Issue Three

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THE WORLD IN PAGES

THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE: TRADE IN THE SHADOWS



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FROM THE FOUNDERS

We are excited to present the third publication of The World in Pages Magazine. This edition was researched, written and edited by Emilyn Teh and Ayaana Agrawal, who have worked tirelessly to bring you 'The Impact of Trade Protectionism on Narcotics Networks in the Golden Triangle.'

In this edition of The World in Pages, we invite you to look at one of the most complex illicit economies in the world. The Golden Triangle, where the borders of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand meet along the Mekong, has long been tied to the production and trafficking of narcotics. We aim to unravel what drives these networks and why they have proved so resilient.

At the heart of this issue is a simple question. What happens to illicit markets when legal trade becomes harder? As states raise tariffs, tighten borders and turn inwards, legitimate livelihoods can shrink while trafficking networks adapt and find new routes. We examine how trade protectionism interacts with the region's economies, its communities and its criminal networks, and what this means for the policymakers trying to respond.

We thank everyone who contributed to this issue. As you turn these pages, we hope they lead you to look closely at how global trade shapes even the most hidden corners of the world, and that they fuel the curiosity that lives deep within you.



Videep Agarwal



Dheer Bhandary

THE EDITORS



Ayaana Agrawal



Emilyn Teh

INTRODUCTION



Source: Bangkok Post



Source: Britannica



Source: CNA

The Golden Triangle is located at the intersection of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. The region's ethnically diverse population mostly lives in rural areas, with a significant reliance on subsistence farming - when farmers grow crops and raise livestock to meet the needs of their households. The region's notoriety for opium cultivation and drug trafficking networks stems from its porous borders and economic vulnerability.

INTRODUCTION



Source: South China Morning Post

Because of its weaker infrastructure, opportunities for skilled jobs and economic development are limited, encouraging people to enter illicit industries in order to earn higher incomes. After world economic order was upended due to “Liberation Day” tariffs, the effects of drug trade have only been exacerbated. On April 2nd, 2025, President Trump imposed sweeping reciprocal tariffs on more than 200 countries, including a 40% tariff on Myanmar and Laos, and an initial tariff rate of 36% on Thailand, which was later revised to 19%. This form of trade protectionism has had harrowing effects on local production and economic growth, affecting local communities and domestic firms, and indirectly leading to an increase in organised crime rates. This increase in organised crime not only affects people in the Golden Triangle, but also affects people around the globe. With drug abuse on the rise, the effects of this will threaten public wellbeing and safety globally.

TARIFFS IN THE SEA REGION

WHAT ARE TARIFFS?

Tariffs are levies imposed on the imports of goods and services, making imported goods more expensive, and local goods relatively cheaper. Governments often impose tariffs to protect domestic producers and encourage local production, as they make imports comparatively more expensive. This also improves the nation's current account balance, increasing aggregate demand and stimulating economic growth. On the surface level, this seems like a win-win scenario, as not only are governments able to collect additional tariff revenue, they are also able to boost the economy and protect local firms.

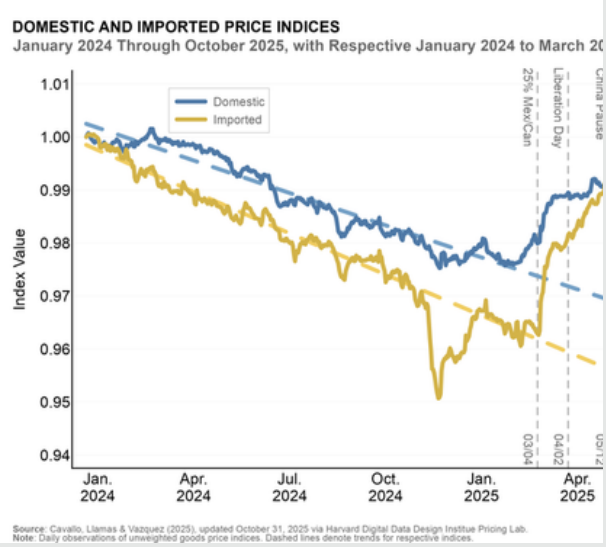


Source: EY



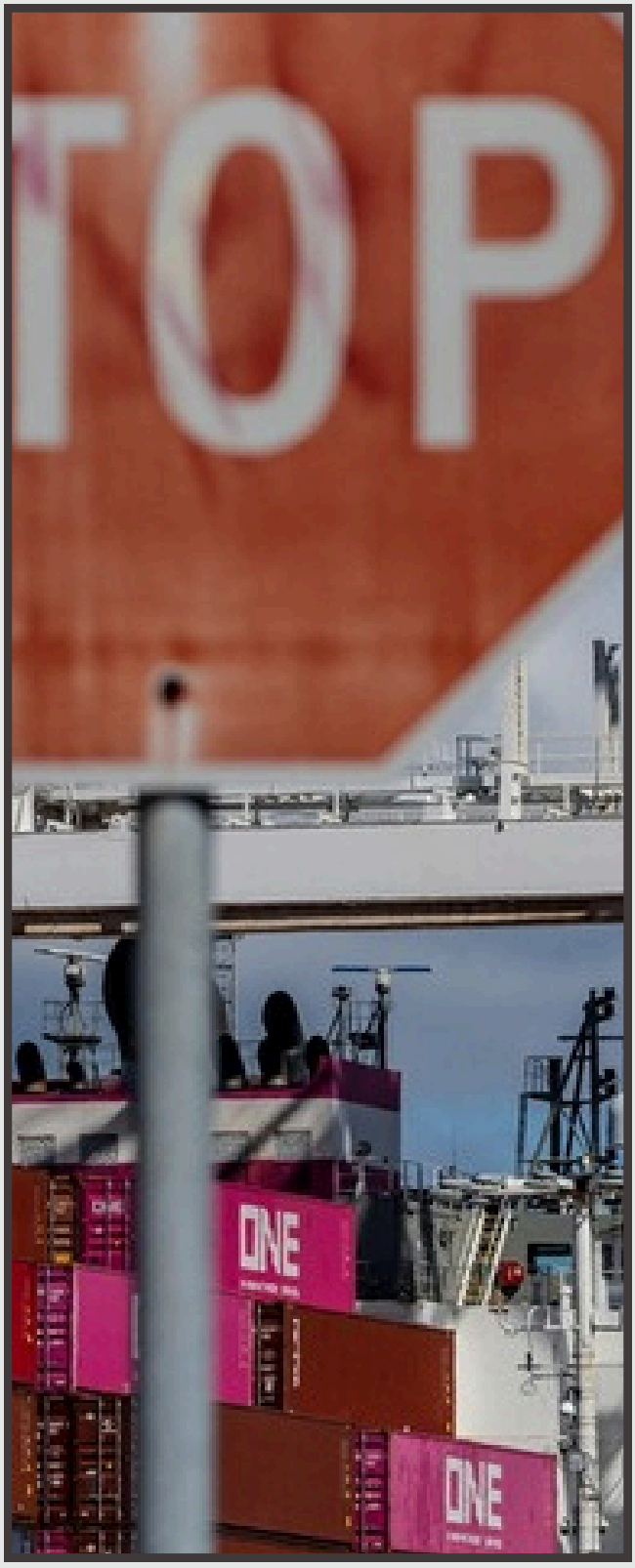
Source: EconLib

WHAT ARE TARIFFS?



Source: Econofact

Yet, tariffs have proven to be double-edged swords. Despite their multiple benefits, they also have their disadvantages. A common misconception is that tariffs are only borne by foreign firms and governments. But in actual fact, tariffs are a burden to local producers and consumers as well. To maintain a steady profit margin, foreign firms will impute the cost of the tariff into their prices, which means that local firms will face increased production costs. While some firms may be able to absorb the increase in costs, other firms will pass the tariff burden to consumers, raising price levels and lowering real income.



Source: Global Times

“LIBERATION DAY”



Source: The Guardian



Source: The Independent Institute

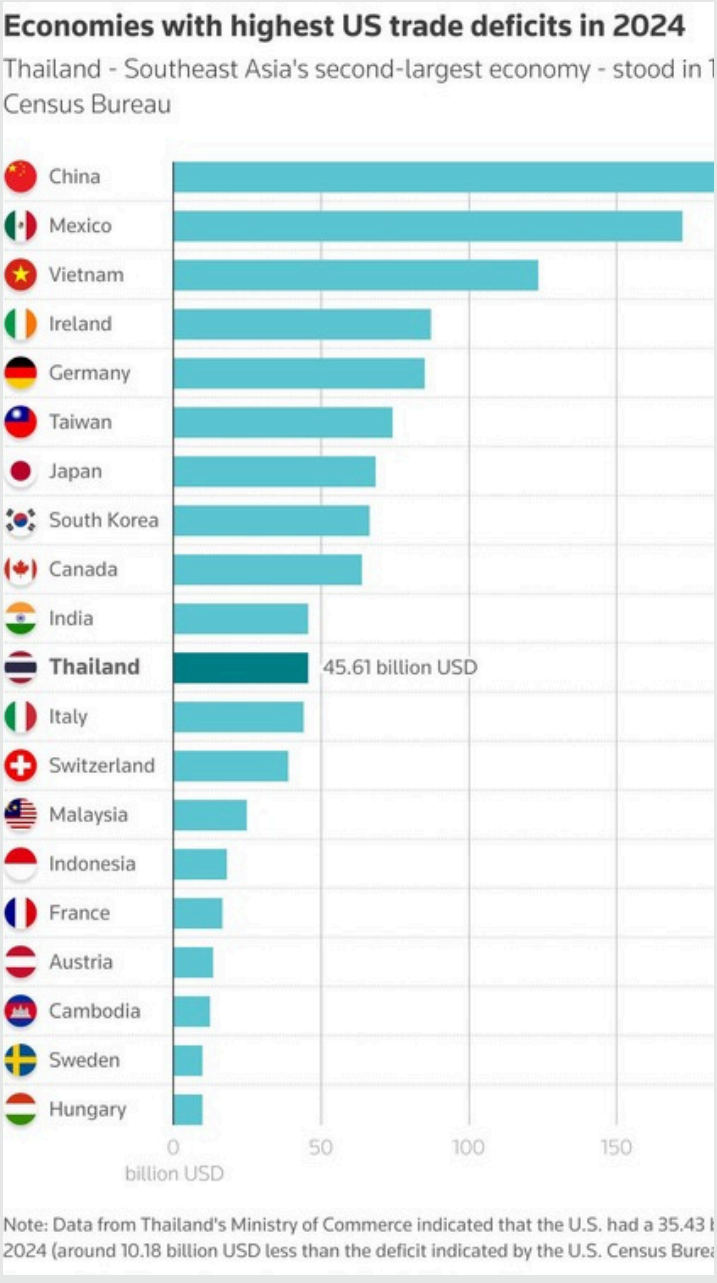
Recently, in the United States, President Trump imposed sweeping reciprocal tariffs on many countries, as a part of his “Made in America” push to bring production back onshore. Average US tariffs rose from approximately 2% to 23%, and this sudden rise led to various economic shocks globally.

“LIBERATION DAY”



Source: The Business of Fashion

Locally, due to the inflationary nature of these tariffs, consumer prices in the US were predicted to rise by roughly 2.3% in the short run, translating to a $3800 loss per household, while wages were set to fall by ~5%, meaning that middle income households would lose roughly $22,000 over its lifetime because of these tariffs.



Source: Reuters

TRADE PROTECTIONISM

However, the effect of these tariffs was not only contained within America's borders. Major exporters to the USA, specifically in the SEA region, were severely affected by this, which had a detrimental impact on economic growth in these nations. South-East Asian nations such as Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia are heavily reliant on the US market, exporting $683 million, $55.11 billion, and $9 billion worth of goods and services respectively to the US in 2024 (Trading Economics, 2024).



Source: GIS

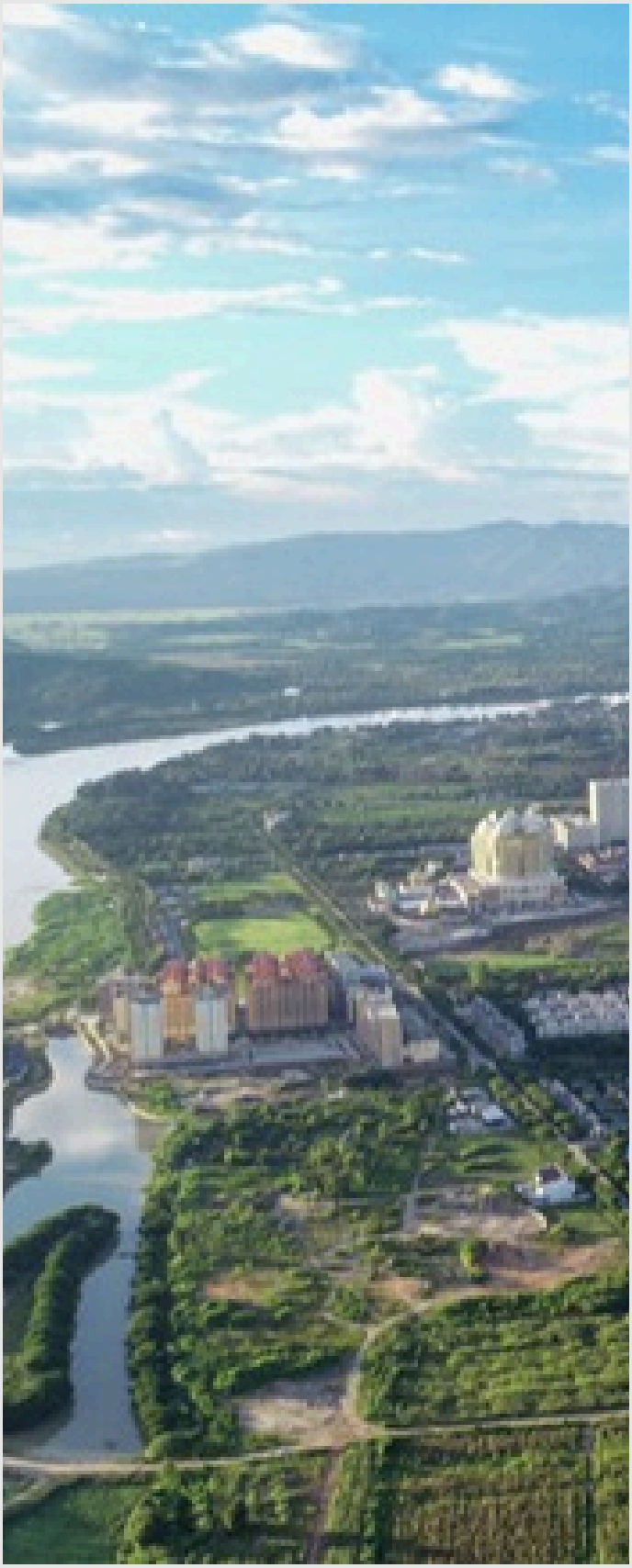
TRADE PROTECTIONISM

After Trump's "Liberation Day", there was an immediate drop in exports to the U.S. across the entire region, causing GDP growth to downgrade. Smaller firms, specifically in Cambodia and Laos, struggled to absorb the increase in production costs, further leading to increased factory closures and job losses, increasing unemployment and lowering living standards.

This fall in public well-being and employment would lead to an increase in criminal activity, as after losing their primary source of income, many have to resort to illicit ways to earn money. This influx of illegal activity would result in an increase in crime drug trafficking, and especially in the Golden Triangle.



Source: The Borgen Project



Source: Wikipedia

ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Opium poppy (Papaver somniferum) was initially cultivated for medical purposes, a long way from the recreational drug it is today. From the 18th-19th century, colonial powers such as the British Empire commercialised opium and exported it to China, leading to significant addiction issues.



Source: East Asia Forum

KEY SECTORS

Chinese traders and settlers then introduced poppy cultivation to upland regions of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand. For impoverished farmers, opium was significantly more profitable, which made it a cash crop for these upland farmers. While synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine have become more popular, the effect of the opium trade still has long-lasting effects globally.



Source: NPR



Source: Audley Travel

From the 1950s to 1990s, the Golden Triangle was one of the world's largest opium producers. Thailand acted as a point of transit for traffickers, and its refineries converted opium into heroin for people to purchase and sell worldwide. In the late 20th century, Thailand was pressured to reduce and eradicate opium production. Nevertheless, the region still remained dependent on drugs, with opium cultivation shifting to other countries such as Laos and Myanmar.

KEY SECTORS

Regions in the Golden Triangle, among other SEA nations, are mostly reliant on the agriculture, mining and manufacturing industries. Jobs in these industries are often unskilled and have lower wage prospects, which lead to lower disposable incomes and living standards. Reliance on such industries has proven to be unsustainable for the economy in the long run.

The majority of the population is engaged in subsistence or small-scale farming, harvesting crops such as rice, maize, tea and coffee. Farming serves as the primary source of income for many rural population, and provides food security for many rural communities, making the economy reliant on the agricultural industry.



Source: Perfect Daily



Source: Bangkok Post

KEY SECTORS



Source: IPES Food

However, the Golden Triangle's dependence on these sectors is a concern for the economy. Farming in these regions often has low levels of productivity because of poor infrastructure and limited R&D, and its upland geography leads to farming on steep slopes, causing soil erosion. Additionally, agriculture is vulnerable to fluctuations in consumer demand, as a decrease in demand would severely impact revenue for these farmers. Climate change is also an issue, as extreme weather events can impact crop yields, and the perishable nature of agricultural goods makes it difficult for farmers to keep or release stock when there is a change in consumer demand.

KEY SECTORS



Source: North of 60



Source: NPSRC



Due to the region's factor endowment, the Golden Triangle is rich in natural resources such as tin, gold, copper, jade and rare earth minerals. The industry generates export revenue and attracts foreign direct investment (FDI, which stimulates economic growth. The region's lax regulations also attract multiple multinational corporations (MNCs), which help create employment and competition in the industry, encouraging innovation and increasing productivity.

KEY SECTORS



Source: Vision Times

However, profit generated by these mining firms rarely benefits local communities, as companies often engage in worker exploitation, involving paying little to no wages and creating harsh working conditions for employees. Constant mining is also unsustainable, as it depletes resources for future generations, and also generates negative externalities in production - polluting water and leading to deforestation.

KEY SECTORS

The manufacturing sector includes sub-sectors such as textile production, food processing and assembly. Manufacturing can be a path for diversification away from agriculture and illicit economies, and also provides formal but limited job opportunities in industrial hubs. However, demand for products in this sector is largely cyclical, making it vulnerable to economic downturns. The lack of skilled labour and capital investment further limits productivity and expansion, leading to higher average costs in the long run and lower quality goods and services.



Source: UNODC



Source: GoldenTriangle Polymers

THE RISE OF ILLICIT DRUG ECONOMIES

OPIUM CULTIVATION

Nestled between Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, the Golden Triangle is infamous for its huge role in the global opium trade. Harsh geography, poverty, and limited control have continued to fuel the surging rates of poppy plantations throughout the region. Despite government efforts to suppress production, opium continues to sustain local economies and influence politics. In recent years, opium cultivation rates have skyrocketed in spite of the various government regulations imposed on poppy farming. Farmers in the Golden Triangle continue to grow poppy plantations to defeat poverty as a result of the lack of government alternatives to support impoverished farmers. Opium cultivation remains one of the more financially viable choices for farmers due to the numerous trade barriers imposed on the Golden Triangle.



Source: UN News

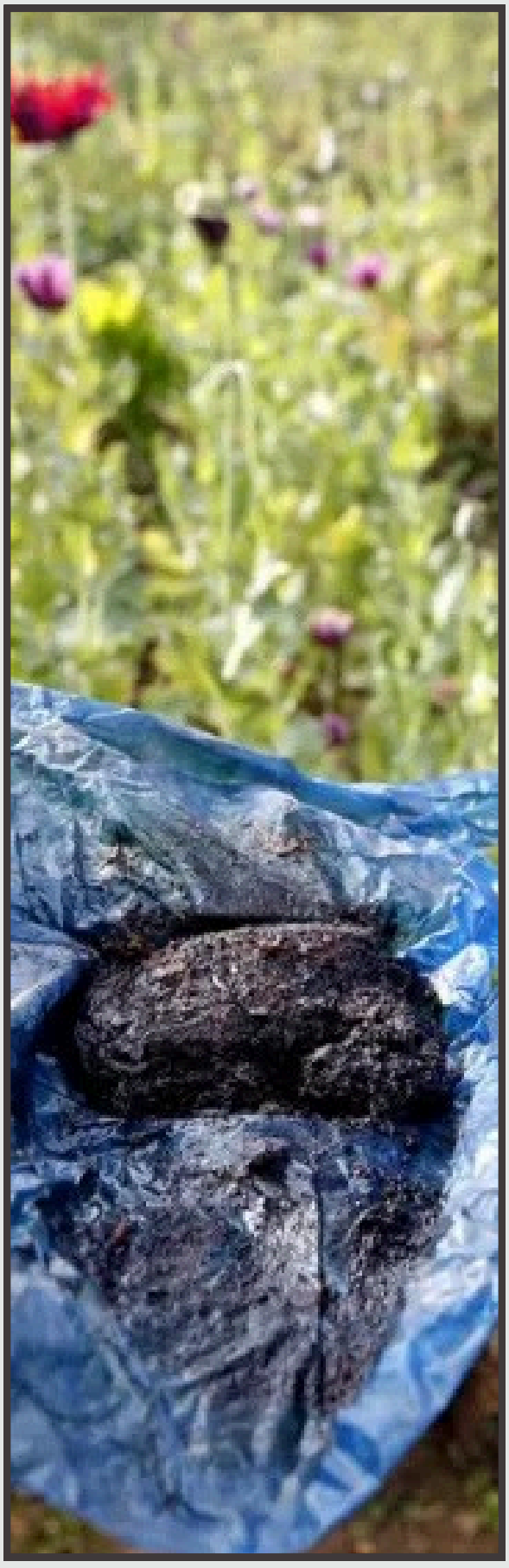
OPIUM CULTIVATION



Source: UN News

At its core, the decision to cultivate illegal crops, such as the poppy plant, is often driven by the lack of alternate livelihoods and the desperate need to secure food and other essential supplies for survival. Trade barriers imposed on the trade of legal crops, such as tariffs and subsidies in developed countries, suppress prices; thus pushing poor farmers towards the agriculture of illicit drug crops, a seemingly attractive option, to earn enough money to sustain themselves, despite the risks involved. Poppy cultivation provides a cash buffer for these poverty-stricken farmers against food shortages and other crises.

OPIUM CULTIVATION



Source: AlJazeera

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Source: Wikipedia

OPIUM CULTIVATION

Poppy cultivation provides a cash buffer for these poverty-stricken farmers against food shortages and other crises. The steep tariff rates imposed, specifically by the USA, on goods from Myanmar (40%), Thailand (36%) and Laos (48%), is the main cause of poverty in these nations. As a result of these high tariffs, there was an immediate drop in exports to the US from these nations. Due to the fact that these countries are heavily reliant on US markets, have limited trade diversification and fragile domestic buffers, GDP growth downgraded across these nations, causing a decline in legitimate income sources and pushing many rural communities to revert to opium cultivation as an alternative means of survival.



Source: Myanmar Now

SYNTHETIC DRUGS

The Golden Triangle is notorious for being the world's leading areas for the production of synthetic drugs. Various studies illustrate how illicit manufacturing and trafficking of synthetic drugs, specifically in the Golden Triangle, has grown exponentially over recent years.



Source: UNODC



Source: UN News

SYNTHETIC DRUGS

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), a record amount of 236 tons of methamphetamine was seized in East and Southeast Asia, marking a 24% increase as compared to 2023. It is important to note, however, that the 236 tons of methamphetamine is only the amount seized, meaning that much more methamphetamine is actually reaching the markets.



Source: SCMP

SYNTHETIC DRUGS

In recent years, Myanmar has observed a spike in the manufacturing and trafficking of illicit synthetic drugs. The ongoing civil war in Myanmar following the military coup in 2021, the long-standing conflict between various ethnic groups and the persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority, have created an environment fostering the production of such proscribed drugs.



Source: Al Jazeera



Source: The Guardian

Despite the current crisis, there is a certain degree of stability in certain parts of the country, especially in regions known for the large-scale production of synthetic drugs. The detrimental combination of conflict and stability has created convenient conditions for the expansion of synthetic drug production. The rapid increase in the cultivation and illicit trade of synthetic drugs causes an increase in the overall usage of them.

ARMED GROUPS AND MILITIAS

An increase in the consumption of such injurious narcotics has detrimental effects on the region's population, deepening poverty, fostering addiction, and undermining efforts to transition away from drug-based economies.

Drug traffickers in the Golden Triangle have started to diversify into illegal economies such as financial fraud, wildlife trafficking, and illegal resource extraction, causing inequality and instability throughout the region. Poor and displaced communities suffer the consequences of the instability caused, thus forced to turn to illegal resource extraction and opium cultivation as a means of survival. As a result, they fall into debt with crime groups or start using drugs themselves, causing untold harm to their health, safety and wellbeing.



Source: Al Jazeera



Source: ABC News

HOW DRUG NETWORKS EXPLOIT PROTECTIONIST GAPS

INFORMAL CROSS-BORDER TRADE



Source: UN News

Cross border trafficking of illicit drugs poses a significant threat to the Golden Triangle region. The increased rate of drug trafficking leads to an surge in the use of such substances, having widespread and profound harm on the area and its population. Smoother border crossings and improved logistics have reduced risks and costs for the trafficking of unlawful drugs and substances. The effortless informal border trade of narcotics results in the spillover and proliferation in the consumption and use of them, having detrimental effects on the wider public and the economies of these nations.

POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION

Drug networks in the Golden Triangle operate as a result of the pervasive corruption, deep political fragmentation, and weak enforcement. The unstable political situation plays a major role in the spread and trafficking of drugs. The current political conflict, specifically in Myanmar, creates an environment that allows narcotics networks and drug militias to thrive, resulting in a substantial spillover of such substances into neighbouring countries, exacerbating circumstances.



Source: Thailand Business News

POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION

As a result of the immensity of the political fragmentation in these nations, crime and corruption rates surge, resulting in further instability and wreaking chaos throughout the region. Criminal groups in the Golden Triangle exploit the chaos to expand illicit operations such as smuggling, money laundering, illegal resource extraction, and black market trade.



Source: Traffick.org



Source: SCMP

Furthermore, weak governance throughout the region allows militias and crime groups to exploit protectionist gaps. Due to the weak enforcement in these nations, the weak cross border cooperation aids criminal and narcotics networks. Fragmented oversight and technology is used by criminal groups to establish illicit supply chains, fueling corruption in the area. On top of the weak enforcement, protectionism, instead of mitigating matters, makes them worse. This is due to the fact that protectionism boosts opportunity for organised crime, permitting criminal groups and networks to shift more towards illegal activities as a source of income as a result of the limitations placed on legitimate income sources, creating nothing but havoc and disorder.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

POLITICAL & SOCIAL INSTABILITY

The deleterious combination of trade protectionism and extensive narcotics networks has exacerbated regional insecurity and contributed to a rise in violence and organised crime; thus weakening governance and deepening instability throughout the Golden Triangle. Marginalised communities are forced to face the consequences of this instability, leaving them impoverished and without a stable source of income. As a result, they turn to illegal resource extraction or opium cultivation for survival; unintentionally getting entangled into a web of narcotics networks, which, in turn, perpetuates the very cycles of poverty and dependence they wish to escape.



Source: Royal Vacation

POLITICAL & SOCIAL INSTABILITY

The cultivation and trafficking of drugs due to the various narcotics networks and the trade restrictions imposed on legal goods, constitutes a major threat to the wellbeing of the broader public in the region. The increase in the manufacturing and trade of such narcotics causes a widespread addiction crisis as well as drug related health issues, endangering not only the present population but also compromising the wellbeing of future generations.



Source: SCMP

ARMED GROUPS AND MILITIAS

The disastrous addiction crisis paired with the alarming rate of drug related health issues exerts significant strain on healthcare systems and disrupted communities, undermining solidarity, depleting scarce public resources, and entrenching cycles of poverty and volatility that obstruct the region's long-term development and recuperation.



Source: KPL



Source: Al Jazeera

Source: ABC News

ECONOMIC DISPLACEMENT

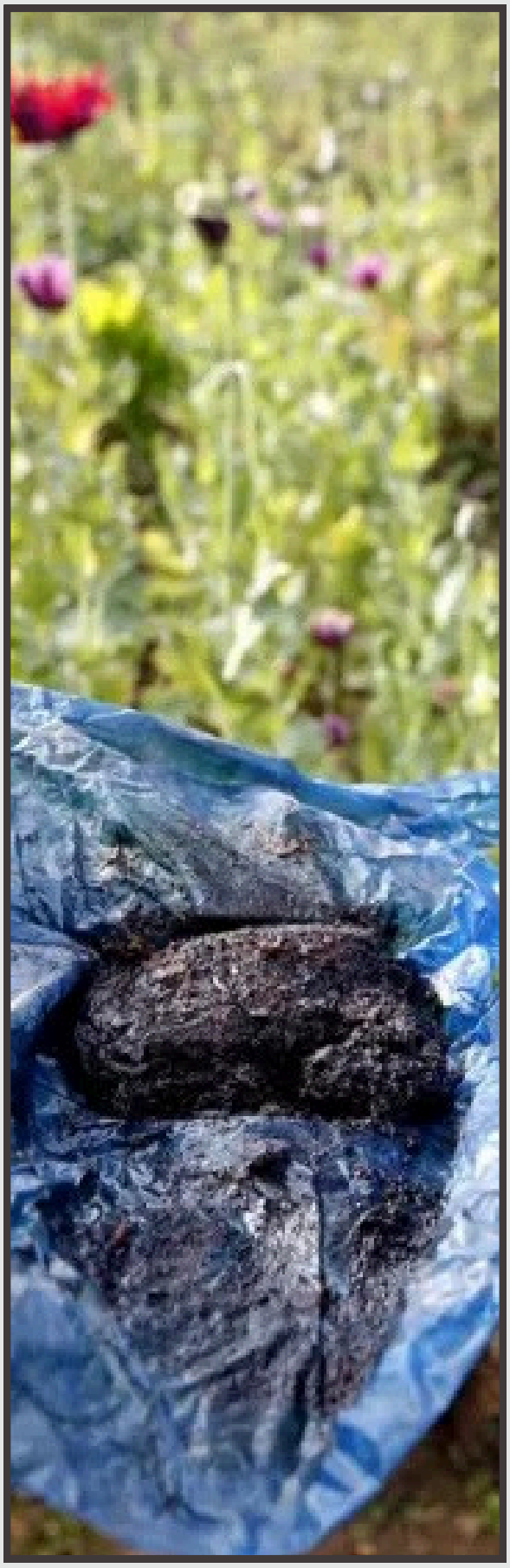


Source: UN News

The erosion of traditional livelihoods in the Golden Triangle and the limited legitimate income options due to the trade protectionism in place impacts future generations, not solely the current generation by causing rates of displacement, unemployment, and poverty to skyrocket. It also fosters a sense of disillusionment among the youth population.

INTERNATIONATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

SPILLOVER OF ILLICIT DRUG TRADE



Source: AlJazeera

The increased trafficking of illicit drugs from the Golden Triangle has led to the massive spillover of such narcotics into other southeast asian countries and beyond.

One of the most rapidly expanding routes for the trafficking of methamphetamine runs through Cambodia from the Shan State in Myanmar. Cambodian authorities reported the largest methamphetamine seizure in the history of the country with almost 10 tons. Trafficking drugs into Cambodia allows them to be smuggled off to other nations via ships, thus causing a major expansion of international trafficking networks and intensifying the global narcotics trade.



Source: Wikipedia

COUNTERPRODUCTIVE INT'L EFFORTS

Despite various international attempts to halt the illicit trafficking of narcotics and mitigate the spillover from the Golden Triangle to other nations, the issue remains a persistent challenge. Implementing opium bans, although a seemingly helpful solution, is often proved to be counterproductive. Opium bans lack alternative development strategies to make up for the loss of income faced by farmers, delving them deeper into the cycle of poverty and continuing the cycle of illicit incomes.



Source: TNGO

COUNTERPRODUCTIVE INT'L EFFORTS

Many nations have declared a 'war on drugs', which targets the consequences of narcotics trafficking instead of its causes as well as focusing on the supply of such drugs instead of their demand, thus having little impact on the issue. The opium ban in Afghanistan has led to a shortage in the supply of opium, not the demand, placing further strain on the Golden Triangle, causing an increase in the cultivation of such drugs.



Source: UNODC



Source: UN News

THE BOTTOM LINE

While trade protectionism brings in multitudinous benefits for local governments and firms, its effect on foreign firms and communities is quite the opposite. The effect of tariffs on the drug trade not only leads to a higher distribution of narcotics worldwide, but it also has detrimental impacts on the local community, with the persistent nature of the drug trade in the Golden Triangle trapping rural communities in cycles of poverty and dependency on illicit activities, ultimately being unsustainable in the long run.

Thus, it is important for nations to consider alternative methods to meet their macroeconomic objectives, as protectionist measures bring about unwanted consequences that can have a long-term effect on the economy as a whole. Similarly, it is imperative for nations in the Golden Triangle to divert their economy from being narcotics-reliant, for the well-being of their citizens and to ensure the sustainability of their economy in the long-run.



Source: National Geograpic

GLOSSARY

Trade Protectionism: The policy of shielding domestic industries from foreign competition, usually through tariffs, quotas or subsidies.

Tariff: A tax charged on goods imported from another country.

Non-tariff barrier: A restriction on trade other than a tax, such as quotas, licensing rules, standards or extra border inspections.

Narcotics: Drugs that are illegal to produce, sell or possess, or that are controlled by law. The term is often used to describe opium and its derivatives.

Opium: A drug made from the sap of the opium poppy, and the raw material for heroin. Historically the region's main illicit crop

Methamphetamine. A powerful synthetic stimulant made in laboratories rather than grown. It now dominates drug production in the region.

Special economic zone: A designated area with different trade, tax and regulatory rules meant to attract investment.

Precursor chemicals. Chemicals used to manufacture illicit drugs that also have legitimate industrial uses, which makes them hard to control.

Illicit economy: Economic activity that is illegal or hidden from the state, such as drug production and smuggling.

Trafficking. The illegal movement and sale of goods or people across borders.

Money laundering: The process of making money earned illegally appear to come from a legitimate source.

Golden Triangle. The area where the borders of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar meet near the Mekong River. Long known for opium production and now for synthetic drugs.

Mekong River. The major river running through Southeast Asia, including the Golden Triangle. It is a key trade route, both legal and illegal.

Alternative development: Programmes that help farmers replace illicit crops with legal crops and livelihoods.

Definitions taken from Oxford Languages (unless otherwise specified)

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