

Western Foreign Policy and it's Effects on the Southeast Asian Drug Trade

Across the United States, there is a silent killer working it's way into the homes and lives of everyday individuals. Synthetic opioids like the painkiller fentanyl (which can be as much as 50 times more potent than heroin) have caused a public health crisis in the United States, and many US government officials are quick to point the finger at countries such as China. At the start of 2017, the head of the DEA travelled to Shanghai (for the first time in 12 years) to meet with Chinese government officials and to build better ties between the two nations[1]. But how did a part of the world that has a considerable number of nations that enforce the death penalty for drug possession become a major source of the most deadly narcotics sold on the black market? How and why did China, a country that was coerced into widespread drug usage during the Opium Wars, reach such strict drug policies? The modern demand set by Western nations such as the UK and US have created widespread changes in drug trade for other nations. But for a greater understanding of this contemporary paradigm, analysis of the effects that the Western world has had upon the drug policy of other nations must be understood. At what point in time did Western colonization of Asian countries irreversibly set the tone for future drug policy in these nations? What major events occurred to cause the governmental policy that we now see? In particular, we will closely examine the influence that Western powers had after World War 2 on the modern narcotics climate in this part of the world. The rush to set up hastily designed governments after such a global conflict was seen all around the world and had a great number of effects in many different nations, but the examples that we will see in Southeast Asian are very pronounced when placed within the context of narco-military organizations.

Western imperialism and colonialism after the second World War created a perfect storm for the birth of militant narcotics organizations in the Southeast Corner of Asia. The interwoven nature of these organizations spanned across the borders of several different nations, and their influence could be seen in some ways be seen thousands of miles away in some of the most politically and economically advanced nations in the world. In order to fully understand the full repercussions that the time period following WW2 had on the narco groups in this time period, we must first set the stage of events in SE Asian that lead the region to where it was in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Prior to the start of the 20th century, population saturation in South China led to the mass migration of a number of individuals who sought opportunity; these same individuals carried with them the Chinese habit of smoking opium. For much of the first 40 or so years of the 1900s, the drug use was seen as a means to ensure that at least some of the populace was dependent on state provided drugs, ensuring that government also had a stable labor force and a continuous source of income. Though drug use was rather common in many parts of SE Asia during this time, opium trafficking was still not as big of a business as it was in other parts of the world. This changed during the second World War however. A sharp increase in opium product during WW2 can be noted by analyzing the region of Indochina, that went from 7.5 tons of opium produced in 1940 to 60.6 tons produced in 1944 [3]. This suggests that the Chinese government used the revenue from

opium sales as a source of income for its defensive campaigns against Allied forces in the region.

An excellent example of the effects that imperialism has had on countries in Asia after World War Two can be seen in a report on the "Golden Triangle", (a narcotics conglomerate that centered where the borders of Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar come together) that was published September 12th 1978 in The Globe and Mail. This newspaper article was published by Reuters following the arrest of 40 different individuals across several different nations and also resulted in the confiscation of \$4.5 million dollars worth of heroin. It is suggested by the author of the article that this international crime syndicate was almost wholly responsible for the majority of the product found in the European heroin market (the author assumes that no other major Asian drug organizations supply heroin to Europe) [3]. If this assumption by the author is correct, that one can see that one major influence that Western society has had on the drug trade in this part of the world is as simple as the relationship between supply and demand. However, this capitalistic viewpoint can only begin to scratch the surface of how Western society influenced the drug production in SE Asia. In 1948, the Burmese gained independence from the British and hastily attempted to set up a government that was destined to collapse at the slightest sign of mutiny.



Figure 1: An image of the Golden Triangle Region.

A dizzying array of political, economical, and militant events had to take place over several decades to allow the flourishing of drug organizations that were nothing more than warlords who lead defected revolutionary armies. One of the other critical early events regarding the origins of the Golden Triangle can be traced to January 1950 when the communist civil war in China was just wrapping up. Mao Zedong's communist armies were quickly approaching one of the last strongholds of the Republic of China. Chiang Kai-shek's (leader of the People's Republic of China until 1975) forces began to flee the city where they were holed up, Yunnan. The leader of the ROC forces in Yunnan was unable to stop a detachment of 1500 of his soldiers from fleeing from the advancing communists; these soldiers escaped into neighboring Burma. This group would eventually begin to turn into an organization called the Kuomintang, or KMT for short. This group carved paths of destruction through much of Burma, and acted as mercenaries for hire for much of

the 70s and 80s. During this time, the KMT received support from a number of different organizations, one of which included the CIA. American policy at this point in time was to support any organization that could possibly help halt the advancement of communism into parts of the world that were still developing fully. These actions by the US government hurt future diplomatic ties between with the Burmese government for many years to come, and may have impeded future American attempts to try to halt the production of heroin from opium in the northern parts of Burma.



Figure 2: Burmese government soldiers burning mounds of confiscated heroin.

The onset of the Korean War in 1950 brought about a new policy in Washington, that supported the development of a close relationship with the Burmese government. This was in part seen as a way to deter the advancement of Chinese communists into the region. Despite the best diplomatic efforts on behalf of the US, Washington eventually decided to cut its losses and secede influence over the Burmese back to the British. A failed assault on the Chinese city of Yunnan by the general Li Mi had dissuaded the US from further immediate attempts to stabilize the region. The CIA, which had up until this point directly supported Yi Mi, began to slowly defund his army both monetarily and logistically in November of 1951. This was a decision that would have massive repercussions for formation of a number of different army-states that were all derived from the massive battalions that Yi Mi had at his command [5]. This meant that a large number of highly trained and well-armed soldiers were disbanded with no sense of general command. Career soldiers who suddenly have no source of reliable income are undoubtedly a massive resource for any potential drug-lord, so this provides us with another example of how Western intervention in SE Asia during the period following WW2 created ripple effects that easily allowed formation of the first iteration of the Golden Triangle.

An ethnic group within Burma that played an integral role in the formation of the Golden Triangle is the Wa tribe, who are located in the eastern hills of the country in a province known as the Shan State. Shan is and has been a major stronghold of many of the Golden Triangle's key players. This group has historically had a very mercurial relationship with members of the Golden Triangle,

due to the financial and military support provided by the Triangle's armies, but also the continued scrutiny in later years from anti-drug factions. The political arm of these people is the United Wa State Party, and the military representation is the United Wa State Army. The Wa region plays an integral role in the transport of illicit substances through some of the most important parts of the Triangle's smuggling routes[11]. Though the army and its parent political organization have both only existed since the late 1980s, the founders and leaders of this movement were fundamental in instrumental in ensuring that the traffickers in operation prior to the Triangle's formation were well protected from the authorities [13,15]. When the KMT arrived in this region following their deposition from Yunnan in 1950, the residents of this area now had the muscle to begin producing heroin at an unprecedented rate, with no repercussions.

Some of the other primary factors that allowed for the formation of the Golden Triangle can be seen in the context of the fallout from the Cold War. These factors include a suitable climate for the growth of opium, the coca leaf, and cannabis; other facets of the phenomena include the sustained existence of legal systems that failed to appropriately punish those who committed certain crimes, and political corruption. The collapse of the 1st world- 2nd world paradigm led to the formation of the "grey-area phenomenon" or GAP, an area where conflict was suspiciously scarce during the cold war [9]. Another key factor in the formation of drug organizations in SE Asia at this time was the decolonization movement that was sweeping throughout much of the 3rd world around this time. One may speculate that the focus of many of the most intelligent and civically scrupulous individuals in these nations was too focused on breaking the shackles of Western rule to notice that the development of a massive underground market that spanned across the borders of the most powerful nations on the continent. This hypothesis can be supported by the fact that the most powerful warlord in the Golden Triangle during the last decade of the Cold War (and for for 5 years after it ended), a man by the name of Khun Sa, held a standing army of twenty thousand soldiers along the Thai-Burma border. During this time, it was estimated that Khun Sa was responsible for the production of over half of the world's heroin supply [21]. Other sources estimate that in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, other half of the world's heroin supply came from Khun Sa's main competitor, Lo Hsiung-Han, who also received backing by the US government in exchange for control over specific regions of the Triangle that were considered strategically advantageous and therefore undesirable for communist forces to get their hands on [11]. This led to the usage of US supplied weapons in conflicts between the Burmese and Thai governments, and also skirmishes between military forces of both of these nations with soldiers from armies who were aligned with

The economic boom of the 1950s seen in the US drove demand for all kinds of goods, and the capitalist mentality didn't stop at the sale of illegal drugs. This fact coupled with the remnants of Prohibition-era criminal organizations created a launchpad for a flourishing underground market in the States after the war. However, it was not until over 2 decades later, during the onset of the Vietnam war, that American demand for substances like opium began to become even more pronounced. American resources were even used for the trafficking of bulk amounts of opium, as shown by the fact that heroin was even sent stateside from Saigon in the coffins of dead US soldiers [7]. Robins et. al estimated that the percentage of US soldiers who had tried heroin was

approximately 34%, with ~10% of those individuals trying the drug at least once more upon return to the US [17, 19]. By the early 1980s, the Golden Triangle had gained too much influence and loyalty in its tri-nation domain to be easily uprooted by any single government. Today, this same black market has grown to billion-dollar per year industry within the US, and has strong ties to the general opioid epidemic that has helped lower the life expectancy for middle-aged Caucasian Americans for the first time in decades.



Figure 3: Confiscated opium.

The history of Western interaction and intervention with the drug trade in this region is bloody and historic, and in the modern context with which we began this analysis, is also very ironic. The policy put forth by the US during the conflicts that perpetuated the formation of the Golden Triangle helped solidify the socio economic power that narco traffickers currently have in this region of the world. The beginning of this discussion on the Asian-American drug trade centered around the opioid epidemic in the US that is partially fueled by the domestic import of fentanyl from places like China. However, it is almost impossible to state exactly how much the Golden Triangle's role in heroin export and production played a role in setting the stage for this public health crisis. Because of the striking similarities between these two drugs, heroin users will turn to the much more deadly cousin of their substance of choice because of it's ability to achieve similar effects at a much lower dosage. It is very well possible that if past American foreign policy had been structured differently, the supply of narcotics from the Golden Triangle would have been greatly diminished in the 60s, 70s and 80s, and drugs like heroin might never have become as commonplace as they are in the modern US. The exploration of this topic provides a perfect example of how American foreign policy in other parts of the globe can have unforeseen effects that eventually negatively impact US citizens, decades after government agencies that we trust d make a questionable policy choices.

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[2] *Telegraph-Herald*, 07 Jan 2017.

[3] Reuters, "40 arrested as drug ring is smashed," 12 Sep 1978, "*The Global Mail*" <http://ntserver1.wsulibs.wsu.edu:2098/newsstand/docview/387042422/F239FE0587494880PQ/1?accountid=14902>, (accessed February 7th 2017).

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Geographic focus: Thailand, Burma, Laos.

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Search terms: (China AND fentanyl), drug* trade, black market OR drug market, golden triangle, imperialism, colonialism.

Primary Source Database: Proquest Newsstand.

Primary Source Search Date Limiter: Between 1950 and 1975 was the date range that fit best. Between 1975-78 The Global Mail had much information on the power narcotics and military organizations in SE Asia.

Potential date range for project might be 1950 to 1979.

Historical Research Questions: What role did colonialism and imperialism play in the formation of cartels in SE Asia? How did the imperialism and colonization create an environment conducive to drug trafficking?