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China's Antidrug Policies in Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle

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Xiaobo Su, recent Asia Studies Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “Since the 1980s, successive Chinese leaders have sought to address this nontraditional security challenge, and there have been a number of initiatives activated in China’s antidrug campaign with Yunnan province on the frontline.”

The notorious illicit opium-producing area—the Golden Triangle—between Myanmar, Laos and Thailand in the heart of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) has become the focal point for China’s external antidrug policy. Connected by the Mekong River—which flows from the Chinese province of Yunnan through Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam into the South China Sea—this subregion is now the new frontline in China’s war on drugs, especially along the borders of northern Laos and northern Myanmar. The area is endowed with an ideal climate for opium poppy cultivation, the prime ingredient for heroin. Drug trafficking from the Golden Triangle into mainland China through Yunnan is currently perceived by the Chinese government as a serious nontraditional security challenge as it is estimated that between 60-70 percent of the drugs consumed in China come from this region.

These six GMS countries, with assistance from the Asian Development Bank, launched a program in 1992 of sub-regional economic cooperation—the GMS program—that aims to transform Asia’s “last frontier” into an integrated free-trade zone. After more than 20 years of development, the program has promoted regional integration and further consolidated economic interactions between China and mainland Southeast Asia. Since 2010, Yunnan province has been Myanmar’s primary export market, and today Myanmar and Vietnam account for 66 percent of Yunnan’s foreign exports. Amidst these achievements in regional and economic integration, the region has encountered a number of social challenges ranging from poor infrastructure, high rates of illiteracy, money laundering and human trafficking. However, the most persistent nontraditional security challenge remains the plantation of opium poppy and the related drug trafficking of illicit drugs into China.

Heroin and other drug trafficking activities in the Golden Triangle are based upon highly sophisticated and well-organized trans-national networks, such as in the northern Myanmar states of Kachin and Shan where the cultivation and trafficking of drugs has become a very lucrative business targeting China. National drug enforcement agencies from the GMS convened a conference last May in Naypyitaw, Myanmar, to discuss the serious problem of the breakdown of the rule of law and civil society within the Golden Triangle, resulting in the Naypyitaw Declaration on Drug Control Cooperation. There was broad agreement that the ongoing proliferation of drug-related crimes in the sub-region “threatens public health and socioeconomic development, national security and stability.”

Since the 1980s, successive Chinese leaders have sought to address this nontraditional security challenge, and there have been a number of initiatives activated in China’s antidrug campaign with Yunnan province on the frontline. China launched its first antidrug police department in Yunnan in 1982 in order to stem the flow of drugs from the Golden Triangle into Southwest China. Since 2000, China has signed

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memorandums of understanding on antidrug cooperation with Laos, Myanmar and Thailand to curtail drug plantation and trafficking. Beyond memorandums, other specific actions have been launched. Senior antidrug officials from the Chinese Ministry of Public Security met in July 2003 with their counterparts from Laos, Myanmar and Thailand to foster a joint team to investigate drug smuggling along the Mekong River and proposed detailed plans for transnational cooperation. Under this mechanism, the Yunnan antidrug police department worked closely with its foreign counterparts to facilitate information exchange, training and criminal repatriation. Former Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2004 proclaimed a "people's war" to protect Yunnan against drugs and the related spread of AIDS. The term "people's war," words that were regularly used by Mao Zedong, once again entered into the lexicon of China's top leaders, a demonstration of just how seriously the top leadership views the situation.

Another major turning point for China's anti-drug campaign occurred in October 2011 when thirteen Chinese sailors were killed after their vessels were hijacked by a drug gang on the Mekong River in northern Thailand. Besides working with law enforcement officers in Laos, Myanmar and Thailand to capture the perpetrators, China persuaded Laos and Myanmar to join Chinese patrols along the river in an effort to protect cargo ships and reduce the flow of drugs into Yunnan. To date, there have been twelve of these patrols by the armed police forces from the three countries. This is the first time in almost three decades that Chinese security forces have operated beyond the borders of China in a mission that was not mandated by the United Nations, but rather for its own national security interests. Hence, these patrols demonstrate an expansion of China's role in regional security and economic integration in mainland Southeast Asia and indicate that China's security forces are prepared to venture abroad to protect Chinese national interests.

China has also been utilizing development assistance programs to support social and economic development in northern Myanmar and northern Laos since the mid-1990s. One key program is opium substitution which has been endorsed by the United Nations International Drug Control Program and state agencies in Laos and Myanmar. The initiative, financed by the Chinese government, provides subsidies and tax waivers for Chinese agricultural enterprises to develop economically viable alternatives to opium plantations in northern Laos and northern Myanmar. The Yunnan provincial government works with state-owned and private enterprises to train farmers to plant rice, sugarcane, rubber and other crops instead of opium poppy. Annual funding for this initiative was increased to RMB250 million in China's twelfth five-year plan for 2011-2015, up from RMB50 million previously. In the period from 2005 to 2010, over 180 Yunnan-based enterprises invested more than RMB1 billion in the opium substitution project to grow economic crops. These crops are then exported to Yunnan for further processing, which fosters active transnational agribusiness networks between Yunnan and its foreign neighbors.

Despite these efforts, the United Nations Office of Drug and Crime has found that opium poppy plantation areas in northern Myanmar and northern Laos have been on the increase since 2006. In addition, the 2013 Annual Report on Drug Control in China, released by the National Narcotics Control Commission of China, emphasized that "drug plantation in northern Myanmar bounced back to a higher level in recent years" and the Golden Triangle remains the largest source for illegal narcotics that threaten China's social stability.

In summary, it is in China's interests to continue its antidrug campaign in this section of the Golden Triangle. China's efforts in preventing transnational drug trafficking, along with development assistance for rural farmers in northern Laos and northern Myanmar, demonstrates its determination in promoting social stability and economic development in Yunnan and the broader GMS region. Progress is being made, but China cannot finish the job alone.

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