

# Research on Cooperation in Combating Drug Crimes in the Greater Mekong Subregion

Souksavanh Namnouvong<sup>1</sup> Qin Zongwen<sup>2\*</sup>

1. PhD candidate, School of Law, Nanjing University, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China

2. Professor, School of Law, Nanjing University, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China

\* Corresponding author Qin Zongwen. E-mail: qinzongwen@nju.edu.cn

*The research is funded by the 2021 Jiangsu Social Science Fund Project "Research on the Boundary Value of Criminal Science Evidence"*

## Abstract

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) faces a significant challenge in combating drug-related crimes, which have far-reaching negative implications for the region's stability, development, and security. Cooperation among GMS countries is crucial in effectively addressing this shared threat. This paper examines the current status and characteristics of drug-related crimes in the GMS, highlighting the importance of cooperation and analyzing the existing cooperation mechanisms and their achievements. It also discusses the challenges to cooperation, including political, economic, social, and legal factors, and proposes strategies to enhance cooperation, such as strengthening existing mechanisms, adopting innovative approaches, and fostering greater collaboration among GMS countries and international partners. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of continued and strengthened cooperation to achieve a drug-free and secure GMS, contributing to sustainable development and regional stability.

**Keywords:** Greater Mekong Subregion, drug-related crimes, cooperation, regional stability

**DOI:** 10.7176/JLPG/146-04

**Publication date:** February 28<sup>th</sup> 2025

## 1. Introduction

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), encompassing Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam, is a geographical area of vital strategic importance. Its unique position at the intersection of major international drug trafficking routes has made it a focal point for drug-related crime cooperation. The GMS faces a significant challenge in the form of drug-related crimes, which have far-reaching negative implications for the region's stability, development, and overall security.

Drug-related crime in the GMS presents a complex web of challenges, impacting not only the immediate region but also having ripple effects across the globe. The production, trafficking, and consumption of illicit drugs, along with associated criminal activities such as money laundering, corruption, and human trafficking, pose a direct threat to the safety and well-being of communities within the GMS and beyond. These criminal activities undermine the rule of law, destabilize economies, and fuel social unrest, hindering the sustainable development of the region.

Recognizing the transnational nature of drug-related crime, cooperation among GMS countries has become indispensable in effectively combating this shared threat. Collaborative efforts among law enforcement agencies, judicial bodies, and policymakers are essential for the successful disruption of drug trafficking networks, the dismantling of illicit drug production facilities, and the reduction of drug demand. By working together, GMS countries can pool resources, share intelligence, and coordinate strategies to enhance their collective response to drug-related crime.

## 2. Current Status and Characteristics of Drug-Related Crimes in the Greater Mekong Subregion

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) faces a formidable challenge in combating drug-related crimes, which pose a significant threat to the region's stability, development, and security. The Golden Triangle, situated where

the borders of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand converge, serves as a major hub for the production and trafficking of illicit drugs, fueling a complex and evolving criminal landscape in the GMS. This section provides an in-depth analysis of the current status and characteristics of drug-related crimes in the GMS, drawing upon the latest data and trends to provide a comprehensive overview of the situation.

### *2.1 Current Status*

The current drug situation in the GMS is characterized by a dynamic interplay of factors that contribute to the production, trafficking, and consumption of illicit drugs. The Golden Triangle remains a major source of illicit drugs, with a notable increase in the production of synthetic drugs in recent years. The trafficking of drugs in the GMS occurs through various channels, exploiting the region's porous borders and utilizing increasingly sophisticated methods. Drug consumption is also a growing concern, with methamphetamine being the most prevalent drug in the region.

#### *2.1.1 Production*

The Golden Triangle has long been recognized as a major source of illicit drugs, including heroin, methamphetamine, and other substances. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the production of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine and ketamine. This surge in production is driven by a confluence of factors, including:

- **Increased Opium Poppy Cultivation:** Despite international efforts to eradicate opium poppy cultivation, the area under cultivation in the Golden Triangle has been on the rise, particularly in Myanmar. In 2022, the UNODC reported that opium poppy cultivation in Myanmar increased by 33% to 40,100 hectares, reversing a six-year downward trend. This trend can be attributed to a combination of poverty, conflict, and weak rule of law, which create an environment conducive to illicit crop cultivation. The lack of alternative livelihood opportunities and the presence of armed groups in certain areas further exacerbate the problem.
- **Expansion of Synthetic Drug Production:** The illicit production of synthetic drugs, such as methamphetamine and ketamine, has witnessed a dramatic increase in recent years. This expansion is fueled by the readily available precursor chemicals from neighboring countries, such as China and India, and the relatively low cost of production. Clandestine laboratories, often located in remote and inaccessible areas, are used to manufacture these drugs, making them difficult to detect and dismantle. In 2023, East and Southeast Asia seized a record 190 tons of methamphetamine, with Southeast Asia alone accounting for 169 tons. The Golden Triangle remains the primary source of methamphetamine in the region.
- **Emergence of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS):** The emergence of NPS, also known as "designer drugs," poses a growing concern in the GMS. These substances are often designed to mimic the effects of controlled drugs but are not yet regulated, making them challenging to detect and control. The constantly evolving nature of NPS, with new substances frequently appearing on the market, presents a significant challenge for law enforcement agencies and necessitates continuous monitoring and adaptation of control measures.

#### *2.1.2 Trafficking*

- **The strategic location of the GMS at the intersection of major international drug trafficking routes makes it a key transit point for illicit drugs destined for markets in East and Southeast Asia, as well as other parts of the world. Drug traffickers exploit various channels to transport drugs across borders, including land, sea, air, and online platforms.**
- **Cross-border Trafficking:** The porous borders between countries in the GMS, coupled with weak rule of law and corruption in some border areas, facilitate the cross-border trafficking of drugs and precursor chemicals. Traffickers often utilize established smuggling routes and employ various concealment methods to evade detection by border control agencies. This necessitates enhanced cooperation and intelligence sharing among countries to effectively combat cross-border trafficking.
- **Maritime Trafficking:** The Mekong River and the Andaman Sea serve as major transportation routes for drugs in the GMS. Drug traffickers often utilize small boats and fishing vessels to transport drugs along these waterways, taking advantage of the vastness and complexity of these maritime routes to evade detection. This requires sophisticated surveillance and interdiction strategies to effectively monitor and disrupt maritime trafficking operations.
- **Air Trafficking:** The use of air routes to transport drugs into and out of the GMS is on the rise. Drug traffickers employ various methods, including air cargo, air couriers, and postal services, to conceal and transport drugs. The increasing volume of air travel and the sophisticated concealment methods employed by traffickers pose challenges for customs and aviation security agencies, requiring advanced screening technologies and intelligence-led approaches to effectively combat air trafficking.

- **Online Trafficking:** The internet and social media have become increasingly important tools for facilitating drug trafficking in the GMS. Online platforms, including social media, online sales platforms, and darknet markets, provide traffickers with a wider reach and the ability to operate anonymously. This necessitates the development of new strategies and technologies to monitor and disrupt online drug trafficking activities.

#### 2.1.3 Consumption

- **Drug consumption** is a growing problem in the GMS, with methamphetamine being the most commonly used drug. The non-medical use of pharmaceutical drugs, such as tramadol, is also a concern. The increasing prevalence of drug use in the GMS has significant public health, social, and economic implications.
- **Public Health Challenges:** The use of injecting drugs poses a major public health challenge, as it can lead to the spread of HIV and other blood-borne diseases. Drug addiction and overdose also pose significant risks to individuals and communities, requiring comprehensive prevention, treatment, and harm reduction strategies.
- **Social and Economic Consequences:** Drug use is associated with various social and economic problems, including crime, poverty, and family breakdown. The social costs of drug addiction and related health problems can be substantial, placing a burden on healthcare systems and social welfare programs.

### 2.2 Characteristics

Drug-related crimes in the GMS exhibit distinct characteristics that shape the regional drug landscape and pose unique challenges for law enforcement and policymakers. These characteristics include the transnational nature of drug trafficking, the involvement of organized crime groups, the increasing use of technology, and the adaptability of drug traffickers.

#### 2.2.1 Transnational Nature

Drug trafficking in the GMS is inherently transnational, with drugs and precursor chemicals moving across borders, often involving multiple countries and organized crime networks. The porous borders in the region, coupled with weak law enforcement capacity in some areas, facilitate the movement of drugs, precursor chemicals, and illicit funds across borders. This transnational nature necessitates strong international cooperation and coordination among law enforcement agencies in different countries to effectively combat drug trafficking.

#### 2.2.2 Involvement of Organized Crime Groups

Organized crime groups play a significant role in the production, trafficking, and distribution of illicit drugs in the GMS. These groups are often well-financed, well-equipped, and have established networks across borders, making them a formidable challenge for law enforcement agencies. The involvement of organized crime groups in the drug trade underscores the need for sophisticated intelligence-gathering and investigative techniques to disrupt their operations.

#### 2.2.3 Increasing Use of Technology

Drug traffickers in the GMS are increasingly using technology, such as the internet and social media, to facilitate their activities. The use of technology allows traffickers to communicate anonymously, coordinate activities across borders, and access new markets. Law enforcement agencies need to adapt to this trend by adopting new technologies and strategies to monitor and disrupt online drug trafficking activities.

#### 2.2.4 Adaptability of Drug Traffickers

Drug traffickers in the GMS are constantly adapting their methods and routes in response to law enforcement efforts. They are quick to exploit new opportunities, such as the availability of non-controlled chemicals or the use of new technologies, to circumvent law enforcement crackdowns. This adaptability necessitates continuous monitoring of drug trafficking trends and patterns, as well as flexible and adaptive cooperation strategies.

The characteristics of drug-related crimes in the GMS highlight the need for a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to combat this evolving threat. This approach should involve strengthening international cooperation, enhancing law enforcement capacity, addressing the root causes of drug-related crime, and adopting innovative strategies to disrupt drug trafficking networks and reduce drug demand.

### 3. Necessity of Cooperation in Combating Drug Crimes in the Greater Mekong Subregion

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) faces a formidable challenge in combating drug crimes due to the deep-rooted and evolving nature of the drug trade in the region. The production, trafficking, and consumption of illicit drugs, along with associated criminal activities, have far-reaching negative implications for the socio-economic development and security of the GMS countries. Given the complexity and magnitude of the drug problem, cooperation among GMS countries is not only necessary but also indispensable for effectively addressing this shared threat.

### *3.1 Limitations of Unilateral Action*

While individual countries can take measures to combat drug crimes within their borders, unilateral action has limitations in addressing the transnational nature of the drug trade. Drug traffickers and organized crime groups operate across borders, exploiting vulnerabilities and circumventing law enforcement efforts in individual countries. Unilateral action may displace drug production and trafficking to other areas, creating a "balloon effect" where the problem simply shifts to another location.

Moreover, limited resources and capacity constraints can hinder the effectiveness of unilateral action. Countries in the GMS may have varying levels of law enforcement capacity, financial resources, and technical expertise to tackle drug-related crimes effectively. This disparity in capacity can create vulnerabilities that are exploited by transnational organized crime groups.

Differences in legal frameworks and drug control policies among GMS countries can pose challenges to cooperation. For instance, variations in the legal status of certain drugs, sentencing guidelines, and extradition procedures can complicate cross-border investigations and prosecutions. Harmonizing legal frameworks and procedures is essential for seamless cooperation and effective law enforcement.

### *3.2 Advantages of Cooperation*

Cooperation among GMS countries offers several advantages in combating drug crimes:

- **Enhanced intelligence sharing:** Cooperation enables the exchange of intelligence and information on drug trafficking routes, methods, and organized crime groups. This shared understanding helps countries anticipate and respond to evolving drug trafficking trends and patterns.
- **Strengthened law enforcement:** Joint operations, coordinated investigations, and cross-border law enforcement cooperation enhance the capacity of countries to disrupt drug trafficking networks and dismantle drug production facilities.
- **Harmonized legal frameworks:** Cooperation can lead to the harmonization of legal frameworks and procedures, facilitating extradition, mutual legal assistance, and the prosecution of drug traffickers across borders.
- **Capacity building:** Collaborative efforts can support capacity building initiatives, training programs, and technical assistance to strengthen law enforcement and judicial institutions in the region.
- **Reduced drug demand:** Cooperation allows countries to share best practices and implement joint programs for drug demand reduction, prevention, and treatment.
- **Addressing the root causes:** By fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community groups, countries can work together to address the root causes of drug-related crime, such as poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunities.

### *3.3 Crucial Role in Regional Security and Stability*

Cooperation in combating drug crimes plays a crucial role in maintaining regional security and stability. Drug-related crimes have the potential to destabilize communities, fuel corruption, and undermine the rule of law. This destabilization can have ripple effects across the region, affecting not only the immediate countries involved but also their neighbors.

By working together, GMS countries can create a more secure and stable environment conducive to economic growth and sustainable development. Reduced drug crime and enhanced security promote investor confidence, attract tourism, and facilitate trade, contributing to economic prosperity and improved livelihoods.

In conclusion, the necessity of cooperation in combating drug crimes in the Greater Mekong Subregion cannot be overstated. The transnational nature of the drug trade, the limitations of unilateral action, and the advantages of cooperation all point to the indispensable role of collaborative efforts in addressing this shared threat. By strengthening cooperation mechanisms, enhancing information sharing, and coordinating law enforcement efforts, GMS countries can effectively combat drug crimes, mitigate their impact on the region, and contribute to a more secure and prosperous future for all.

## **4. Mechanisms and Achievements of Cooperation in Combating Drug Crimes in the Greater Mekong Subregion**

Recognizing the transnational nature of drug-related crimes and the limitations of unilateral action, countries in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) have been actively engaged in cooperation to combat this shared threat. Various mechanisms have been established to facilitate cooperation, leading to significant achievements in drug control efforts.

#### 4.1 Cooperation Mechanisms

- **Bilateral Agreements:** GMS countries have established bilateral agreements to enhance cooperation in drug control. These agreements cover various aspects of drug control, including intelligence sharing, joint operations, and capacity building. For example, China has signed bilateral agreements with several GMS countries, such as Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, to strengthen cooperation in border control, drug interdiction, and alternative development programs.
- **Multilateral Agreements:** GMS countries have also been active in multilateral agreements and initiatives to combat drug crimes. The most prominent multilateral mechanism is the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Drug Control in the Greater Mekong Subregion, signed in 1993. The MOU provides a framework for cooperation among GMS countries, including China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. It promotes cooperation in various areas, such as drug law enforcement, demand reduction, treatment, and rehabilitation. The MOU has been instrumental in facilitating information sharing, joint operations, and capacity building among GMS countries. It has also helped to harmonize drug control policies and practices in the region.
- **Regional and International Organizations:** Regional and international organizations play a crucial role in supporting drug control efforts in the GMS. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) provides technical assistance, capacity building programs, and platforms for information sharing and cooperation among GMS countries. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC) also facilitate cooperation in drug control and related security issues.

In addition to the above, the following mechanisms are also noteworthy:

- **Border Liaison Offices (BLOs):** The establishment of BLOs at border crossings has facilitated communication and coordination among law enforcement agencies in neighboring countries. BLOs serve as a point of contact for information exchange, joint operations, and the resolution of cross-border issues related to drug trafficking.
- **Information Sharing Networks:** The development of secure information sharing networks, such as the Mekong MOU Information Sharing Network (ISN), has enabled real-time exchange of intelligence and information among GMS countries. These networks support drug law enforcement operations, facilitate the identification of drug trafficking trends, and promote coordinated responses.
- **Training and Capacity Building Programs:** The UNODC and other international partners have conducted various training and capacity building programs for law enforcement officers, judicial officials, and policymakers in the GMS. These programs have enhanced the knowledge, skills, and expertise of drug control personnel in the region, strengthening their ability to effectively address drug-related crimes.
- **Cross-border cooperation centers:** The establishment of cross-border cooperation centers has promoted joint efforts and intelligence sharing among neighboring countries. These centers serve as a platform for coordinating law enforcement operations, conducting joint investigations, and addressing cross-border crime in a timely and efficient manner.

#### 4.2 Achievements of Cooperation

Cooperation in combating drug crimes in the GMS has led to significant achievements:

- **Intelligence Sharing:** GMS countries have established mechanisms for intelligence sharing and information exchange on drug trafficking routes, methods, and organized crime groups. This has helped countries better understand the drug trade and coordinate their law enforcement efforts. For instance, in the first nine months of 2023, the Mekong MOU Information Sharing Network (ISN) facilitated the exchange of 1,383 pieces of intelligence among member countries, contributing to successful drug law enforcement operations.
- **Joint Operations:** Joint operations and coordinated investigations have been conducted among GMS countries to disrupt drug trafficking networks and dismantle drug production facilities. For example, the Safe Mekong Joint Operation among China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam has resulted in the seizure of large quantities of drugs, weapons, and precursor chemicals, as well as the arrest of numerous drug traffickers. In 2024 alone, the operation resulted in the dismantling of 11,000 drug-related criminal cases, the apprehension of 18,000 suspects, and the confiscation of 35.5 tons of various drugs. The China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand Mekong River Joint Patrol has also been successful in intercepting drug shipments and apprehending drug traffickers along the Mekong River. Over the past 10 years, law enforcement agencies from the four countries have dispatched a total of 17,118 personnel and 843 vessels, conducting 182 joint operations, including water and land inspections and segmented patrols. These efforts have resulted in the dismantling of 36,173 drug-related cases, the seizure of

136.93 tons of drugs, and the apprehension of 2,659 individuals involved in illegal immigration. Furthermore, the perpetrators of the "Mekong River Massacre," including the main culprit, Naw Kham, were brought to justice. These operations highlight the effectiveness of joint actions and intelligence sharing among GMS countries in combating drug crimes and maintaining regional stability.

- **Capacity Building:** Cooperation has supported capacity building initiatives, training programs, and technical assistance to strengthen law enforcement and judicial institutions in the region. This has enhanced the ability of GMS countries to effectively investigate, prosecute, and adjudicate drug-related crimes. For example, China has conducted 18 training sessions for law enforcement officers from Laos and Myanmar, training over 200 individuals and equipping them to combat drug-related crimes.
- **Alternative Development:** GMS countries have collaborated on alternative development programs to provide farmers with sustainable livelihoods and reduce their reliance on opium poppy cultivation. These programs have helped to reduce the supply of heroin and other illicit drugs from the Golden Triangle. For instance, China has assisted Laos in implementing alternative development programs, contributing to a significant reduction in opium poppy cultivation from approximately 6,800 hectares in 2012 to 901 hectares in 2020.

Cooperation in combating drug crimes in the GMS has made significant strides in disrupting the drug trade, reducing drug production, and strengthening law enforcement capacity. However, the drug problem remains a persistent challenge, requiring continued and enhanced cooperation among GMS countries to effectively address this shared threat.

## **5. Challenges to Cooperation in Combating Drug Crimes in the Greater Mekong Subregion**

Despite significant strides made in cooperation, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) continues to face persistent challenges in its collective fight against drug-related crimes. These challenges are multifaceted, stemming from political, economic, social, and legal complexities within the region.

### *5.1 Political Challenges*

- **Political instability:** The ongoing political instability and conflicts in certain GMS countries, particularly in Myanmar, can hinder cooperation efforts. The presence of non-state armed groups and organized crime networks operating in conflict zones can create challenges for law enforcement and cross-border cooperation. Political instability can lead to a lack of government control and oversight, particularly in border regions, making it easier for drug traffickers to operate with impunity. Conflicts and armed clashes can also disrupt law enforcement operations and hinder the implementation of drug control measures.
- **Lack of trust:** A lack of trust and mutual suspicion among some GMS countries can impede information sharing and joint operations. Concerns about sovereignty and national interests can sometimes overshadow the shared goal of combating drug crimes. This lack of trust can lead to reluctance in sharing sensitive information, hindering the ability to effectively track and target drug trafficking networks. It can also hamper joint law enforcement operations, as countries may be hesitant to cooperate fully or share resources.

### *5.2 Economic Challenges*

- **Poverty and inequality:** The prevalence of poverty and economic inequality in certain GMS areas can create incentives for people to engage in drug-related activities. The lack of economic opportunities and alternative livelihoods can make it difficult to reduce drug production and trafficking. Impoverished communities may view drug cultivation, production, or trafficking as a means of survival or economic advancement, making it challenging to implement alternative development programs or eradicate drug crops. Economic inequality can also fuel social unrest and instability, creating an environment conducive to drug-related crimes.
- **Illicit financial flows:** The illicit financial flows generated by the drug trade can fuel corruption, money laundering, and other criminal activities, undermining economic development and stability. These illicit financial flows can distort markets, undermine legitimate businesses, and destabilize economies. They can also be used to finance other criminal activities, such as terrorism and human trafficking, further exacerbating the security challenges in the region.

### *5.3 Social Challenges*

- **Drug demand:** The growing demand for drugs in the GMS and neighboring regions fuels the drug trade and poses significant public health and social challenges. The increasing demand for both traditional and synthetic drugs create a lucrative market for drug traffickers, incentivizing them to expand their

operations. Drug use is associated with various health and social problems, including addiction, overdose, the spread of infectious diseases, and crime.

- Cultural differences: Cultural differences and varying perceptions of drug use can complicate cooperation efforts. Different cultural norms and values regarding drug use can make it challenging to reach a consensus on drug control policies and strategies. This can also affect the implementation of demand reduction programs and treatment approaches, as they may need to be tailored to specific cultural contexts.

#### 5.4 Legal Challenges

- Lack of harmonization: The lack of harmonization in drug laws and legal frameworks among GMS countries can create obstacles for cross-border investigations, extradition, and mutual legal assistance. Differences in legal definitions, sentencing guidelines, and procedures can complicate efforts to prosecute drug traffickers and dismantle organized crime networks. This lack of harmonization can also create loopholes and inconsistencies that are exploited by drug traffickers to evade justice.
- Corruption: Corruption and weak rule of law in some GMS areas can undermine law enforcement efforts and facilitate drug trafficking activities. Corruption can compromise law enforcement and judicial integrity, allowing drug traffickers to bribe officials and operate with impunity. Weak rule of law can also hinder the effective investigation and prosecution of drug-related crimes, further emboldening criminal networks.

#### 5.5 Other Challenges

- Geographical challenges: The GMS's mountainous terrain, dense forests, and porous borders can make it difficult to detect and interdict drug trafficking operations. The region's challenging geography provides ample opportunities for drug traffickers to establish hidden production facilities and utilize clandestine routes to transport drugs and precursor chemicals. The porous borders make it easier for traffickers to move illicit goods and evade border patrols.
- Technological advancements: The use of technology by drug traffickers, such as encrypted communication platforms and online drug markets, can make it more challenging for law enforcement agencies to track and disrupt their activities. The increasing use of technology by drug traffickers allows them to communicate anonymously, coordinate activities across borders, and access new markets. This requires law enforcement agencies to adopt new technologies and strategies to effectively counter these threats.
- Adaptability of drug traffickers: Drug traffickers are constantly adapting their methods and routes in response to law enforcement efforts, requiring continuous monitoring and adaptation of cooperation strategies. Drug traffickers are quick to adapt to changing circumstances, shifting their routes, methods, and drug types to avoid detection and exploit new opportunities. This necessitates continuous monitoring of drug trafficking trends and patterns, as well as flexible and adaptive cooperation strategies.

### 6. Improving Cooperation in Combating Drug Crimes in the Greater Mekong Subregion

To effectively address the multifaceted challenges hindering cooperation in combating drug crimes in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), a comprehensive and multifaceted approach is required. This approach should focus on strengthening existing mechanisms, adopting innovative strategies, and fostering greater collaboration among GMS countries and international partners.

#### 6.1 Strengthening Existing Mechanisms

- Enhancing the MOU on Drug Control: The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Drug Control in the Greater Mekong Subregion, established in 1993, serves as a crucial framework for regional cooperation in combating drug crimes. To enhance its effectiveness in addressing emerging challenges, the MOU should be reviewed and strengthened. This could involve expanding its scope to encompass new psychoactive substances (NPS) and other evolving drug threats, ensuring it remains relevant in the face of dynamic drug markets. Additionally, the information-sharing mechanisms under the MOU, including the Mekong MOU Information Sharing Network (ISN), should be fortified to ensure the timely and secure exchange of intelligence, enabling a more coordinated and rapid response to drug trafficking activities. Furthermore, developing more specific and actionable targets and indicators to measure the progress of cooperation under the MOU would enhance accountability and facilitate better evaluation of the effectiveness of joint efforts.
- Enhancing border control cooperation: Recognizing the GMS's porous borders and the ease with which

drugs, precursor chemicals, and illicit funds can be moved across them, GMS countries should bolster their cooperation in border control. This could involve increasing the frequency and scope of joint patrols and law enforcement operations in border areas, improving coordination and communication among border control agencies, and utilizing technology, such as surveillance systems and data analytics, to enhance border security. By strengthening border control measures, GMS countries can effectively interdict the flow of illicit goods and disrupt drug trafficking networks operating in the region.

- **Strengthening legal frameworks:** The lack of harmonization in drug laws and legal frameworks among GMS countries poses a significant challenge to cooperation. To facilitate cross-border investigations, extradition, and mutual legal assistance, GMS countries should work towards greater harmonization of their legal frameworks and drug control policies. This could involve developing model legislation and guidelines on drug control, negotiating bilateral and multilateral agreements to streamline extradition and mutual legal assistance procedures, and providing technical assistance and capacity building to strengthen legal and judicial institutions in the region. Harmonizing legal frameworks would enable a more coordinated and effective response to drug trafficking, ensuring that criminals cannot exploit loopholes or inconsistencies in legal systems.
- **Strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms:** Regional cooperation initiatives, such as the China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand Mekong River Joint Patrol and the Safe Mekong Joint Operation, have demonstrated the effectiveness of joint efforts in combating drug crimes. These mechanisms should be further strengthened through increased resource allocation, enhanced coordination, and expanded operational scope. Regular joint exercises, training programs, and the establishment of dedicated task forces could enhance interoperability and effectiveness of joint law enforcement operations.
- **Enhancing the role of international organizations:** International organizations, such as the UNODC, ASEAN, and INTERPOL, play a vital role in supporting drug control efforts in the GMS. Their role could be enhanced through increased technical assistance, capacity building programs, and financial support. These organizations can also facilitate the exchange of best practices, promote research and analysis, and support the development and implementation of regional drug control strategies.

### *6.2 Adopting Innovative Strategies*

- **Addressing the root causes:** GMS countries should actively address the root causes of drug-related crime, such as poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunities, recognizing that these socioeconomic factors can create an environment conducive to illicit activities. This could involve investing in sustainable economic development and alternative livelihood programs in drug-producing areas, empowering communities to pursue legitimate economic activities and reducing their reliance on drug cultivation or production. Additionally, strengthening education and awareness-raising programs to prevent drug use, particularly among vulnerable populations, would help curb the demand for drugs and reduce the profitability of the drug trade. Furthermore, expanding access to drug treatment and rehabilitation services would help address the public health dimension of the drug problem, reducing addiction and its associated social and economic costs.
- **Enhancing the use of technology:** In the face of increasingly sophisticated drug trafficking networks, GMS countries should leverage technology to enhance their drug control efforts. This could involve utilizing data analytics and artificial intelligence to identify drug trafficking patterns and trends, enabling law enforcement agencies to anticipate and disrupt trafficking routes and methods more effectively. Developing early warning systems to detect and respond to emerging drug threats, such as new psychoactive substances (NPS) and novel concealment methods, would help countries stay ahead of the curve in the fight against drug-related crime. Furthermore, using technology to enhance information sharing and communication among law enforcement agencies would facilitate a more coordinated and rapid response to drug trafficking activities.

### *6.3 Fostering Greater Collaboration*

- **Promoting multi-sectoral collaboration:** GMS countries should promote collaboration among various sectors, including law enforcement, health, education, and social welfare, to address the drug problem comprehensively. This integrated approach would ensure that drug control efforts encompass prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation, as well as law enforcement and interdiction.
- **Engaging civil society:** GMS countries should support and empower civil society organizations (CSOs) to actively participate in drug control efforts. CSOs can play a vital role in raising awareness, providing education and prevention programs, and supporting drug users and their families.
- **Enhancing community participation:** GMS countries should encourage community participation in drug



prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation programs. By empowering communities to take ownership of drug control efforts, GMS countries can foster a sense of shared responsibility and promote sustainable solutions.

- Promoting transparency and accountability: To build trust and ensure the effectiveness of cooperation, GMS countries should promote transparency and accountability in their drug control efforts. This could involve regularly publishing data and information on drug-related crimes and cooperation efforts, establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the progress of cooperation, and conducting independent reviews and assessments of drug control policies and programs.
- Strengthening political will: Strong political will and commitment from GMS leaders are essential for effective cooperation in combating drug crimes. This could involve elevating drug control to a higher priority on the regional agenda, providing adequate resources and support for drug control efforts, and fostering a culture of cooperation and information sharing among GMS countries.

By strengthening existing mechanisms, adopting innovative strategies, and fostering greater collaboration, GMS countries can overcome the challenges to cooperation and effectively combat drug crimes in the region. A comprehensive and coordinated approach is essential to achieve a drug-free and secure GMS, contributing to sustainable development and regional stability.

## 7. Conclusion

Drug-related crimes in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) pose a significant threat to regional security and sustainable development. Cooperation among GMS countries is crucial to combat this threat effectively. This paper has highlighted the mechanisms, achievements, and challenges of such cooperation. Key findings include the GMS's role as a major hub for illicit drug activities and the importance of continued and enhanced cooperation among GMS countries. Despite significant achievements, the drug problem remains a persistent challenge requiring a comprehensive and coordinated approach. Recommendations include strengthening existing mechanisms, adopting innovative strategies, and fostering greater collaboration among GMS countries and with international partners. In conclusion, by working together and strengthening cooperation, GMS countries can mitigate the negative impact of drug-related crime and create a more secure and prosperous future for the region.

## References

- Chen, Z. (2024), "Research on Anti-Drug Cooperation Mechanism Between China and Southeast Asian Countries", *Master's thesis*, Guizhou Normal University.
- Chouvy, P. A. (2013), "Drug trafficking in and out of the Golden Triangle. In An Atlas of Trafficking in Southeast Asia: The Illegal Trade in Arms, Drugs, People, Counterfeit Goods and Natural Resources in Mainland Southeast Asia", Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Gu, Y., & Zhao, Y. (2021), "Research on Legal Issues of Drug Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation between China and the Five Lancang-Mekong Countries", *Crime Research* (5), 57–65.
- Harza, Z. (2024), "Transnational Crime of Illicit Drugs in Southeast Asia", *Andalus Journal of International Studies (AJIS)*, 12(2).
- Li, G. (2018), "Research on Police Law Enforcement Cooperation in Combating Drug Crimes in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region", *Journal of Wuhan Public Security Cadre's College* (1), 48–53.
- Li, J., & Li, Y. (2021), "Research on Transnational Drug Crime in the "Golden Triangle" Region under the Background of Globalization", *Journal of Yunnan Police College* (3), 11–18.
- Lu, Z., & Niu, H. (2024), "Research on the Impact and Countermeasures of Drug Situation Changes in the "Golden Triangle" Region of Southeast Asia on China", *Journal of Yunnan Police College* (6), 8–16.
- Luong, H. T. (2019), "Drug production, consumption, and trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region". *Asian Survey* 59(4), 717–737.
- Prayuda, R., & Warsito, T. (2021), "Problems Faced by ASEAN in Dealing with Transnational Drug Smuggling in Southeast Asia Region". *Foresight* 23(3), 353–366.
- Tang, G. (2022), "Review and Prospect of the 10th Anniversary of China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand Mekong River Joint Patrol Law Enforcement", *Southeast Asian Affairs* (5), 54–60.
- The Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China (2024, October 18), "The 2024 "Safe Waterway" joint drug sweeping operation was a complete success, with a total of 11,000 drug-related criminal

cases solved and 18,000 drug crime suspects arrested”, Retrieved from <https://m.mps.gov.cn/n6935718/n6936559/c9818093/content.html>

UNODC (2024), “World Drug Report 2024”, Retrieved from <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2024.html>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024), “Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges 2024”.

Wang, A., & Liang, C. (2022), “Research on Yunnan Province's Response to Drug Crime Issues in the Lancang-Mekong River Basin”, *Chinese Journal of Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment* 28(3), 278–282+288.

Zhang, L., Ma, S., & Wen, X. (2019), “Strategic Study on Drug Elimination in "Golden Triangle" from the Perspective of Community of Shared Future for Mankind”, *Development Research* (5), 9–14.