

The Golden Crescent

The Golden Crescent is the name of Asia's two illegal drug superhighways, located at the crossroads of Central, South and Western Asia. Its sister network, the Golden Triangle is located in Southeast Asia. The Golden Crescent overlaps between the mountain ranges of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan whose mountainous peripheries give the network its eponymous name.

History of the Golden Crescent

The Golden Crescent is much older than its counterpart in Southeast Asia. While the Golden Triangle was an opium-producing entity during the 1980s, the Golden Crescent has been doing the same since the 1950s. The Golden Crescent's opium production took a huge nosedive during Operation Enduring Freedom, the retaliatory invasion of Afghanistan by the US following the 9/11 attacks. Opium production was about 90% less in 2001.

Post-2002 however, opium production had been back on track owing to the political instability in Afghanistan. In 2007, the Golden Crescent produced more than 8000 tons of the world's 9000 total tons of opium, effectively making it a monopoly.

Despite worldwide efforts in cracking down on the illegal drug trade only 23.5% of the total products distributed worldwide. Most of the products, about 97% of them, seized are made in the Middle East. Although Afghanistan is the major producer of opiates and heroin in Golden Crescent, most of the seizures are made in Iran, its western neighbour.

What routes do the Golden Crescent utilise?

The Golden Crescent operates primarily through two routes, the Northern and Southern Route's. Through the 'Northern Route', opium and heroin are trafficked to the Russian Federation by way of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. As a result, Russia is facing an epidemic of a fast-growing HIV population with over 50% of known cases resulting from intravenous drug use.

Through the 'Southern Route', heroin travels from Afghanistan through Pakistan and Iran by sea to South Asia, Africa and Oceania region. The Indian Ocean is a favourite among the drug smugglers as the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean Region makes it difficult for authorities to patrol the region. In order to overcome this hurdle, the Colombo Declaration was adopted to enhance cooperation among the nations of the Indian Ocean region. Along with supplying the huge Asian and European markets, Afghan opioids have greatly destabilized the region by fulfilling the demand of its neighbouring countries. Both Iran and Pakistan are facing a drug addiction epidemic on with officials of both countries proclaiming it a national disaster.

What is being done to combat the drug menace?

Despite the rise of drug usage on a global scale, nations in Asia and Europe have not only strengthened their own domestic counternarcotics programmes but have agreed to increase coordinated regional initiatives to combat the illicit drug trade. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) through its Regional Programme for Afghanistan and Neighbouring Countries, UNODC aims to expand the counternarcotics capacity of states by fostering cooperation and information sharing.

The Triangular Initiative, one of the UNODC programmes, aims to unite Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan to increase combined efforts, as joint operations limit cross-border flows of narcotics. As part of the initiative, a Joint Planning Cell has been established in Tehran to facilitate intelligence sharing. The three countries have also identified locations on their shared borders to place Border Liaison Offices, a strategy which promises to allow for a rapid and coordinated inter-agency response to trafficking between the three states. Since their establishment in 2009, there have been 11 joint operations between the three countries, one of which, in March 2011, resulting in over three tonnes of drugs being seized.

How India is affected by the Golden Crescent?

India is geographically nestled between both the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle. As such large amounts of opium and heroin pass through the Indian heartland. The effect of this has been devastating, to say the least, and nowhere has it been more evident than in the Indian state of Punjab.

Though Punjab does not grow Opium or Heroin, the region consumes about Rs. 7500 crores worth of drugs every year. The drug cartels enter India, mainly through the Golden Crescent route. Punjab is both a market as well as a transit point for drugs smuggled from the Golden Crescent. Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Ferozepur and Fazilka districts sharing the border with Pakistan are part of the drug smuggling route which the Pakistan or Afghanistan based drug smugglers use to route their consignments.

Rehab centres, anti-narcotic drives and heavy police crackdown on drug smugglers have to an extent stemmed the flow of narcotics, but the sheer volume of the drugs coming in means that it is a difficult fight. Until more innovative measures are enacted it will be an uphill task to completely eradicate the drug menace from Indian soil.