal operations can run freely. However, the Government can still prevent the country from failing.

Within Southeast Asia, there is the "Golden Triangle" located on the eastern border of Myanmar, northwest of Laos, and northern Thailand along the Mekong River. The Golden Triangle is known as one of the world's leading narcotics production areas, where the Golden Triangle produces 60% of the world's opium and heroin.¹⁴ Viewing and understanding the problem of illegal drugs in the Southeast Asian region can be seen from various aspects, such as public health, poverty and limitations of economic development in producing countries, lack of social support systems, and political constraints and instability. From a financial perspective, it is no coincidence that Myanmar and Laos are the least economically developed countries in the Southeast Asia region, with farmers who depend on illegal medicinal plants as a source of livelihood because it is easy to grow opium. Furthermore, the plant has high selling value with low weight.

¹³ Shen Yang Mok, "ASEAN and Transnational Crime: Gains and Challenges in Tackling Drug Trafficking," *WIMAYA* 1, no. 01 (June 10, 2020): 31–38, <https://doi.org/10.33005/wimaya.v1i01.13>.

¹⁴ A. Indra Rukmana, "Perdagangan Narkotika Dalam Perspektif Hukum Pidana Internasional," *Jurnal Ilmu Hukum Legal Opinion* 1, no. 2 (2014): 1–8.

Since its inception, ASEAN has sought to address the drug problem in Southeast Asia as a regional entity that reflects the importance of drug issues on the ASEAN agenda. In this case, the United States has a role in encouraging ASEAN to bring the issue of illegal drug trafficking at the regional level together with the 'war on drugs' launched by the US in the 1970s so that eradicating illegal drug trafficking becomes ASEAN's incentive to legitimize its position as a regional organization in the eyes of the world.

The production and smuggling of narcotics in Southeast Asia have been carried out for a long time since the 19th century. In this area, the production activities that produce the most drugs are bordered by three countries, namely, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar, which have opium on a large scale. Based on history, the types of narcotics derived from opium are medicinal plants used by people in Asia, especially China, to be medicinal plants for wound healing. However, after the cold war, the Southeast Asian region, especially Thailand, became the main route for the opium trade from Myanmar and heroin, entering Thailand through the Laos border. The high production of illegal drugs in Myanmar in the 1990s was also followed by the increasing flow of narcotics trafficking in Thailand from Myanmar. The existence of an opium production area that is the raw material for making drugs on the Myanmar and China border makes it easier for this group to market and spread. In addition to these three countries, opium growers are also found on the Vietnamese border, but cultivation is limited and small. So with a population of nearly 500 million people in Southeast Asia, this region is the largest producer of dangerous drugs and a potential market for drug manufacturers and dealers. Problems in drug smuggling have resulted in the state not being able to solve the global narcotics problem, so an international communication platform is needed, namely an international organization.

The region's profit in drug production and trafficking last year was at least about US\$71 billion, of which methamphetamine accounted for as much as US\$61 billion. In carrying out the operation of transnational crimes, there are usually specific routes to circulate or smuggle goods to be sent to other countries. In the case of illegal drug trafficking in Southeast Asia, two main ways are used: the southern route to Bangkok for distribution and the northern route to China, Kunming, and other areas.¹⁵

¹⁵ Roni Gunawan Raja Gukguk and Nyoman Serikat Putra Jaya, "Tindak Pidana Narkotika Sebagai Transnasional Organized Crime," *Jurnal Pembangunan Hukum Indonesia* 1, no. 3 (September 24, 2019): 337–51, <https://doi.org/10.14710/jphi.v1i3.337-351>.

C. Conclusion

The illicit drug trade continues to pose a significant risk in Southeast Asia because of its widespread impact, which can be seen in the lives of millions of people. Are effective measures to combat industry, to uncover it is essential to uncover the mechanisms. In order to break free from the grip of this seedy underworld, it is essential to have regional collaboration, public awareness, and comprehensive approaches that target the underlying reasons for both the demand for and supply of drugs. Southeast Asia's only hope of reclaiming its future from the shackles of illegal narcotics is a dogged determination and concerted effort on the part of its inhabitants.

REFERENCES

- Baker, Jacqui, and Sarah Milne. "Dirty Money States: Illicit Economies and the State in Southeast Asia." *Critical Asian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2015): 151–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2015.1041273>.
- Baldwin, David A. "Security Studies and the End of the Cold War." *World Politics* 48, no. 1 (1995): 117–41. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.1995.0001>.
- Benson, Jana S, and Scott H Decker. "The Organizational Structure of International Drug Smuggling." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 38, no. 2 (2010): 130–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2010.01.001>.
- Bichler, Gisela, Aili Malm, and Tristen Cooper. "Drug Supply Networks: A Systematic Review of the Organizational Structure of Illicit Drug Trade." *Crime Science* 6, no. 1 (2017): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40163-017-0063-3>.
- Decker, Scott H, and David C Pyrooz. "Gangs: Another Form of Organized Crime?" In *Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199730445.013.008.
- Dolliver, Diana S., Steven P. Ericson, and Katherine L. Love. "A Geographic Analysis of Drug Trafficking Patterns on the TOR Network." *Geographical Review* 108, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 45–68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gere.12241>.
- Emmers, Ralf. "The Threat of Transnational Crime in Southeast Asia: Drug Trafficking, Human Smuggling and Trafficking and Sea Piracy." *Revista Unisci*, no. 2 (2003): 1–11.
- Garrett, Geoffrey. "The Causes of Globalization." *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 6–7 (2000): 941–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001041400003300610>.
- Hossain, Kamrul, Gerald Zojer, Wilfrid Greaves, J. Miguel Roncero, and Michael Sheehan. "Constructing Arctic Security: An Inter-Disciplinary Approach to Understanding Security in the Barents Region." *Polar Record* 53, no. 1 (2017): 52–66. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247416000693>.

- Krause, Keith, and Michael C. Williams. "Broadening the Agenda of Security Studies: Politics and Methods." *Mershon International Studies Review* 40, no. 2 (1996): 229–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/222776>.
- Lampe, Klaus von. "Withdrawal Symptoms in the Golden Triangle: A Drugs Market in Disarray." *Trends in Organized Crime* 13, no. 1 (2010): 87–108. <https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs12117-009-9084-y>.
- Luong, Hai Thanh. "Drug Trafficking in the Mainland Southeast Asian Region: The Example of Vietnam's Shared Borderland with Laos." *International Annals of Criminology* 58, no. 1 (2020): 130–51. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cri.2020.19>.
- May, Channing. *Transnational Crime and the Developing World*. Washington, D.C.: Global Financial Integrity, 2017.
- Mok, Shen Yang. "ASEAN and Transnational Crime: Gains and Challenges in Tackling Drug Trafficking." *WIMAYA* 1, no. 01 (June 10, 2020): 31–38. <https://doi.org/10.33005/wimaya.v1i01.13>.
- Natarajan, Mangai, Marco Zanella, and Christopher Yu. "Classifying the Variety of Drug Trafficking Organizations." *Journal of Drug Issues* 45, no. 4 (2015): 409–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022042615603391>.
- Paoli, Letizia. "The Paradoxes of Organized Crime." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 37, no. 1 (2002): 51–97. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1013355122531>.
- Raja Gukguk, Roni Gunawan, and Nyoman Serikat Putra Jaya. "Tindak Pidana Narkotika Sebagai Transnasional Organized Crime." *Jurnal Pembangunan Hukum Indonesia* 1, no. 3 (September 24, 2019): 337–51. <https://doi.org/10.14710/jphi.v1i3.337-351>.
- Roth, Mitchel P, and Murat Sever. "The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, a Case Study." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 10 (2007): 901–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100701558620>.
- Rukmana, A. Indra. "Perdagangan Narkotika Dalam Perspektif Hukum Pidana Internasional." *Jurnal Ilmu Hukum Legal Opinion* 1, no. 2 (2014): 1–8.
- Small, Kevonne, and Bruce Taylor. "State and Local Law Enforcement Response to Transnational Crime." *Trends in Organized Crime* 10, no. 2 (2006): 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.1007%2Fs12117-006-1033-4>.
- Turner, Jackie, and Liz Kelly. "Trade Secrets: Intersections between Diasporas and Crime Groups in the Constitution of the Human Trafficking Chain." *The British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 2 (2009): 184–201. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azn079>.
- UNODC. "Drug Trafficking," 2010. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/>.
- Warchol, Greg L, Linda L Zupan, and Willie Clack. "Transnational Criminality: An Analysis of the Illegal Wildlife Market in Southern Africa." *International Criminal Justice Review* 13, no. 1 (2003): 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105756770301300101>.

Williams, Phil. "Transnational Criminal Networks." In *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, 1382:61–97. Rand Santa Monica, CA, 2001.