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A soldier wearing a helmet and carrying a rifle is walking through a field of tall poppies. The field is filled with green poppy heads and some red flowers. In the background, there is a stone wall and trees.

# NARCO- STATE NEXUS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 transformed Pakistan into a critical processor and transit corridor for narcotics.**

Poppy cultivation in Pakistan has been a long-standing issue, intensely for decades. Yet, its involvement in the modern international drug trade began only in the 1970s. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 transformed Pakistan into a critical processor and transit corridor for narcotics. Although narcotics did not initiate the conflict in Afghanistan, the drug trade has both sustained and been sustained by the ongoing violence. This trade has strengthened the capacity of the insurgents and has evolved into a state-sponsored instrument of asymmetric warfare and revenue generation.

Understanding terrorism in South Asia requires more than a political or ideological analysis; a deeper examination shows that narcotics are deeply intertwined with the economy of terrorism, transforming the drug trade into a war economy. This report explores the development of the narco-state nexus in this region, focusing on its cross-border impact on India, especially in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), where terror outfits have systematically exploited the narcotics trade as a crucial financial pillar for their operations.

**The report further assesses India's counterterrorism measures and the implications of narco-terrorism on the security and socio-political stability of India, the region, and beyond.**



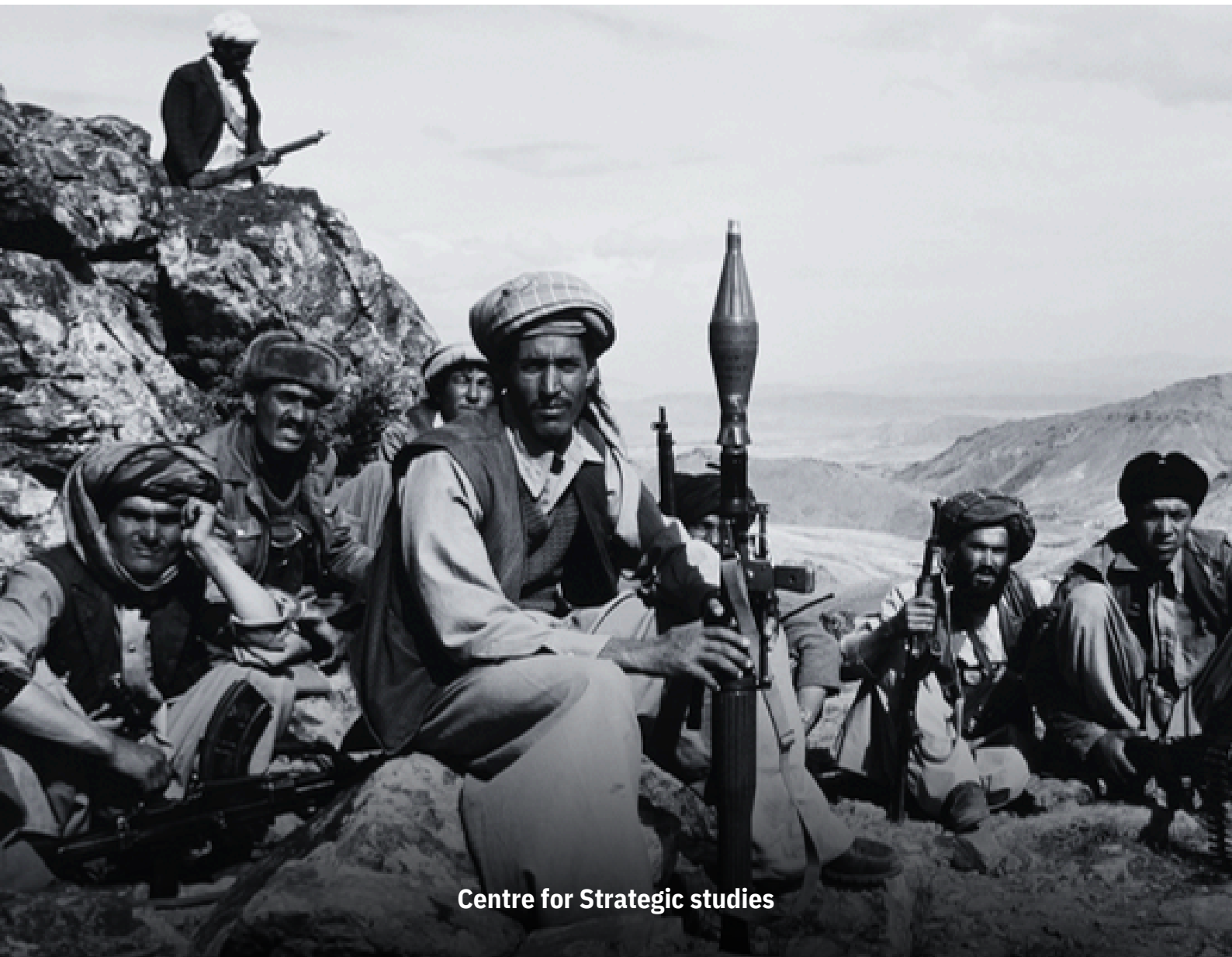


# HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE NARCO-NETWORK

**As the Afghan war intensified, drug expansion stood in direct connection with war-related events.**

## *A. Birth of the Heroin Economy*

Opium has long been grown in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan for local use, but the international demand, especially for refining it into heroin, began in the 1970s. The Afghan-Soviet War and decreased opium production in post-revolution Iran precipitated supply gaps that were soon filled by drug producers in Afghanistan, making it the new hub of the 'Asian Drug Trade'. Opium Production,<sup>1</sup> estimated at 100 tons in 1971, suddenly increased during the Afghan war, reaching 2000 tons by 1991, which doubled to 4600 tons by the end of the decade.





By the mid-1980s, Afghanistan produced one-third of the world's opium. As the Afghan war intensified, drug expansion stood in direct connection with war-related events. Profits earned from the selling of drugs brought additional money to bankroll the Mujahideen struggle against the Soviets, shifting the trajectory from a drug economy to a 'war economy'.<sup>2</sup>

The drug trade started to gain momentum following the Soviet withdrawal, as lawlessness allowed illicit industries to flourish. The Taliban initially supported the poppy trade as a source of revenue, but imposed a crackdown in 2000. However, after the 2001 U.S. invasion, heroin production expanded, and by 2009, Afghanistan supplied an estimated 90% of the world's heroin.<sup>3</sup>

With the Taliban 2.0 coming back to power in Afghanistan, the regime has once again imposed a ban on opium cultivation in 2022. Following this ban, the production in Afghanistan plunged by 95% by 2023,<sup>4</sup> causing the re-emergence of poppy cultivation in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) after a significant migration of Afghan opium farmers to Pakistan. Two small areas in Balochistan<sup>5</sup> alone contain more than 8,000 hectares of farms. Some fields stretch beyond five hectares, expanding at a stunning pace. This scale of cultivation goes beyond anything Afghanistan has witnessed, making Pakistan the world's new opium capital, dethroning Afghanistan.

## *B. Role of Pakistan in Facilitating Drug Trade*

Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan's opium cultivation and subsequent illicit drug trading began with its support for the Afghan Mujahideen resistance as a U.S. ally. As the opium cultivation expanded during the war, Pakistan became a notable producer, processor, and exporter of heroin. The Pakistani Drug Syndicate ran a parallel economy that contributed to the largest 'narco-terrorism'<sup>6</sup> in the region.



In Afghanistan, Helmand remained the top opium poppy cultivating province, followed by Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Nangarhar, all bordering Pakistan. The Soviet scorched-earth policy led to a large exodus of Afghan farmers to Pakistan. During the era, cultivation proliferated from the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to Balochistan and even in Punjab. Opium was then processed into heroin in Pakistani laboratories in the Bannu and Dir districts of KPK before being exported via Pakistan.<sup>7</sup>

Pakistan's opium production<sup>8</sup> soared to an estimated 800 tons annually, and by the mid-1980s, 70 percent of the heroin processed in Pakistan entered international markets. It generated millions, much of which was used to fund military activities, fuelling regional instability and proliferating the global drug trade.

The CIA collaborated with Pakistan's ISI in opening a 'weapons-drugs pipeline'.<sup>9</sup> Gretchen Peters, in her book, "Seeds of Terror: How Heroin is Bankrolling the Taliban and al Qaeda," says, "there was an arms pipeline going in, and a drugs pipeline coming out of Afghanistan." She emphasizes the money-laundering and transnational routes: "U.S. satellites tracked cargo ships leaving Pakistani shores laden with Afghan heroin, and returning with weapons for the insurgency."<sup>10</sup>

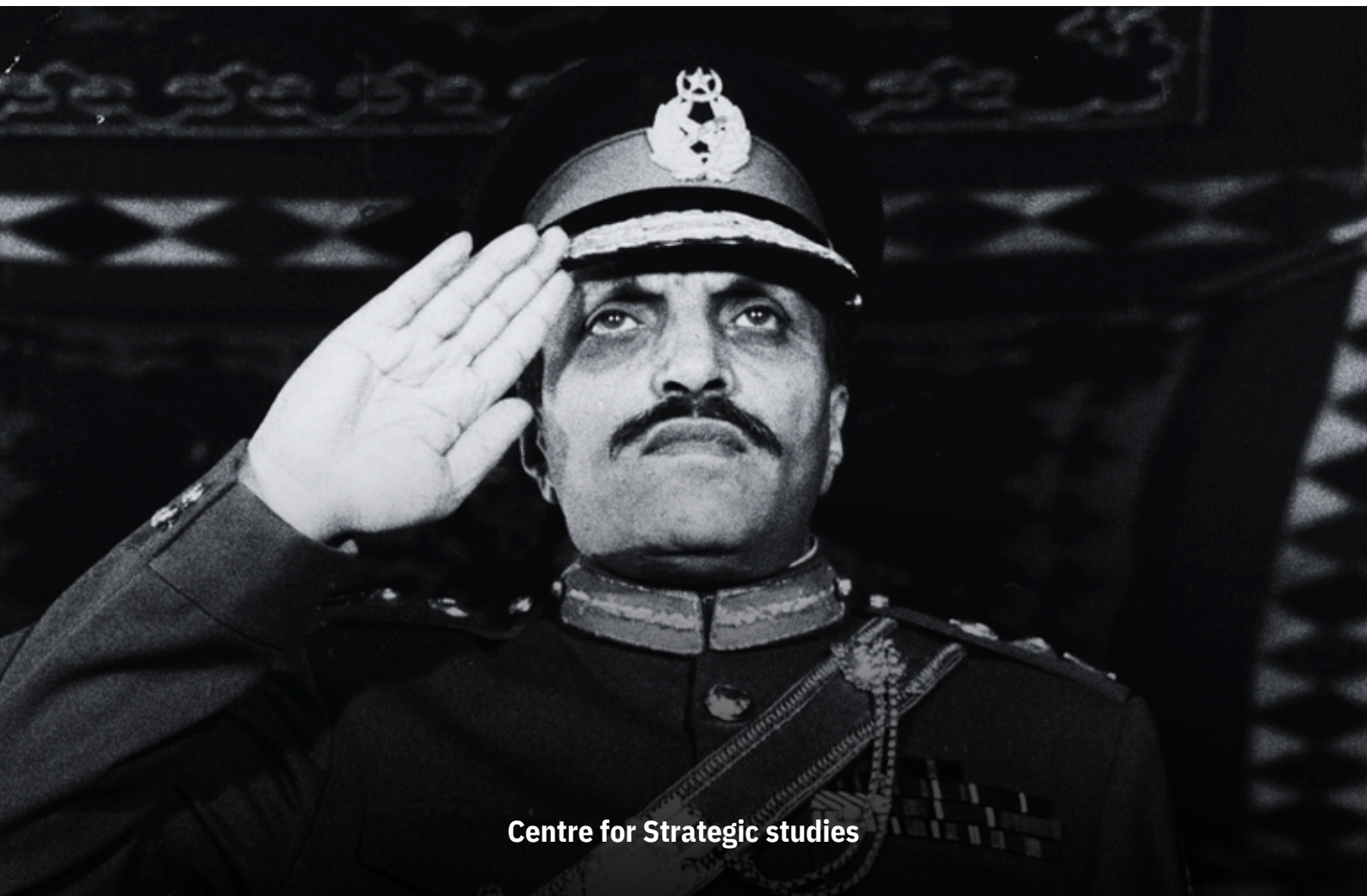






The former President of Pakistan, General Zia-ul Haq, and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) played a prominent role in encouraging opium farming along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Due to Pakistan's hostilities with India, Zia covertly supported illicit opium cultivation to generate funds. To sustain this growing shadow economy during 1970-1980, Zia established the National Logistics Cell (NLC) that was used to transport arms to Afghanistan while trafficking opiates through Karachi for export.<sup>11</sup> This close state involvement showed strong links between Pakistan's Army and drug trafficking.

This dual-use infrastructure acted as a critical covert supply chain connecting narcotics, warfare, and foreign policy during Zia's rule. Revenue from drugs and weapons was diverted to militant groups involved in cross-border offensives against India. It was evident in Pakistan's Operation Tupac, initiated in the late 1980s by Zia, aimed to destabilize J&K through insurgency and narco-jihad. Peters, thereby portrayed drug commerce as a central engine of modern insurgency: "It's no coincidence that it [the opium trade] was booming just as the insurgency exploded."<sup>12</sup>





## DRUG TRANSIT ROUTES

**Pakistan's Balochistan province, bordering Iran and Afghanistan, plays a critical role in the transnational drug trafficking.**

Until the 1980s, drug smuggling into India from neighboring countries was minimal. This situation changed with the introduction of heroin from the Afghanistan–Pakistan–Iran area. India's position, between the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle, susceptibility to cross-border terrorism, the emergence of advanced tactics like cross-border drone sorties and maritime routes for narcotic smuggling, make it highly vulnerable to cross-border drug trafficking and narcoterrorism.

Pakistan's Balochistan province,<sup>13</sup> bordering Iran and Afghanistan, plays a critical role in the transnational drug trafficking. It functions as a primary conduit for six of the nine major smuggling routes leading to Iran, Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America. Major exit points for narcotics from Pakistan include Gwadar, Pasni in Balochistan, and Karachi in Sindh.





Punjab, a bordering state with Pakistan, is highly impacted. Narcotics are smuggled through districts like Tarn Taran, Ferozepur, Fazilka, and Amritsar, all primary entry points for Pakistani and Afghan drug cartels. Punjab also acts as a distribution hub, moving narcotics further into mainland India. The misuse of routes for trafficking drugs, money, and arms, such as the Attari Integrated Check Post, led to the suspension of several cross-border trading corridors in 2019.

In Kashmir, Pakistani syndicates use the Poonch-Chakkan da Bagh and Uri-Salamabad routes to smuggle narcotics. The shift in terrorist activities from the Kashmir Valley to south of the Pir Panjal Range has led to a similar movement among drug smugglers. Early in the Kashmir insurgency, about 15 percent of drug proceeds financed terrorism. After Pakistan's FATF grey-listing, narcotics smuggling also increased for covert militancy financing within drug networks.<sup>16</sup> In 2023, Border Security Force (BSF) seized a total of 841 kg of drugs along the western border with Pakistan, with Rajasthan seeing a four-fold rise compared to the recoveries in 2022.

Another notable trend is the rising use of maritime routes for trafficking. Drug trafficking syndicates in the Golden Crescent smuggle 60-70 percent of their drugs to India, Sri Lanka, and South Africa by sea. India's Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways reported drug seizures of 2,826 kg in coastal waters and ports in 2023,<sup>18</sup> the highest in five years.

Drug traffickers frequently use drones or uncrewed aerial vehicles for smuggling. In 2023, BSF shot down 119 such drones and reported 400-500 drone sightings on the India-Pakistan border.<sup>19</sup> Given the huge profits in the narcotics trade and the crackdown on cross-border aerial drones, drug traffickers exploring the potential of underwater drones on maritime routes also remains a possibility.





## STATE SPONSORED NARCO-TERRORISM

**The role of Pakistan's military in the narcotics trade has been accepted by Pakistan's former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif.**

Unlike other regions where narco trading is largely profit-driven, this phenomenon is more complex in India. It experiences a symbiotic relationship between terrorist organizations, drug traffickers, and Pakistani state agencies.<sup>20</sup> On India's western borders, routes used for drug smuggling are also often the same ones taken for terrorist movements, firearms, and explosives, which receive the support of Pakistan's military, both in pushing narcotics and coordinating terrorist operations.

The role of Pakistan's military in the narcotics trade has been accepted by Pakistan's former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif. In 1994, he revealed that Pakistan's army chief and head of ISI had proposed to him a detailed blueprint for selling heroin to pay for the country's covert military operations, especially in Kashmir and Punjab in early 1991.<sup>21</sup> This came after foreign funding to ISI declined post-1989 Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.







In the 1990s, the CIA reported the drug kingpins' close connections to Pakistan's key institutions of power, including the president and military intelligence agencies.<sup>22</sup> Ashok Tandon, in his book, "The Reverse Swing- Colonialism to Cooperation," also mentioned that the nexus between the Pakistan Army and ISI is believed to be fully immersed in the drug money.<sup>23</sup>

International assessments have tied Pakistani military logistical chains with large-scale seizures of heroin. Military checkpoints in KPK and Balochistan function as unofficial toll booths for drug shipments. Military transport vehicles, often operating under diplomatic immunity or defense tags, are used to shield drug cargo.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, the ISI helps militant proxies by laundering vast narcotic profits by funneling these into the formal economy through a sophisticated network of military-operated financial institutions and accounts fronted as political, religious, or charitable trusts.<sup>25</sup> Askari Bank, among others, has been repeatedly named in suspicious transaction reports of global financial watchdogs for flouting anti-money laundering (AML) norms.

What makes these illicit networks so dangerously effective is how they carefully keep Pakistan's proxy war machinery running. Narcotic revenue is funneled to support terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Hizbul Mujahideen, and the Haqqani Network. The Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation and Al-Rahmat Trust, fronts for LeT and JeM, respectively, receive funds from accounts directly tied to Pakistan's military.<sup>26</sup>

It goes towards weapons procurement, recruitment, propaganda, and logistics. Training camps in PoK and KPK region are known to be funded through narcotics proceeds, thereby turning the drug trade into a strategic enabler of terrorism.



In the past two years, security forces registered 26 narcoterrorism cases in J&K, with LeT linked to 17.<sup>27</sup> Some of these cases go beyond Pakistan, Punjab, and J&K, involving suspects from Türkiye, France, and Canada, highlighting the complexity of the narco-terrorism network.

India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) has repeatedly highlighted the scale of this problem. In 2017, NIA filed cases against JeM, LeT, HM, and Dukhtarane-Milat leaders for allegedly receiving funds from ISI to fuel unrest in Kashmir.<sup>28</sup>

In 2021, it seized heroin worth Rs 21,000 crore, the largest intercepted narcotics consignment in India, which was linked to the May Pahalgam attack and LeT's narco-trafficking strategy, backed by ISI.<sup>29</sup>

Intelligence sources further warn of a deepening nexus between the ISI and Khalistani extremists through narcotics trafficking. In 2021, NIA accused seven people with links to a narcoterrorism ring run by the banned terrorist group Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), managed by foreign handlers who raise money by selling drugs.<sup>30</sup>





## IMPACT ON INDIA

**This systematic inflow of narcotics has engineered an acute, state-sponsored public health crisis in vulnerable border states, particularly Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir (J&K).**

The illicit drug nexus, sourced from the Golden Crescent and cynically channeled through Pakistan, forms an existential multi-layered assault on India's security architecture.<sup>31</sup> The geopolitical vulnerability of India, situated between the world's two major opiate production zones, leaves it a primary target for destabilisation through narcotics routes.

This systematic inflow of narcotics has engineered an acute, state-sponsored public health crisis in vulnerable border states, particularly Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). In Punjab, drug abuse is not merely a social problem, but has taken the shape of a "raging epidemic" deliberately designed to achieve profound societal destabilisation.





The societal costs are catastrophic and calculated. Narcotics abuse reduces national productivity by incapacitating individuals, predominantly in the productive age group of 18-35 years. Furthermore, the high cost of opiates draws users towards pervasive economic crimes, such as theft, robbery, and snatching, driving social disorder.

The consequent diversion of massive governmental resources towards police enforcement, healthcare, and rehabilitation, that could otherwise finance infrastructure and development-acts as a direct institutional cost, crippling India's development momentum.

The calculated fusion of drug trafficking and militancy is not a random crime wave but a core pillar of Pakistan's strategy for asymmetric, hybrid warfare, designed to destabilise India's border regions.<sup>32</sup> This heinous tactic, termed as "Dual Use Crime", serves two interconnected strategic objectives of Guaranteed Revenue, and Societal Incapacitation.

On one hand securing a vast, reliable financial bedrock for terror organisations such as Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) enables them to produce arms and execute operations. On the other hand, the intentional saturation of border states with narcotics is a malicious mechanism to incapacitate communities, leading to degradation of human capital.

The Government of India, recognising the existential dimensions of this hybrid threat, has been compelled to institute a robust, multi-pronged counter-narcotics strategy that focuses on systemic inter-agency coordination.

India's operational response is planned through a strengthened institutional architecture, with the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) coordinating efforts with the aid of four-tier National Anti-Narcotics Coordination Mechanism (NCORD). This structure ensures mandatory coordination across federal and state law enforcement agencies. In this regard, the border security forces have been strategically empowered.





The Border Security Forces (BSF), along with Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), Assam Rifles, and the Indian Coast Guard (ICG), are now vested with authority under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic substances (NDPS) Act of 1985.<sup>33</sup>

This legal empowerment facilitates immediate seizures and investigations at primary entry points. Furthermore, the Indian Navy and Coast Guard execute vital, large-scale interdiction missions in the maritime domain, successfully seizing massive narcotics shipments and directly targeting the financial infrastructure of narco-terrorism.

Additionally, Intelligence-led operations are paramount. The NIDAAN database and the NCORD portal enhance the sharing of intelligence information. While a Joint Coordination Committee (JCC), chaired by the Director Generals of NCB, monitors and directs investigations into significant cases, specifically those linked to narco-terrorism.

The transitional nature of the drug trade cannot be overcome by domestic action alone. India's cooperation with the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is essential but insufficient to meet the scale of the challenge.<sup>34</sup>

Enhanced cross-border cooperation is essential to counter regional and global criminal networks effectively. India's collaboration focuses on capacity building, training, and effective information sharing, which are necessary to stem the influx of heroin originating from South-West Asia.





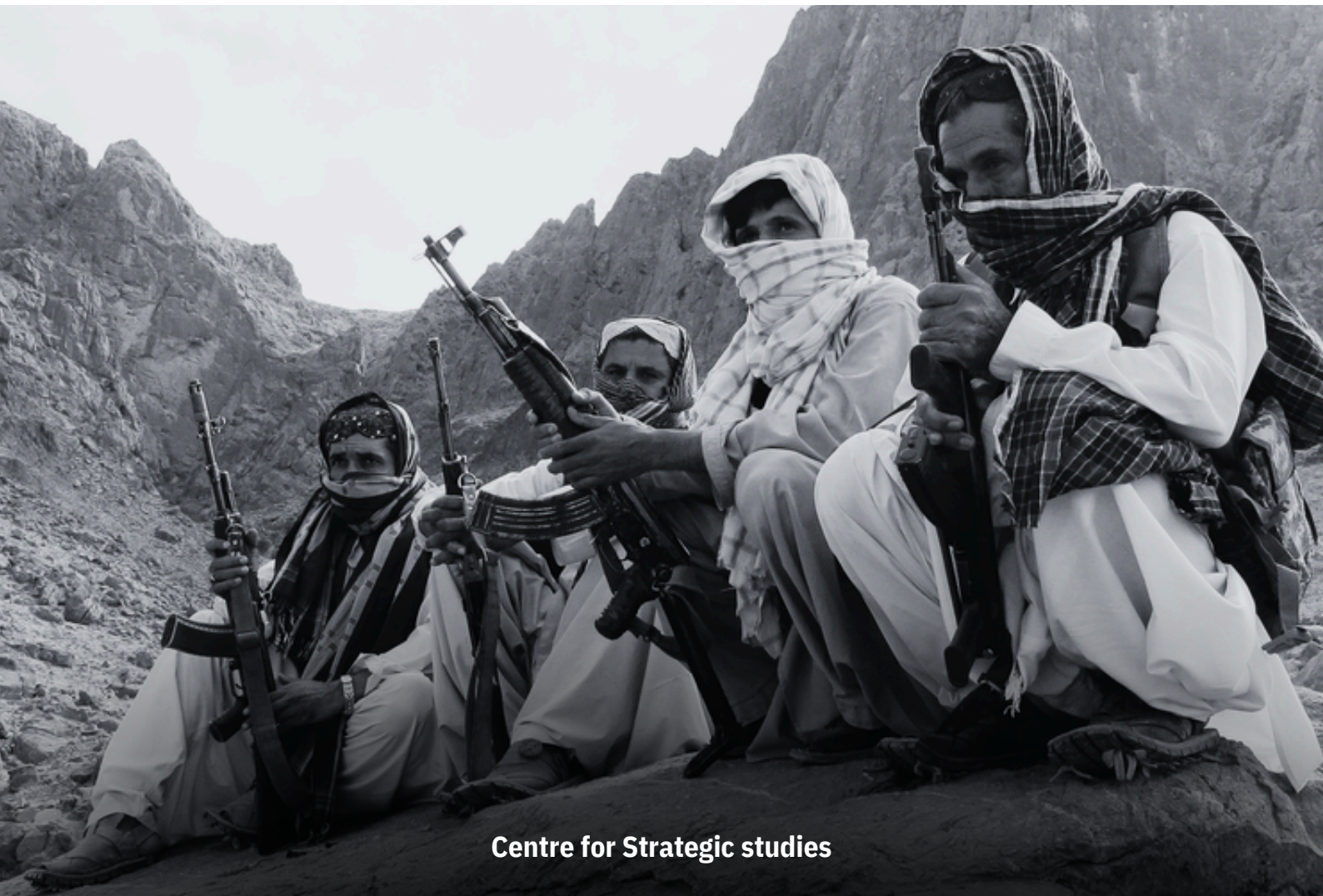
## REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

**Narcotics trafficking actively supports separatists and insurgent activities, including those undertaken by Baloch groups operating in Pakistan and Iran, and Taliban-affiliated criminal networks.**

Pakistan's Narco-State nexus is not a localised failure but a global vector of instability that fundamentally comprises established security and governance structures across the region and beyond. The enormous, untaxed revenues derived from the drug trade fuel instability across the wider region.

Narcotics trafficking actively supports separatists and insurgent activities, including those undertaken by Baloch groups operating in Pakistan and Iran, and Taliban-affiliated criminal networks. This instability is consistently forged within “weak states” characterised by systemic corruption and limited law enforcement capabilities.

The opium cultivated in Afghanistan is a known source of funding for terrorist activity across Central Asian republics, exposing the continental scope of this threat.







Pakistan's role as the unacknowledged master conduit for the region's illicit drug flow places it in a compromised and hypocritical geopolitical position. While the Taliban's 2022 poppy cultivation is economically unsustainable for the vast rural population, Pakistan's deliberate tolerance of transit trade grants it undue and informal diplomatic leverage over the volatile Afghan regime.

Despite facing severe internal security challenges from groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) utilising Afghan sanctuaries, the shared, illicit reliance on narco-profits among various actors, including elements within the Pakistani security establishment, ensures a level of complex dependency.

This effectively transforms the control of the narcotics supply chain into a cynical, undeclared strategic tool wielded by Islamabad to maintain regional influence and manage its perpetually volatile border equations.





Extending from this regional logic of managed disorder, Pakistan's narco-state nexus acquires a distinctly global dimension in both its reach and consequences. The same illicit supply chains that sustain insurgents and provide Islamabad with informal leverage in its immediate neighbourhood are seamlessly embedded within transnational criminal networks that span the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia. In this sense, Pakistan's role as a permissive conduit does not merely transmit narcotics outward; it actively internationalises instability by linking localised conflict economies to global markets and criminal infrastructures.

The global effects are most visible<sup>35</sup> in the systematic laundering of narco-revenues through informal and formal financial channels. Profits generated along the Afghanistan–Pakistan corridor are reintegrated into the international economy via hawala networks, shell entities, and compromised banking systems, eroding regulatory regimes and enabling corruption well beyond South Asia. This process weakens state capacity in already fragile regions and undermines international efforts to enforce financial transparency, counter money laundering, and disrupt terror financing.

Beyond security and finance, the societal consequences are profound. Heroin and opioid derivatives moving through Pakistan contribute<sup>36</sup> directly to addiction crises across Central Asia and Europe, imposing long-term public health and social welfare costs on distant states. These outcomes illustrate how Pakistan's tolerance of narcotics transit effectively externalises the consequences of weak governance onto the international community.

Taken together, the globalisation of Pakistan's narco-networks transforms narcotics control into an undeclared instrument of strategic statecraft. By sustaining ambiguity between victimhood and complicity, Islamabad weakens collective international responses to transnational crime, ensuring that a regionally rooted narcotics economy continues to generate worldwide instability.





## CASE STUDIES IN THE NARCO-TERRORISM SUPPLY CHAIN

**The most significant indicator of this strategic intent was the seizure of over 3,000 kg of high-purity heroin at Mundra Port in Gujarat in September 2021.**

### *A. 2022 Gujarat and Punjab Heroin Seizures from Pakistani Networks*

The synchronised drug flow across India's western land and maritime frontiers- especially targeting Gujarat and Punjab reveals a calculated operation of immense scale. The most significant indicator of this strategic intent was the seizure of over 3,000 kg of high-purity heroin at Mundra Port in Gujarat in September 2021, estimated to be worth approximately \$2.6 billion in street value. Concurrently, the land borders across Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir have witnessed a tactical shift, marked by an exponential rise in the use of sophisticated Chinese-made hexacopter drones.





Border Security Forces reports detail these unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) carrying payloads of 5kg to 15kg of narcotics and small arms, establishing a low-cost, high-frequency logistics chain. Such an influx directly triggers a societal and economic destabilisation threat. Result has been the catastrophic health crisis in Punjab, where government resources are increasingly diverted from development into enforcement and rehabilitation weakens the social fabric and drains vital capital.

### *B. The Baluchistan Route and Gwadar's Role in the Narco-Economy*

The Baluchistan-Gwadar corridor functions as the strategic linchpin of the global opiate supply chain, creating the most egregious intersection of national infrastructure and illicit economy<sup>37</sup>. The development of the deep-sea port of Gwadar, integral to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has created world-class logistics for narco-cartels. Narcotics, processes in clandestine labs across Baluchistan, are consolidated near Gwadar for maritime shipments, destined for Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. This utilisation of strategic infrastructure shows the deep complicity of powerful state elements who facilitate its function as a high-security international exit point.





The illicit trade fuels both state and non-state actors, separatist groups, including elements of the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA). They extract transit taxes, complicating internal security while internationalising the crime. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has repeatedly cited Pakistan's structural Anti-Money Laundering (AML) weakness, noting the ease with which narco-dollars, estimated to be several billion dollars annually through this corridor, are integrated into the formal financial system through powerful hawala networks. This mechanism presents a critical threat to regional supply chain integrity, formalising a system where the Pakistani establishment can leverage illicit proceeds for strategic advantage while externalising the resultant instability into its neighbours.

### *C. Narco-Financing of Pulwama and Pathankot-related networks*

The most chilling evidence of the strategic nexus is the direct tracing of drug profits to the execution of horrendous, high-profile terrorist attacks against India. National Investigation Agency (NIA) investigations following the 2016 Pathankot Airbase Attack and the 2019 Pulwama Attack conclusively revealed that local drug smugglers in Punjab and Jammu were fundamental components of the terror support infrastructure. Their role was not limited to drug distribution but extended to providing essential, untraceable "local" cash liquidity for militant logistics, including the procurement of vehicles, IED components, and communications devices for the operatives.





The modus operandi typically involves collecting cash proceeds from high-value heroin sales and channeling this untraceable currency to Over-Ground-Workers (OGWs) for tactical use. This process confirms the ultimate form of Narco-Terrorism as Hybrid Warfare: by linking narcotics consumption directly to terror logistics, the Pakistani-sponsored networks achieve financial autonomy. This creates a self-sustaining nature of terror, forcing the targeted nation to fund the very militant groups seeking its destruction, thus rendering traditional counter-terror financing measures significantly less effective.





## CONCLUSION

**It is a sophisticated, state-enabled instrument of asymmetric warfare designed to undermine national security.**

It can be rightly concluded that the involvement of terrorist organisations and insurgents in drug trafficking has deepened into a complex geopolitical weapon. This is no longer merely a high-level criminal enterprise; it is a sophisticated, state-enabled instrument of asymmetric warfare designed to undermine national security. It is a means to destabilise the social fabric of India through financial subversion and direct opiate influx from South-West Asia. The threat exploits the nexus, moving towards complete merger, clearly evidenced by the use of cyber-enabled drug markets to finance armed proxies.

Addressing this existential threat requires an immediate strategic paradigm shift. India's approach should be to synthesise counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and counter-insurgency strategies through robust intelligence coordination and specialised cyber-narcotics fusion<sup>38</sup>. Concurrently, aggressive global diplomatic isolation of the sponsoring state, based on evidence of complicity in narco-financial warfare, is essential to dismantle the foundation of this geopolitical challenge and safeguard long-term national stability.





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