



Maritime narcotics trafficking in the Western Indian Ocean Threat to regional maritime security

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ABSTRACT

Maritime narcotics trafficking in the Indian Ocean has increasingly become a major security concern for India and other countries in the region, with the Afghanistan–Pakistan corridor being the primary conduit facilitating illegal drug trade via the sea-route in the Western Indian Ocean. However, there is a gap in understanding the extent and manner of the criminal syndicate involvement in the maritime narcotics drug trafficking in the region. This commentary looks at the emerging maritime-bound illicit drug trafficking in the region and also analyses the *modus operandi* of the criminal syndicate in Pakistan to evade detection from the law-enforcement. It also examines the role of Combined Maritime Force (CMF) and regional navies in detecting and tracking the maritime narcotics trafficking in the Western Indian Ocean.

KEYWORDS

Illicit drug trade; Makran coast; Western Indian Ocean; regional maritime security initiative

Introduction

Illicit drug trafficking in the Western Indian Ocean poses a serious maritime security challenge to littorals of the Indian Ocean. Afghanistan and Pakistan are the two major producers and exporters of opium, heroin and hashish to numerous destinations across the globe. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has designated illicit Afghan opiates as one of the world’s “greatest transnational drug and crime threats”, causing serious damage to health, governance and security at national, regional and international levels.¹ Pakistan acts as one of the major transit points for criminal syndicates to smuggle the goods across the region. The coastal region of Pakistan, particularly the Makran coast, provides perfect opportunity for the criminal syndicate to smuggle illicit drugs through boats, dhows and fishing trawlers across various destinations in the Indian Ocean. The discussion below looks at the emerging maritime-bound illicit drug trafficking in the region, which poses a security challenge to regional maritime security.

Brief history of narcotics trafficking: from production to market

In the mountain ranges at the Afghanistan–Pakistanat the border, opium is not only the source of main currency for external trade but also a source of political power. Historically, poppy was grown in small quantities for merchant caravans visiting India and Iran.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 led to massive disruption of agricultural activity and local economy, which stimulated the development of an illegal drug economy.² Many agricultural lands were turned into poppy cultivation field to fund Mujahedeen's war effort against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan during the 1980s. However, without external support, the opium produced in Afghanistan would have not reached the global market. According to Ikramul Haq, "... CIA intervention provided the political protection and logistics linkage that joined Afghanistan's poppy fields, through Pakistan's land mass, to heroin markets in Europe and America".³ It was the Pakistani drug cartels that built a number of refineries to process poppy into refined marketable products for the global market.⁴ According to experts, Pakistan's military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) played an important role in creating a narcotics ecosystem in Pakistan.⁵ By the end of the twentieth century, Pakistan had become a leading manufacturer and exporter of heroin and hashish.

According to a 2020 UNODC report, Afghanistan remains one of the top opium producers with approximately 84 per cent of global opium production over the past five years.⁶ Despite the opium production being less in 2018 compared to the previous year, there has been no indication to suggest that the heroin production has been affected.⁷ The narcotics seized globally remains very high and nearly 70 per cent of narcotics seized in Asia have been close to main production areas. In 2018, the Southern Route via Pakistan or Iran to India, Africa and Europe accounted for 6 per cent of global quantities.⁸ However, the amount of narcotics seized in the Western Indian Ocean (Southern Sea route) by foreign navies suggests that criminal cartels are conducting narcotics trade with impunity. In fact, the Southern Route is emerging as a major transit point for criminal syndicates to smuggle illicit drugs to Africa and other small island countries in the Indian Ocean.⁹

The emergence of the Southern Route

Geography has a major role in regulating the characteristics of maritime drug trafficking. The mountainous range across Afghanistan–Pakistan border and the tribal belt of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) provide a natural cover for overland movement of narcotics to reach the Makran and Sindh coasts. The traffickers follow key local routes, like Shorabak–Chaman, Shorabak–Nushki, Spin Boldak–Chaman, Maruf–Qila Saifullah, Argistan–Toba Achakzai and Registan–Nushki, to reach important distribution centres or refinery units in Pakistan.¹⁰ For onward trafficking from Makran coast, larger consignments are broken up into smaller ones for sea transport to different locations in the Indian Ocean. The heavy shipping traffic in northern Arabian Sea provides traffickers/smugglers a perfect cover to conduct their illicit drug trade. Based on Pakistan's Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) report, opium, heroin and hashish were among the major drugs seized by anti-narcotics agencies in 2019 (see [Table 1](#)). Most of the drugs were seized at airports and checkpoints compared to seaports/dry ports in Pakistan. However, fewer seizures at ports does not mean a reduction in trafficking or smuggling ([Table 2](#)).¹¹ It might be due to effective concealment of illicit drugs in goods, cargo and vessels by the drug cartels.

The drug cartels or criminal syndicates are highly motivated and disciplined hierarchical organisations. They constantly analyse and monitor vessel routing, as well as activities of

Table 1. Narcotics Seizures in 2019.

Agency	Cases	Arrested	Kind and Quantity of Drugs Seized (kg)				
			Opium	Heroin/Morphine	Hashish	Ketamine	Cocaine
Anti-Narcotics Force	1,087	1,259	7,901.647	4,590.417	62,389.805	0	3,256
Intelligence-based Operations	5	15	0	1,700.00	0	150.0	0
Total	1,092	1,274	7,901.647	6,290.417	62,389.805	150.199	3,256

Source: ANF Quarterly Bulletins of 2019, Pakistan.

seaports and shipping companies, for opportunities to exploit the vulnerabilities in the system. The traffickers also constantly keep on updating themselves with latest technology and innovative methods or modify the old techniques to avoid detection.

There are three primary smuggling methods and techniques used by the drug cartels in Pakistan:

1. *Smuggling via cargo*: The traffickers use various concealing techniques to smuggle the drugs out of the country. According to Pakistan's ANF, in order to deceive law enforcement agencies and their means of detection, traffickers have employed third-party consultants (concealment experts) for concealment of goods. The famous concealment techniques in Pakistan seaports and dry ports include concealing the heroin/meth in machineries, vegetables, clothing, tires of tractors, eatable items, decorative items and medicine tablets. The quantity of drug smuggled via cargo varies anywhere between few grams to 1,000 kg.
2. *Smuggling via containers*: Containers provide effective concealment for smuggling illicit drugs. It is difficult for any law enforcement agency to identify the container carrying illicit drugs without prior intelligence. The construction of secret compartments, fabrication of inner structures and the disassembly and reassembly of container structures are the most common techniques and tactics used by the smugglers. A large quantity of illicit drugs can be easily smuggled through the containers without raising any suspicion. In December 2019, Malaysian custom officials seized 82 kg of ketamine hidden in the door frames of six containers shipped in from Karachi Port, Pakistan.¹²
3. *Smuggling via vessels*: The drugs smuggled through commercial vessels/dhows/trawlers pose a significant challenge to law enforcement to discover the contraband. Experts says that boarding teams may take even days to discover well-concealed illicit drugs onboard vessels in the high seas. In some case, even with reliable intelligence, the search teams are not able to locate illicit drugs hidden in the vessels. Some vessels have been specifically modified to conceal illicit drugs in hull/compartments. Small vessels like dhows, which can travel long distance in the Arabian Sea, are the

Table 2. Narcotics Seizures at Seaports in 2019.

Location	Seaport	Cases	Kind and quantity of narcotics seized (in kg)	
			Heroin	Opium
Sindh	QICT, Karachi	4	46.033	0
	SAPT, Karachi	1		329.00

Source: Source: ANF Quarterly Bulletins of 2019, Pakistan.

Note: QICT: Qasim International Container Terminal; SAPT: South Asia Pakistan Terminal.

preferred mode of transportation of smugglers. In 2020, major drugs captured by the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in Arabian Sea were from dhows (see [Table 3](#)).

Overall, drug trafficking is a challenge to regional security. Afghanistan and Pakistan are facing numerous domestic and external challenge in combating illicit drug trafficking. Weak governance and rampant corruption in the Pakistan's political and law enforcement establishment have weakened its effort to control illicit drug trafficking. Moreover, lack of inter-agency coordination during interdiction of drug trade, lack of coordination among the federal and provincial agencies and judicial inefficiency in investigating the cases and prosecution of the smugglers are all possibly affecting Pakistan's and international efforts to counter narcotics trade in the region.

According to the Fragile States Index 2020, the littorals of Western Indian Ocean are listed among the top fragile countries in the world. The spillover of conflict from land to sea is a serious challenge in the Western Indian Ocean. In particular, the narcotics link to financing Taliban terrorist activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as also evidence of heroin discovered along with weapons and ammunition, raises serious security concern.¹³ The narcotics trafficking is contributing to the instability in the Western Indian Ocean. Ongoing military conflict in Yemen, Syria and Iraq is adding to the regional instability.

Narcotics trafficking and maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean

According to the UNODC Global Maritime Crime Programme (GMCP), the Indian Ocean is emerging as a major trafficking route for traffickers in the region. In 2018, the UNDOC GMCP organised an event, "Countering Narcotics Trafficking in the Indian Ocean", to discuss the recent trends in narcotic trafficking in the region. The experts acknowledged that there has been "a major shift in trafficking patterns of narcotics across the Indian Ocean from the Makran to the Swahili Coast".¹⁴ The seizures in the Indian Ocean have drastically increased over time and landings on the East African

Table 3. Narcotics Seized in Western Indian Ocean (December 2019–December 2020)

Date	Drug	Mode of transportation	Amount (kg)	Location vessel	Interdicting agency
December 13, 2019	Cannabis	Dhow	3,500	Gulf of Oman	French Navy
December 14, 2019	Heroin	Boat	1,500	Mozambican coast	Mozambican Navy
February 4, 2020	Hashish	Dhow	2,500	Persian Gulf	British Navy
February 20, 2020	Hashish	Dhow	1,000	Gulf of Oman	British Navy
March 4, 2020	Heroin	Trawler	400	Arabian Sea	Sri Lankan Navy
April 1, 2020	Crystal meth/ ketamine	Fishing boat	605/579	Arabian Sea	Sri Lankan Navy
August 10, 2020	Heroin	Container	191	Navi Mumbai's Nhava Sheva Port (Mumbai Port)	India Directorate of Revenue Intelligence
October 20, 2020	Meth	Dhow	450	Arabian Sea	British Navy

Source: Compiled by the author from different news agencies.

coasts have moved further down to Tanzania and Mozambique.¹⁵ Between December 2019 and December 2020, the CMF, along with other regional navies, seized a sizeable amount of narcotics in the Western Indian Ocean (Table 3), pointing to the rising risk of heroin addiction.

It is thus evident that the CMF and regional navies are now facing a huge challenge from illicit drug trade in the Western Indian Ocean. Maritime interdiction in high seas by naval forces is the only possible way to control this trafficking as there seems to be no immediate relief to the problem. This becomes all the more challenging in the current pandemic situation as the navy has to take precautions, including sanitising the search team coming in contact with the vessel crew. Also, as long as there is instability in Pakistan and Afghanistan, particularly with the withdrawal of the US troops, the Southern Route will need be actively monitored for movement of illicit drugs.

Conclusion

Regional maritime security, including that of India, is threatened by illicit drug trafficking in the Western Indian Ocean. The expansion of narcotics trade proves that the criminal syndicates have well-established illicit trade networks in the region. These drug syndicates also have a tendency to generate a variety of interconnected threats to the political, economy and social fabric of nations. For example, in South America, drug trafficking has not only created lawlessness in many countries but also has had a profound impact on regional stability. As a regional maritime power, India through its navy shoulders great responsibility in protecting the global commons from unlawful activity. To combat transnational criminal activity, India should foster strong regional partnership with like-minded countries in the region. The regional maritime security institutions such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC), Maritime Security in the Eastern and Southern Africa–Indian Ocean Region and Indian Ocean Forum on Maritime Crime (IOFMC), currently have a very limited role to play in the counter-narcotics operations. There is a need to develop these institutions into more effective forums to develop suitable anti-narcotics policies for the region. Through information sharing and joint exercises in counter-narcotics operations, this maritime partnership would help strengthen India's efforts to combat illicit drug trafficking in the Indian Ocean.

Notes

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9. The Southern Route refers to a major heroin route in the Indian Ocean. For details see “Drug Trafficking on the Southern Route and Impact on Coastal States,” Conference Paper, Published for High Level Meeting of Interior Ministers of the Indian Ocean Region, Colombo, Sri Lanka, October 29, 2016, <http://www.southernroute.org/download/Drug%20Trafficking%20on%20the%20Southern%20Route.pdf> (accessed February 25, 2021).
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