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DRUG TRAFFICKING FROM THAILAND'S GOLDEN TRIANGLE REGION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON MALAYSIA'S POLITICAL SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

Organized crime syndicates are fuelling the dangerous and profitable world of drug trafficking making Southeast Asia suffered the consequences for centuries. The spread of opium by Chinese immigrants in the 1700s led to a devastating increase in drug addiction and trafficking. Uncontrolled opium smuggling was rampant, forcing the British government to act and ban the drug in 1952. Since Malaysia's formation in 1963, the government has fought back with legal and enforcement measures, but drug trafficking from Thailand's Golden Triangle has remained a serious threat to national security. This research paper investigates the drug trafficking situation in Malaysia and exposes the sinister threat that illicit drug entry poses to the country's safety. Drawing upon primary data from interviews with enforcement officers, drug research experts, and academics, this qualitative study demonstrates that despite efforts to stop drug

smuggling from the Golden Triangle, these criminal activities persist and endanger Malaysia's political security.

Keywords: Drug trafficking, drug addiction, Malaysia, political security, Golden Triangle.

INTRODUCTION

Drug addiction and trafficking are widely recognized as major threats to a country's political security. Since the end of the Cold War, multiple non-traditional security threats, including drug trafficking, have posed a threat to national political security (Cornell, 2007). According to Ramli (1986), Othman (2017), and Mohamad Yasid (2021), the growing demand for both synthetic and natural illicit drugs has fuelled an increase in inter-state drug smuggling activities. Scorzelli (1987) identified the two main drug-producing regions in the world: (i) The Golden Crescent, which covers a large mountainous area in the territories of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, and (ii) The Golden Triangle, encompassing the remote regions of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. These two regions have become the primary producers of heroin since the early 1970s, with 90 percent of the world's heroin coming from the Golden Crescent and 5 percent from the Golden Triangle Region (Zahari, A.S. (personal communication, January 6, 2021; Zainudin, A., personal communication, January 6, 2021).

In Southeast Asia, the Golden Triangle region has become a significant hub for large-scale drug trade and trafficking operations controlled by well-organized international drug trafficking syndicates (Chalk, 2000; Chouvy, 2013). The region spans 150,000 square miles and encompasses parts of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand (Chin & Zhong, 2015). This isolated area is infamous for its extensive poppy plantations, the primary ingredient in the production of heroin. The name Golden Triangle was coined by Marshall Green, the United States Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, during a press conference on July 12th, 1971, when he referred to the region as a major area for poppy and heroin production (Chouvy, 2010). From the early 1960s to the end of the 1970s, the Golden Triangle attracted various international drug trafficking syndicates due to its reputation as the world's leading producer of opium (Mohamad Yasid, 2021).

The main areas of poppy cultivation in Thailand's Golden Triangle are centered in the regions of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong

Son, and Nan (Sen, 1991). This region is responsible for two-thirds of the world's opium supply due to the favorable climate, terrain, and soil for growing poppies (Sabhasri, 1978). Wiant (1985) stated that the Golden Triangle is an ideal location for poppy cultivation due to its fertile soil and optimal temperature for the growth of poppies. Meanwhile, Decks (2012) and Thanh (2022) agreed that international drug trafficking syndicates have successfully processed and exported high-quality heroin from the Golden Triangle to the United States, as the lower currency exchange rates make it more cost-effective for the syndicates to source opium directly from the Golden Triangle.

The trading of drugs, particularly opium, in Southeast Asia dates back to the Western colonial period. In the 18th century, Western colonial powers such as Great Britain, Spain, the Netherlands, and France expanded their territories across Southeast Asia, including Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaya, and the Philippines, driven in part by their desire to control the opium trade (Spencer & Navaratnam, 1981). Opium was seen at that time as a vital and lucrative trade commodity, far outweighing the profit from trading tea and silk. The Dutch, through the Dutch East India Company, was the first to import a vast supply of raw opium from Bengal, India, which was then resold in the Dutch colonies across the far-flung Indonesian Archipelago (Andaya, 1975).

The huge financial gains generated from the opium trade by the Dutch led the British, who at the time colonized India, to restrict the opium supply to the Dutch in order to eliminate their monopoly on the opium market in the Far East (Tregonning, 1964). The British East India Company seized the opportunity to establish large poppy plantations and commercialized opium smoking dens in their colonies to generate more income and stimulate economic growth in their homelands (Emerson, 1966). When Chinese immigrants arrived in large numbers in Southeast Asia to work in the tin mines in the British colonies in the early 18th century, they introduced the widespread practice of opium smoking among the locals (Tregonning, 1967). Opium smoking dens were set up in colonies such as Myanmar, Malaya, and Singapore (Spencer & Navaratnam, 1981). The opium trade was also extended to remote rural areas that were often only accessible by boat via waterways (Gullick, 1987). The ease of access to raw opium resulted in local populations becoming addicted to opium smoking. The British had exclusive rights to distribute the opium supply, resulting in their monopoly over opium trading throughout their overseas

colonies (Philip, 1969). Opium could only be sold by government-authorized agents, leading to the flourishing of the black market for opium through the collusion of drug traffickers and producers.

From the present operational standpoint, a nation's geographical borders or physical terrain do not necessarily inhibit drug smuggling activities. Advances in air transportation, for example, have driven international and local drug-trafficking syndicates to exploit this technology, intensifying and expanding their operations (Kamarudin, 2007). The drug smuggling operations from the Golden Triangle are organized by international drug trafficking organizations that have an efficient delivery system to ensure that drugs reach their customers globally. According to Mohamad Yasid (2022), there are four popular methods used by these organizations to transport their products to Malaysia: (1) using special compartments in cars or supply trucks, (2) using motorcycles, (3) through trade and transport lorry entering Malaysia, and (4) using individuals who send drugs through the jungles near the Malaysia-Thailand border.

It is noteworthy that based on the existing body of literature, the study of drug trafficking in Malaysia, particularly in terms of its threat to national and political security from the smuggling of drugs sourced from the Golden Triangle region, has not been widely documented by academics and local researchers. Previous studies on drug trafficking activities in the Southeast Asian region, for example, have been conducted by various academics such as Wiant (1985), Sen (1991), McCoy (1990), Rogers (2008), Chouvy (2004, 2010, 2013), and Chin and Zhang (2015), focusing on the historical background and drug smuggling activities in the region. However, the implications of drug trafficking on Malaysia's political security have yet to be the principal subject of investigation. Furthermore, the study of drug-related issues in Malaysia has focused on issues of drug addiction rehabilitation and treatment, such as the work of Spencer and Navaratnam (1981), Scorzelli (1987), Low (1995), and Sarina (2012). Nevertheless, research on drug trafficking and smuggling in Malaysia has been limited and has been covered by a few scholars such as Mazlan and Chawarski (2006), Kamarudin (2007), Derks (2012), and Mohamad Yasid (2022, 2021). Hence, this study was conducted to discuss drug trafficking from Thailand's Golden Triangle region and its implications for the Malaysia's political security. The first part of this paper provides narratives on the early history of illicit drugs in Malaya, followed by the existence of opium smoking culture,

the timeline of opium prohibition in Malaya, the entry of drugs into Malaysia after World War Two, the conceptual framework of political security, the research methodology, research findings, and ends with the conclusion.

EARLY HISTORY OF DRUG ENTRY INTO MALAYSIA

Drug trades, particularly opium, had gained a foothold in the Malay Peninsula since the Dutch colonial occupation of Malacca in 1624. Andaya (1975), a prominent historian highlighted that the Dutch imported a large amount of opium in 1687 for trade with its ally, Riau, and the Johor Old Kingdom, under the rule of Paduka Raja Tun Abdul Jamil. The import of opium into the Malay Peninsula began with the arrival of Chinese immigrants in large numbers in the early 18th century (National Archive, 2007). Many of them came to work in the region as labourers, primarily in the tin mines and gambir plantations in the British colony of Malaya (Lim, 1974). The Chinese ‘tauke’, or boss, controlled the tin mining activities and received mandates from the British colonial government to manage the welfare of the labourers (Stevenson, 1975).

The local inhabitants were unaware of the opium-smoking culture until it was introduced by the Chinese immigrants (Sarina, 2012). Most of the Chinese opium smokers relied on the supply of opium from mainland China. Over time, smoking opium became a norm deeply ingrained in the Chinese community, serving as a way to reduce emotional stress and exhaustion after long days of working in British-owned tin mines (Kamarudin, 2007). The opium-smoking culture was seen as acceptable in the colonies. By 1905, smoking raw opium was a common sight among many local inhabitants in Malaya and Singapore (Tregonning, 1967).

The legal status quo of opium selling and smoking was strengthened in 1932 with the introduction of a revenue tax on the opium trade, enforceable in British colonies including the Federated Malay States (FMS), Non Federated Malay States, and Straits Settlement States (Marimuthu & Nair, 2020). Under the Opium Trade Proceeds Funds of 1932, the State Secretary was responsible for collecting the tax from opium trade activities, and the collected amount was then calculated and channelled as part of the state’s public revenue (Emerson, 1966). The British government viewed the opium trade as a lucrative

business and a steady source of income for the empire (Derks, 2012). It is worth mentioning that the supply of opium was either imported from India or China, but the British preferred to import it from India due to its reputation as the world's leading producer of opium at that time (Mccoy, 1993).

Despite the detrimental health and social impacts commonly associated with opium smoking addiction, the British government in London was determined to monopolize the opium business and trade throughout its overseas colonies, including Malaya. This goal was achieved through the establishment of licensed opium dens (Emerson, 1966). The British government also encouraged Chinese farmers to open new agricultural lands for poppy plantations in Malaya. This encouragement arguably opened the floodgates for the establishment of opium dens throughout the country, making them the main sources for tax collection on the opium trade and entertainment hubs for legal recreational drug smokers (Tregonning, 1967).

EXISTENCE OF OPIUM SMOKING CULTURE AND TIMELINE OF OPIUM PROHIBITION IN MALAYA

The advancement in transportation technology, such as steamships and automobiles, was a driving factor that heightened the opium-smoking culture among the citizens of Malaya. Due to this technological advancement, the British government introduced the concept of mobile grocery stores which delivered and sold food, medicine, clothing, and even opium supplies to people living in remote areas (Tregonning, 1964). The main mode of transportation was modified steam-powered ships and boats cruising along the coasts and rivers where villages were located. This accessibility led to a surge in opium demand from many local inhabitants who had already assimilated smoking opium into their daily routine for leisure or to alleviate work-related stress. The ease of acquiring opium prompted local communities to stop buying it from the British-sanctioned opium dens. In the early stages of opium entry into Malaya, opium smokers were predominantly from the Chinese community. However, the opium-smoking culture had already existed throughout Southeast Asia, particularly among people living in areas north of the Malay Peninsula, such as the Siamese, Vietnamese, Burmese, and Tonkins (Spencer & Navaratnam, 1981). In Malaya, the culture of smoking opium was not only confined to Chinese immigrant communities but it was also practised by local

Malays and Indian migrants. Surprisingly, even several indigenous communities, known as the orang asli (that is, the Semang group), embraced the culture of opium smoking (Schebesta, 1973).

In 1930, the League of Nations Commissioner (LONC) published a comprehensive report which put into motion for the international community to legally prohibit the commercial sales of opium and recreational use of opium (Buxton, 2006). The report was based on the belief that the harmful socio-economic impacts of opium usage would outweigh any potential health or mental benefits. The aforementioned report concluded that the habitual practices of opium smoking among local communities had detrimentally affected the smokers by turning them lazy, chronically addicted, intoxicated, filthy, and unable to manage life (Spencer & Navaratnam, 1981). LONC also took into account the teachings of major religions that prohibited drug abuse among their followers (Aslie, 1990). However, according to a 1936 report by LONC on the status of opium prohibition, most Southeast Asian countries failed to impose a total ban on opium usage, with the exception of the American colony of the Philippines which went as far as to completely prohibit opium smoking (Spencer & Navaratnam, 1981). These early efforts of drug prohibition eventually led to the British government in Malaya making the use of drugs illegal through the implementation of the Dangerous Drugs Act in 1952 (Kamarudin, 2007).

THE ENTRY OF DRUGS INTO MALAYA/MALAYSIA AFTER WORLD WAR II

The aftermath of World War II saw numerous countries worldwide enforced a total ban on the consumption and distribution of illicit drugs. The British government in Malaya took a bold step towards implementing a strict drug control policy by enacting the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 (National Archive, 1980b). This act marked the beginning of a commitment by the British government to limit and control drug trafficking and abuse among the citizens of Malaya. According to Spencer and Navaratnam (1981), the ban on drugs was a crucial measure taken by the government to curb drug smuggling and abuse. The Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 showed the British government's resolve to address the drug trafficking problem in Malaya, as evidenced by the enforcement of death penalties for convicted drug smugglers and traffickers (Kamarudin, 2007).

One can assert that the early years after independence in 1957 did not see a rise in drug production within the country. Malaysia was, and remains, classified as a non-drug producing country by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC Report, 2017). The illegal drugs that entered the country were primarily sourced from Thailand, particularly in the Golden Triangle region (Mazlan et al., 2006; Zainudin, A., personal communication, January 6, 2021). The late 1960s witnessed an increase in the influx of drugs into Malaysia, exacerbating the problem of drug abuse and addiction among the population. The issue was not limited to only urban areas but also impacted small towns and villages with a range of negative consequences such as jeopardizing peace and security, damaging the nation's reputation, and hindering economic development (National Archive, 2007). Thailand, at the time, was the biggest producer of heroin, with drug-trafficking syndicates operating in the Golden Triangle region (Poshyachinda, 1993), serving as the main source of drug supply to Malaysia.

Meanwhile, drug abuse among Malaysians, particularly the Malay youths, saw a disturbing rise in the late 1960s. During the height of anti-war movements and protests the Vietnam War, young people were swayed by the allure of the hippie and rock & roll culture brought in from the West (Lia & Samira, 2012). This culture glorified a hedonistic lifestyle, promoting peace, love, and freedom with no limitations, such as excessive drinking, gambling, promiscuity, and drug abuse (Kamarudin, 2007; Ramli, 1998; Wan Dollah, 2010). The influence of hippie culture on many young Malaysians had arguably led to the widespread culture of drug consumption and abuse (National Archive, 1985).

The late 1960s and 1970s also witnessed a significant rise in the hippie culture, non-violent protests against the Vietnam War, and an alarming increase in drug abuse in Malaysia, particularly among young Malays. American troops, taking a break from the war in Penang and Langkawi, were reportedly responsible for introducing drugs (for example, heroin, morphine, and cannabis) to the local population as a recreational drug (Onzer et al., 2022). Kamarudin, 2007). These soldiers obtained their drugs from South Vietnam and Thailand, which was the world's leading producer of heroin at the time to alleviate the physical and mental strain from the war. Between the 1970s and 1980s, there was an influx of drug smuggling into

Malaysia from overseas especially from Thailand given that the Golden Triangle area was the world's leading producer of heroin at that time (National Archive, 1985). Unfortunately, Malaysia and Singapore were identified by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as the major transit hubs for drug trafficking, adding to the already dire situation (Derks, 2012).

The rampant growth of drug smuggling activities in Malaysia is attributed to its convenient location (Zainudin, 2021). Bordered by Thailand in the north, the country is a prime destination for international drug smuggling and distribution (Low et al., 1995). The challenging terrains of the Malaysia-Thailand border, such as mountainous forests, make it a favourite spot for drug smuggling, with secret routes making it difficult for security forces to detect such operations (Low, 1995; Zahari, 2021; Zaker, 2020).

The Golden Triangle region has cemented its position as the world's largest producer of synthetic drugs such as ecstasy and methamphetamine. The shift from opium and heroin production is largely attributed to the readily available synthetic chemicals from China, which is one of the world's leading producers of these substances (Zainuddin, 2021). Due to its proximity to Thailand, Malaysia remains a major hub for the trafficking of both heroin and synthetic drugs, underscoring the significant challenge posed by the illicit drug trade (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2019). To make matters worse, a significant number of drug trafficking activities involve cross-border operations, starting from the Golden Triangle region (Ramli, 2021). These developments highlight the urgency for continued efforts to address the drug trafficking issue, which not only threatens the peace, security, and economic stability of nations but also endangers the health and lives of those affected by drug abuse.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF POLITICAL SECURITY

The concept of political security encompasses the measures taken by government institutions to protect a country's sovereignty, national security interests, and overall stability. A robust and well-functioning government is capable of facing and overcoming security challenges that may arise from internal or external sources. This is achieved through the diligent enforcement of legal, executive, and judicial

systems that safeguard the political integrity, economic prosperity, and security of the country. As explained by Buzan et al. (1998), political security can be threatened by the pressure exerted on a government's policy orientation through the possibility of revolution and overthrow. The emergence of anti-government movements can also weaken the political system, the structure of governance, and military power, potentially leading to a country's collapse. On the other hand, as noted by Albanese (2015) and Kan (2016), a government that is politically stable is viewed as legitimate by the people and is widely recognized as having the authority to govern the nation. This legitimacy is obtained through the support of the people, who have cast their votes through a legitimate and fair electoral system.

As such, the foundation of a democracy lies in the people's power to elect the government of their choice (Mansouri & Afghah, 2019). This means they are bound to follow the laws and regulations set by the government they choose. However, Buzan et al. (1998) emphasized that the different political ideologies present in any country can pose a threat to national security. This is particularly true when these differences lead to radical and fanatical sentiments, which can be exploited by certain parties to overthrow the existing system of governance (Buzan et al., 1998). Steinberg (2000) pointed out that political security can be evaluated based on how well the government elected by the citizens can sustain itself according to the constitution and through legal participation in the country. On the other hand, scholars such as Kassab and Rossen (2018) highlighted that political stability is even more crucial than military power, as it determines the unity and strength of the citizens, which forms the foundation of a country's administrative systems. Hence, if the issue of drugs directly threatens the political security of a country, as when the ruling government is incapable to handle it properly, it could result in the collapse of the political system. This condition could lead to national security threats ranging from corruption and abuse of power to even the formation of a powerful drug cartel in the long run.

Drug trafficking has been notoriously linked with acts of violence and lawlessness, including murder, narco-terrorism, blackmail, and destruction of property (Armao, 2003; Fusun, 2006). Drug trafficking syndicates or cartels are known for their boldness in using violence to achieve their goals. Often equipped with modern, sophisticated firearms and ammunition, such as assault rifles and semi-automatic

guns, these syndicates are not afraid to engage in violent acts, including armed insurgency (Steinberg, 2000). In order to survive in this cutthroat and violent industry, these organized drug syndicates may resort to terrorist-style tactics to intimidate or eliminate rivals, individuals, and law enforcement personnel who pose a threat to their illegal operations (Buxton, 2006; Kan, 2016; Wong, 2007). These violent acts may even escalate to armed insurgency with the goal of overthrowing the government, similar to the actions taken by armed revolutionary groups (Griset & Mahan, 2003). In Colombia, for example, the FARC (Freedom Army Revolution of Colombia) has used drug trafficking to generate funds for weapons and to wage campaigns against the Central Government in Bogotá since the early 1980s (Kan, 2009). These violent acts are necessary for the drug cartel leaders to protect their operations and ensure the survival of their lucrative business, and to deter any interference from local law enforcement officers and prosecutors. The reality is that the drug-related business cannot be separated from acts of violence as the cartel leaders will use any means necessary to protect their interests.

The dangerous escalation of violence and fear caused by warring drug trafficking syndicates and cartels pose a severe threat to the moral foundation of a country's judicial, legislative, and executive systems. Unfortunately, many public servants and security forces have either voluntarily colluded with these criminal organizations or been intimidated into doing so. According to Thachuk (2007), corruption within the public sector has become a tool that enables drug traffickers to avoid prosecution and attain immunity. This protection is crucial for criminal groups and terrorist organizations to operate without fear of legal repercussions. Weak states have become a safe haven for these groups, who can carry out their illicit operations without fear of prosecution (Buxton, 2006; Fukumi, 2008; Williams, 1997).

The perils of drug trafficking on a nation's political security have become even more pronounced in the post-Cold War era, especially considering the close links between drug traffickers and terrorist organizations (Kan, 2016). This association has become increasingly evident, with numerous terrorist attacks worldwide being financed by the proceeds from drug smuggling and distribution (Braun, 2006; Clarke, 2016; Hollis, 2007). The money generated from illegal drug smuggling can provide criminal groups with the means to purchase advanced weapons and potentially overpower government military forces (Albanese, 2015; Avis, 1999).

The culture of drug trafficking and addiction is often closely tied to corruption and fraudulent behaviour among politicians and government personnel (Ward, 1993). This is particularly prevalent in failed states where corrupted leaders protect and participate in criminal activities in exchange for the support of drug syndicates and criminal organizations, enabling them to maintain their power (Kan, 2016). This unethical behaviour can lead to a societal mentality that normalises and views corruption as acceptable (Armao, 2003; Chouvy, 2010; Fusun, 2006), hindering the government's efforts to address and eliminate the growing problem of corruption among politicians, judges, and policymakers.

The staggering association between drug trafficking syndicates and terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda has become increasingly evident in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (Kan, 2016). These organizations have managed to finance their terror operations with the profits they acquire through drug smuggling and distribution activities (Braun, 2006; Clarke, 2016; Hollis, 2007). The vast wealth generated by illegal drug trafficking has empowered criminal groups to acquire sophisticated weapons, making them a formidable force against even government military forces (Albanese, 2015; Avis, 1999). Sadly, the culture of drug trafficking and addiction often goes hand in hand with corruption and fraud committed by politicians and government officials (Ward, 1993). This is especially true in failed states, where corrupt leaders use their political power to protect and participate in criminal activities in exchange for the support of drug syndicates and crime organizations (Kan, 2016). This has resulted in a societal mindset that views corruption as a norm and morally acceptable, as evidenced by studies conducted by Armao (2003), Fusun (2006), and Chouvy (2010). Such unethical perceptions within society hinder the government's efforts in cracking down and ultimately eliminating corruption among politicians, judges, and policymakers.

METHODOLOGY

This study has adopted a qualitative approach to provide a comprehensive and thorough examination of the extent and types of drug trafficking threats from the Golden Triangle region and their impact on political security in Malaysia. Desktop analysis is used in

this study to collect and review information and data sourced from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected through structured and semi-structured interviews with 34 informants, divided into two groups: primary and secondary informants. Primary informants consisted of key players directly involved in drug trafficking eradication operations, including field operatives, army personnel, and police officers from agencies such as the Border Patrol Agency of Malaysia (AKSEM), the Narcotics Criminal Investigation Department of the Royal Malaysia Police (NCID RMP), and the Borders Regiment of the Malaysian Army, among others. On the other hand, secondary informants were made up of academics and experts in drug-related research and international relations, associated with universities in Malaysia and Thailand. These informants were selected based on their direct involvement in researching the phenomenon and their expertise in preventing drug smuggling into Malaysia. Secondary data was obtained through library research method, including books, journal articles, academic theses, newspapers, magazines, scholarly monographs, all in print and electronic forms, as well as published and unpublished reports on drug trafficking and suppression from government and non-government organizations. Furthermore, this study used declassified official government documents from the National Archives of Malaysia related to national security, the history of drug smuggling into Malaysia, and the country's border control system by previous border security agencies.

THE FINDINGS AND RESULTS ON THE IMPACT OF DRUG TRAFFICKING TOWARDS MALAYSIA'S POLITICAL SECURITY

The modus operandi of drug-trafficking activities typically involves drugs being smuggled from Thailand into Malaysia through its north and north-east border regions of Peninsular Malaysia (Ramli, 1986; Ridzzuan, M., personal communication, October 28, 2020; Jefri, I., personal communication, January 25, 2021). International and local online media platforms have reported Malaysia as a significant transit point for drugs heading to the international market ("Malaysia Jadi Hab Transit Kartel," 2021). The recent successful raid by the Narcotics Criminal Investigation Department of the Royal Malaysia Police (NCID) in June 2022 resulted in the confiscation of 696 kilograms of drugs, worth RM25.3 million, which were believed to have originated

from the Golden Triangle region and were paving their way to Indonesia (Noor, 2022). As previously noted, Malaysia's proximity to Thailand makes it a convenient transit hub for drugs entering the international market.

The repercussions of drug smuggling from Thailand pose a significant threat to Malaysia's political security unless this activity is effectively suppressed. Firdaus (2022) argues that drug smuggling activities are often connected to criminal practices such as corruption, misconduct, and breach of trust among government officials, which can ultimately lead to the collapse of government institutions. Trafficking syndicates use their vast financial resources to leverage and disrupt government interventions and efforts to combat the smuggling by giving and offering bribes to senior government officials, especially law enforcers, and prosecutors. For example, during the successful years of the Cali Cartel led by the infamous Pablo Escobar in the 1980s, Escobar bribed a judge of the Colombia High Court to protect himself from being sentenced to jail (Fusun, 2006; Hollis, 2007).

Drug trafficking is not only a threat to Malaysia's political stability but also a serious risk to its diplomatic relations with Thailand. The recurring incidents of violent crimes and bloodshed caused by drug trafficking activities have the potential to cast a shadow of mistrust and tension on the relationship between the two countries. There have been instances of violent clashes between smugglers and border security forces, such as the fatal shooting of two members of the General Action Forces of Royal Malaysia Police in 2020 which highlights the serious consequences of these activities (Berita Harian, 2020). As strong diplomatic ties between Malaysia and Thailand may be jeopardized by persistent border encroachment incidents, both nations may resort to shifting the blame on each other for their inability to effectively manage and protect their borders (Intra, 2020).

Drug trafficking activities also pose secondary threats to Malaysia's sovereignty and security, as organized crime syndicates smuggle firearms along with drugs across the Malaysia-Thai border (Firdaus, 2022). In the view of Safwan (2020), drug-trafficking syndicates from Thailand have been known to smuggle weapons into Malaysia, making the situation even more calamitous. The widespread addiction to drugs among Malaysia's young generations is a concern, but the threat posed by smuggled firearms is far more severe as they can

be used to commit crimes such as theft, robbery, and murder (Jefri, 2021). The black-market sale of these smuggled weapons has been a security concern for Malaysian authorities since the 1980s (Ghazali Shafie, 1981, Arifin, M.A, personal communication, January 6, 2021). The reality of the situation can be seen in the confiscation of RM5 million worth of contraband goods, including small arms, by the 7th Battalion General Action Forces of Royal Malaysia Police in Kelantan in January 2022 (Berita Harian, 2022). This incident highlights the grave extent of small arms and light weapons trafficking activities at the Malaysia-Thai border.

It is important to recognize that access to smuggled weapons not only empowers individuals and criminal organizations to commit heinous crimes but also provides a means for those seeking to overthrow democratic governments. This is exemplified by Malaysia's decades-long battle against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) insurgency. During the second Emergency Period from 1968 to 1989, the MCP procured weapons and ammunition that were predominantly smuggled into Malaysia from Thailand. These weapons, primarily manufactured by the US military and abandoned during their retreat from South Vietnam during the Vietnam War, were gathered by illegal arms distributors and sold to drug smuggling groups and international drug-trafficking syndicates operating in the Golden Triangle region (Dahari et al., 2019, p. 21).

Given Malaysia's experience with the communist insurgency, it is likely that the smuggled weapons will be used by drug syndicates to engage in violent acts that disrupt efforts to suppress their operations. This uncontrolled situation poses a direct threat to the stability of Malaysia's democratically elected government, which is based on a system of parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy that has been in place since 1957. Drug trafficking not only brings a host of problem linked to moral corruption in society but also undermines political security. This is demonstrated by the bribery and corruption cases involving government servants and law enforcement officers tasked with securing the Malaysia-Thailand border, who were arrested by the Malaysia Anti-Corruption Agency (MACC) for accepting bribes and engaging in corruption (Mansouri & Afghah, 2019). These individuals, bribed by drug syndicates abroad, has facilitated the uninterrupted smuggling operations across international borders thus further exacerbating the problem.

Table 1

Statistical Data of the Arrested Persons by Malaysia Anti-Corruption Agency (MACC) for the Year 2016-2020

Year	Number of Arrested by MACC
2016	918
2017	934
2018	904
2019	1135
2020	998
Total	4889

Source: Malaysia Anti-Corruption Agency (2021)

The data displayed in Table 1 highlights the alarming rates of corruption and bribery within the anti-narcotics law enforcement agencies in Malaysia from 2016-2020. In 2016, there were 918 arrested cases by the MACC. Meanwhile, there were 934 arrested cases for corruption in 2017, with a downward trend of 904 arrested cases in the following year. In 2019, 1135 arrested cases were recorded while in 2020, a small decline was seen at 998 arrested cases by MACC. With total cases of 4,889 of arrests until 2020), it is evident that the issue of corruption is far-reaching and persistent. While not all these cases are directly linked to the members of law enforcement agencies receiving bribes from drug trafficking syndicates, the fact that over 900 cases were recorded each year between 2016 and 2020 alone is concerning. Furthermore, the exact number of anti-narcotics officers and staff arrested is not readily available to the public due to the sensitivity of the data.

However, it's important to acknowledge that the root cause of these corruption cases lies in the greed and desire for luxurious lifestyles by individuals within law enforcement agencies. As highlighted by Ahmad (2021), these officers and staff are willing to put their integrity and the integrity of their organization on the line for personal gain. The failure to address and curb such unethical behaviour could threaten the stability and credibility of the democratically elected government, as well as the agencies responsible for maintaining the security of the nation's borders against drug trafficking.

Drug trafficking syndicates will stop at nothing to protect their illegal operations, including bribing members of enforcement and security

forces to prevent interruption (Firdaus, 2022). The vast revenues and profits generated from the trafficking of drugs and narcotics provide these syndicates with the financial resources necessary to support their criminal activities. These billions of ringgits generated from the illegal industry can then be used to bribe members of security forces and politicians with unlimited financial incentives. This point is further reinforced by Zainudin 2021) who recounts an event in 2019 where the Narcotics Criminal Investigation Department of the Royal Malaysia Police (NCID) confiscated nearly RM300 millions of property belonged to a businessman from Penang who was involved in drug smuggling and trafficking activities in northern peninsular Malaysia. This serves as proof that drug trafficking is a highly lucrative business that provides financial power to drug cartels.

The collapse of a government and rampant corruption or breach of trust among government servants are often intertwined. In the case of Thailand, small-scale drug trafficking syndicates, as highlighted by Gun, 2020), have grown into highly organized and global operations ensuing from the widespread corruption and bribery among government officials, including ministers, politicians, legislators, and military commanders who protect the interests of the drug syndicate. This was confirmed by Sukrit, 2021), who noted that bribery was used as a tool to secure the cooperation of politicians and law enforcement agencies in Thailand, allowing drug smuggling cartels in the Golden Triangle to carry out their operations without interference from anti-narcotics law enforcement agencies.

In Malaysia, international drug trafficking syndicates have turned the country into a transit hub for drug smuggling on the global stage, due to its proximity to the Golden Triangle (Scorzelli, 1987). This is not surprising given that even enforcement and security forces, such as the Border Patrol Agency of Malaysia, have been arrested for accepting bribes from drug trafficking syndicates, as explained by Ahmad (2021). Although these are isolated cases, many succumbed to the desire for instant wealth and self-gratification. As mentioned earlier, border encroachment poses a threat to Malaysia's sovereignty and destabilizes its security, with cross-border drug smuggling activities seen as an affront to the country's sovereignty (Hassan, 2006). Therefore, to ensure the security of the Malaysia-Thailand border, the moral integrity of security forces must be fortified first. When their integrity is secure, they will be protected from bribery by drug syndicates and be able to carry out their enforcement responsibilities

more efficiently, ensuring that the border remains protected from any undesirable elements of criminal activities.

The breakdown of the integrity of law enforcement agencies is a key contributor to the rise of illegal drug entry into Malaysia from Thailand. Shaiful (2020) argued that the trustworthiness and credibility of security forces such as the Malaysia Border Regiment Agency, have been called into question due to the increasing amount of unregulated drug entry, leading many to wonder why drugs can enter the country so easily, suggesting that the country's borders are not being monitored effectively. At the same time, Sheik, A.S.O. (personal communication, January 27, 2021) pointed out that this argument raises suspicions of corruption among security forces and reflects negatively on the reputation of the entire force. The smuggling and distribution of illicit drugs from Thailand's Golden Triangle areas may have a negative impact on Malaysia's political security. However, most informants agree that the country's political security remains stable and resilient despite these criminal activities. This is partly because Malaysia is not plagued by the widespread violence and unlawful activities committed by drug cartels, as is the case in countries like Colombia and Mexico in Latin America.

The brutal tactics employed by infamous drug lords, such as Juan Pablo Escobar of the Medellin cartel, have been well documented. For example, Escobar orchestrated a series of car bombings in Bogota from 1987 to 1990 as a form of protesting an extradition agreement signed between Colombia and the United States, which allowed for the prosecution of drug lords under US jurisdiction (Kan, 2016). However, such violence and lawless acts perpetuated and planned by an organized drug syndicate will not be tolerated in Malaysia. If the country fails to effectively curb cross-border drug trafficking, there will be higher risks following in the footsteps of countries like Colombia and Mexico, where law enforcement agencies are constantly battling crime and violence perpetuated by drug cartels.

Despite the threat of drug trafficking, many informants shared the consensus that Malaysia remains a relatively safe country compared to other nations plagued by drug-related violence, such as Mexico and Colombia. The country has been successful in addressing the threat posed by international drug trafficking due to its strict law enforcement and successful anti-narcotics operations (Chan, 2020; Zainudin, 2021). The resilience of Malaysia's security and law

enforcement efforts, in comparison to other Latin American countries demonstrates the country's commitment to maintain a safe and lawful society.

The Narcotics Criminal Investigation Department (NCID) of the Royal Malaysian Police has been working tirelessly to combat drug trafficking activities in the country. By collaborating closely with international law enforcement agencies, such as the ASEAN Police Organization (ASEANAPOL), World Customs Organization (WCO), International Police Organization (INTERPOL), United States Drug Enforcement Agencies (DEA) and other anti-drug enforcement organizations, the NCID is making significant progress in its fight against drug trafficking (Zainudin, A., personal communication, January 6, 2021). Its excellent cooperation with international anti-narcotics organizations has enabled it to effectively eliminate drug trafficking activities in Malaysia. To maintain and enhance its capabilities, the NCID holds regular bilateral meetings and training sessions with international partners, such as the Narcotics Suppression Bureau of Thailand (NSB) and the United States of America Drugs Enforcement Administration (DEA). Such meetings facilitate intelligence information exchange and updates on the latest drug trafficking threats in Southeast Asia (Zahari, 2021; Zainudin, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The smuggling of drugs from the Golden Triangle region in Thailand poses a constant and serious threat to Malaysia's national security, undermining the country's efforts to protect its citizens and safeguard its borders. This region has become a major international transit hub for not only heroin but also synthetic drugs which are increasingly manufactured and smuggled into Malaysia due to the proliferation of modern technologies and the ease of procuring synthetic chemicals from China.

The drug trade not only poses a lot of danger to Malaysians but also raises deep concerns about the integrity and ethics of anti-narcotics enforcement agencies. To make matters worse, there have been instances of corruption where officers of law enforcement and security forces have been caught accepting bribes from drug traffickers, thus tarnishing the image of the nation's security forces and undermining the sovereignty of the country. In addition, shootouts between border

patrol forces and drug-smuggling syndicates could trigger diplomatic tensions between Malaysia and Thailand, exacerbating an already dangerous situation.

Drug trafficking is a complex and multi-faceted issue that involves not only the trafficking of illegal drugs but also firearms. Smuggled firearms pose a significant threat to Malaysia's security as they can be used to ignite insurrection against the government and escalate the country's crime rate. Given its proximity to the Golden Triangle and the local demand for illegal drugs, it is imperative for Malaysians to join forces with the government in the fight against drug trafficking and smuggling. This shared responsibility cannot be shouldered solely by the security forces but by all Malaysians working together.

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