



## Revisiting Narco trade in South-West Asia: From Non-traditional to Traditional Security Assessment

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### ABSTRACT

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With Afghanistan as a major producer of global illicit drugs, the security dynamics of tri border area between Pakistan-Afghanistan and Iran remain in a flux. Dominantly, academic discourse focuses on the issue through the non-traditional security lens focusing on its transnational nature. However, this research critically shifts the discussion towards a mandatory reconceptualization from the prism of traditional security. The idea rests on the notion that, narco trafficking in this region is not just a criminal activity in the periphery, but is a major enabler of terrorist groups in Pakistan, particularly Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This in turn facilitates regional destabilization, allowing these groups to conduct trans-national operations, challenge state sovereignty and authority. Through a qualitative methodology of content analysis of primary and secondary data, the study is structured towards testing two key hypotheses: H1: illicit narco trade in tri border region of Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran poses a direct traditional security threat to state sovereignty. H2: Unilateral responses are ineffective in view of security interdependence between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. These hypotheses are tested through security trend analysis and examination of intra-border terrorist activities in consonance with narcotics routes. In addition, the lens of Security interdependence, by Barry Buzan is used to view how interrelated state insecurities underpin and amplify the threat.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Throughout history, the tri-border region between Pakistan-Afghanistan and Iran remained an epicenter of power politics, owing to its strategic significance. On one hand, this importance facilitated great empires in connecting with each other, while on the other hand, due to the proximity, the area also transformed into a battle ground for major power rivalries (Robert Kaplan, 2012). As a consequence, the border areas yearn for socio-economic and political development, and are submerged in conflict today (Murad Sadygzade, 2025). Apart from all, a wave of terrorism and militancy also surfaced, where regional terrorist movements like The Islamic State or ISIS (Daesh in Arabic), gained ground and momentum. An offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, the ISIS took advantage of instability in numerous Middle Eastern Countries, like Syria and expanded their influence in the Greater Middle Eastern Region. Reportedly, at its peak in the year 2017 it held one third of Syria and forty percent of Iraq (Cameron, 2019). Amidst the chaos, Afghanistan with its long-standing wars and instability also became a breeding ground for terrorist organizations, where Daesh also managed to acquire a strong foothold (Cameron, 2019). It is worth mentioning that, ISIS was once considered as the richest terrorist organization in the world, with their greatest funding sources coming from illicit oil trade (survey, 2018). However, once the US led coalition forces managed to disrupt their monotony on the business, the militants considered other alternatives. Amongst them, kidnapping for ransoming and robbing banks were popular, albeit illicit drug trade business becomes the most widely pursued options (survey, 2018).

Consequently, the Greater Middle East became the locus of the terror-Drug nexus, posing a significant threat to both regional and international security. Interestingly, the demand for illicit drugs like Captagon in Saudi Arabia has been known for years, and for decades Iran has been among the world's largest consumer countries of opiates (Jonathan, 2022). This provided a window of opportunity for terrorist organizations to fuel their activities even if oil trade was disrupted. Records of drug abuse is also on the rise elsewhere in Iraq and Syria, although data is kept poorly. However, it is a known fact that illicit drug production and trafficking in the region through Afghanistan-Pakistan- Iran and Syria-Jordan-Iraq, has long funded violent conflict; For example, Hezbollah and various sectarian militias taxed the cultivation of marijuana and opium poppy in the Bekaa Valley beginning in the 1970s and ISIS was also reported to be smuggling local weed for generating revenue (Jonathan, 2022).

Accordingly, Afghanistan remained the epicenter of global illicit drug production. Apparently, Taliban remained resilient during the US led war on terror, with a convenient source of funding generated through its trade (Yogita, 2023). According to the United Nations, in the year 2020, Afghanistan accounted for about 85 percent of global opium production (UNODC, 2022). However, in the year 2022, the Taliban after regaining power in the country, banned the production and trade of any form of illicit drugs altogether (Maria, 2025). The market did get seriously disrupted with pressure on farmers to cease the production of poppy as a targeted campaign. However, despite this crackdown the revenue generated from its trafficking is still rampant. A field work conducted in the year 2024 revealed the closure of notorious 'drug bazars' but the vendors continued selling opium along with other products like food and utilities, even with a tacit approval

from authorities (Maria, 2024).

In addition, the methamphetamine industry has also intensified in Afghanistan as a result of opium ban. Satellite imagery revealed an expansion of the Abdul Wadood bazaar, southwest Afghanistan's major meth hub, and more than 250 mounds (or an estimated 11,886 cubic meters) of ephedra (Rupert Stone, 2022). On the other hand, this ban has also forced the local producers of illicit drugs in Afghanistan to shift its production to bordering adjacent areas in Pakistan, particularly, in Gulistan area of Chaman, Loralai and Mastung in Balochistan (Author interview, 2025). This development is helping terrorist organizations like Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) to fund their operations and training/recruitment campaigns. They are trafficking large amounts of illicit drug like heroin and meth, via the Balkan route from Pakistan-Iran-Turkey and then to Europe (Author Interview, 2025). On the other hand, narco trade is rampant from Syria, through its borders of Jordan and Iraq which flows down to Saudi Arabia and other countries (Rupert Stone, 2022).

Unfortunately, despite the considerable narco regional business by terrorist organizations, prevention policies have largely remained ineffective. United Nations sponsored counternarcotic initiatives like 1988 UN Drug Convention, the UN Psychotropic Substances Convention in 1971, and the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, did provide lead for some progress. However, at the regional level handful of initiatives were visible, like the Triangular Initiative between Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (UNODC Regional Program Report, 2023). In recent efforts for normalizing relations with Syria, an Arab league dialogue in a landmark discussion committed to curb drug flow from the Syrian borders through Iraq and Jordan, but tangibles are still underway after the fall of Assad Regime (Al Jazeera, 2025).

Nonetheless, the idea rests on the notion that, there is an ensuing need for a regional narco trafficking dialogue Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, with the perspective of a traditional security lens. These countries face borderless security challenges that can be dealt with through multilateral measures. Such a regional framework is now incredibly important especially if the threat has evolved in to a narco-terror nexus. In this regard, this article will delve in to the narco-terror nexus in the region, with a focus on Pakistan- Afghanistan and Iran, and how a regional approach is imperative to deal with it; this is viewed from the prism of 'Security Interdependence' theory of Barry Buzan and explore how the regional countries can deal with this menace through mutual efforts of subduing this menace at both the supply and demand ends.

## 2.0 Literature Review

In the academic realm, scholars have generally explored the nexus between narco-trade and terrorism from a non-traditional security lens. It is seldom viewed from the standpoint of narco flow as a direct challenge to territorial integrity and state sovereignty. In this regard, firstly it is important to understand what is considered as security and how its conceptual underpinnings have evolved? According to Anthony (2016), the changes in the aftermath of Cold War reconfigured the understanding of security altogether. These changes particularly in the form of ethnic cleansing, internal displacements due to conflicts within national borders and severe climate change effecting human security as a whole, evolved the concept of security from traditional to

non-traditional. Divya Sirikanth (2014) suggests that after the Cold war, frequency of inter-state wars reduced, in which the UN charter also played a major role by ‘outlawing’ the use of military force against each other. Dr. Arun (2011) argues that in order to achieve conceptual clarity, we should assume that non-traditional security threats evolved after the traditional threats from State militaries subdued, particularly in the 1980’s. Professor Richard Ulman (1983), redefined security by bringing forth the threat from non-state actors as its newer form, which emanates from within the national boundaries of a State.

Hence a bulk of literature views both state centric threats separate from the threats emanating from non-state actors like terrorists and drug cartels. The World Bank (2013) defined organized crime networks like narco trafficking, the one which subdues through force in order to gain wealth. As these networks are non-state actors they do not comply with any international law or norms. On the other hand, terrorism is also recognized as a non-traditional security threat, which Hoffman (2013) defines as an exploitation and creation of fear with the means of violence or the threat to pursue it in order to achieve a political change. Although both of these phenomenon’s are similar to each other but they differ in objectives where narco networks employ force for monetary benefits and terrorists have political goals.

However, there is a similarity between them, once viewed from the perspective of how they do not recognize State boundaries and are ready to achieve their objectives by posing national security threat to States. In this regard, according to Michael Roth (2006), a term ‘narcoterrorism’ evolved in the 1980’s, when experts desired a reference to major drug cartels in Peru and Colombia. It is this juncture which is undermined by scholars of traditional security, which this research article will attempt to address and fill the gap with the case study of South-West Asia border region. This area popularly known as the ‘Golden Crescent’ posits Afghanistan as the major producer of global drugs with Pakistan-Iran being the transit States. According to Alkan (2004) it is estimated that more than eighty percent of the drugs produced here are being trafficked to European destinations through Turkey. In a United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Report (2009), it was suggested that this drug money will fuel and facilitate the resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan, which we witnessed in the year 2022.

In another report published by International Institute for Counter Terrorism (2013), it is ascertained that, the narco trafficking business profits terrorist operations in the Golden Crescent and presents a security threat to the world at large. Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), profits in Balochistan where the main entry point from Afghanistan into Iran persists due to the porous nature of border and being proximate to Nimroz and Helmand provinces in Afghanistan, which are a major producer of opium and poppy. On the other hand, the Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), benefit from the narco trade in North Waziristan, as they charge fee for protection to the convoys entering from the Durand line and sometimes are reported to rob those vehicles as well.

Hence, narcoterrorism is a direct existential threat to a State. Organized crime conducted by narco traffickers and cartels facilitate the activities of terrorist groups like TTP and BLA in Pakistan. They in turn increase in men and material which are later used to conduct operations against the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the State. In this regard, it is crucial

to view narcoterrorism from the prism of traditional security and employ relevant strategies to combat this menace.

### 3.0 Methodology

This article is based on qualitative research with a two-fold focus: content analysis of secondary source literature and also primary data in form of credible national and international media reports and also field research through questionnaire circulated amongst ANF Balochistan and KPK officials and other subject specialists. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and security concerns in the area, the research was limited. The interviews were remote, with identity of ANF officials kept anonymous. Their answers were corroborated with other secondary data and media reports. Detailed discussions were also carried out with officials who have on ground experience in counter-narcotics in bordering areas of Afghanistan. The author also travelled and spent time in the border areas with Iran and Afghanistan and on the Makran coasts including Pasni and Gwadar.

In this regard, during the course of research recurring patterns and themes were observed, which facilitated the author in formulating two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Narco trade in tri border region of Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran poses a direct traditional security threat to state sovereignty as it finances terrorist groups

Independent Variable (IV)	Dependent Variable (DV)	Indicators	Sources of Data	Expected Findings
Routes and Patterns of Narco trafficking	Enhanced frequency of terrorist activity (TTP, BLA)	Intercepts showing financial links and territorial control	Reports of UNODC, interviews with ANF Balochistan officials	a positive correlation established between narco trafficking and terrorist activity despite crackdown

**Hypothesis 2:** Unilateral responses are ineffective in view of security interdependence between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran

Independent Variable (IV)	Dependent Variable (DV)	Indicators	Sources of Data	Expected Findings
Lack of coordination on border and security management	Spillover of regional insecurity	Trans-regional movement of terrorists like TTP. Refugee inflow and militarization of border	Interviews of ANF Balochistan officials as field study and reports by UNODC	Lack of trilateral efforts allow narco networks to survive, despite unilateral national efforts

The hypotheses testing framework worked at a dual level: Firstly, it examined the link between narco trafficking and resilience of terrorist organizations like TTP and BLA in Pakistan; secondly it connected the narco criminal network to the general traditional security concerns at the tri border of Pakistan-Iran and Afghanistan; while also analyzing the regional interdependence of these threats, based on Barry Buzan's theory of security interdependence.

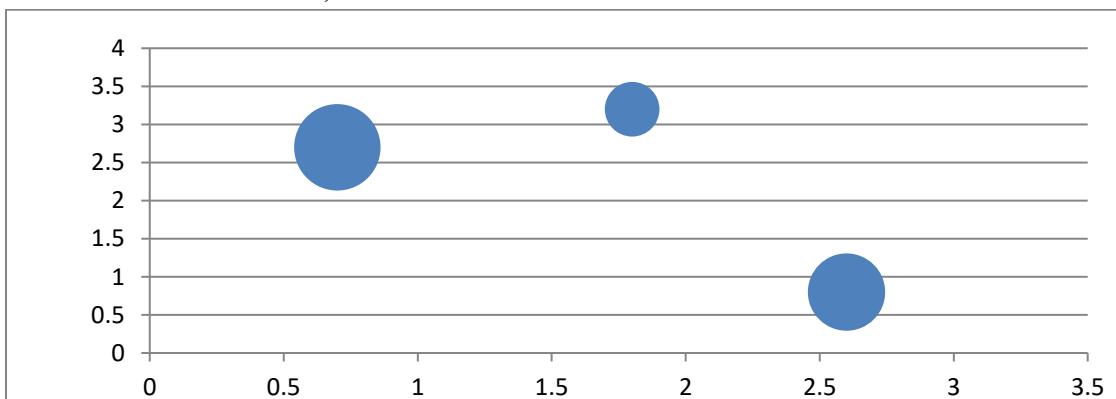
H1 analysis: The analysis of this hypothesis indicates a strong correlation within the narco trafficking from Afghanistan and the capacity of terrorist groups like TTP and BLA along the narco corridors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. With the entrenchment of narco routes these groups get enriched both in men and material. This poses a direct traditional security threat to Pakistan. Implication: This corroborates the main argument of this research: narco trafficking, especially from Afghanistan is not merely a law enforcement issue or socio-economic concern, but a core national security threat, demanding a military and strategic policy response. H2 analysis: It posits that the unilateral actions taken by all Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran are not sufficient due to the interdependent nature of narco networks in the region. Insecurity of one country has the tendency to spill over to the other two countries. The narco traders exploit this gap and are facilitated by terrorist organizations in exchange of monetary benefits, which later fuel their activities. Implication: This reinforces Barry Buzan's concept of security interdependence, which holds that in a regional security complex, no state's security can be considered in isolation.

In this regard, both these hypotheses provide a multilayered approach: H1 has a focus on national security challenging the territorial integrity and stability of a State. Meanwhile, H2 shifts the focus on the region, where state insecurities are interconnected illustrating that narco trafficking in the tri-border region of Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran is both a cause and consequence of instability at the regional level. Hence, this approach challenges the prevalent non-traditional security framework that views narco-trafficking and shifts the focus towards the need of viewing it through the traditional security framework, which is the objective of this research. The hypotheses were determined with the help of primary or secondary data. Firstly, the analysis of in scripts of interviews conducted by the author can be illustrated in the star diagram below. The highlighted and bold phrases depict the frequency of these words used. The emphasis of in scripts were on collaboration between Pakistan-Afghanistan and Iran, impact of Afghan opium bans on Pakistan and narco-terror nexus.



Meanwhile, the open-source data accessed for this research remained limited to US led war in Afghanistan and the narco-terror nexus. It focused more on Afghan Taliban and the use of narco trade for their financial support during the war on terror and today once they are in Government. Near to minimum data was available on the narco-terror nexus in Pakistan. Hence, this research will fill this gap in credible ways as the author attained firsthand knowledge. To recall, qualitative research is conducted to understand the phenomena and its nature and delivers answers to questions of why. Hence, its most common method was adopted for this research i.e. data collection of documents and semi-structured interviews. Analysis was performed through transcription of interviews by help of NVIVO software.

For the purpose of this study the content analysis of Grounded theory was adopted. This inductive approach allowed the author to explore the process of how drug trade benefits terror outfits in Pakistan and Afghanistan, in order to generate hefty finances. It developed a theory that due to the loose border coordination between Pakistan-Afghanistan and Iran, this decades old 'Golden triangle' still persists as a credible drug trafficking juncture and facilitates terrorists alongside cartels in generating money. More than 50 articles were read for this purpose of this study from Google scholar, all of them referred to the problem of governance in Afghanistan as the main cause of this drug-terror nexus and also of how the Taliban government has benefitted itself from the trade. Meanwhile, there has been a reference to Pakistan as a transit state.



**Fig 1: Frequency of reference to Afghanistan narco-terror nexus in the data collected from Google scholar. The bubbles indicate values and frequency**

#### **Exploring 'Security Interdependence': A Theoretical prism**

Interests of a group of countries clustered together in a region are naturally intertwined in every domain. The calamities they face and strategic compulsions based on threat perceptions are almost similar. In this regard, their national security concerns are also interrelated and should not be viewed separately for numerous reasons; this forms the basic premise of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as proposed by Barry Buzan in his ground breaking work 'Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security'. Prior to this notion, security was merely considered as a 'derivative of power' (Barry Buzan, 2003).

It is worth mentioning that during the cold war era, security studies was state centric and illustrated a struggle for power. However, in its after math, multifaceted subjects were included in its domain. Barry Buzan in his book, points out that viewing security which is only state orientated

is misleading. A broader parameter for security includes all the regional, societal and environmental sectors. His ideas are majorly neorealist and relates to the concept of a wholesome package of security.

Furthermore, as an attempt to comprehensively understand the concept of security and regionalism, Buzan loosely binds the ideas of constructivism and neo-realism. The departure from neo-realism's concept of power being the defining principle for security occurs, where it is deemed obsolete. He suggests three-levels as interplay of security and threat perceptions: International Systems, States and individuals. The other sectors mentioned in this article: "New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-First Century", are Military, Societal, Political, Economic, and Environmental (as illustrated in the table below).

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Referent object</b>
Military	State or other political entities
Political	Sovereignty
Economic	Firms
Societal	Collective Identities (Nations and Religions)
Environmental	Very broad ( ranging from Human species to the rest of the biosphere)

**Figure 2: Sectors and referent objects (Based on Buzan, Waever and Wilde (20), 1998)**

However, this is also a fact that these ideas are intertwined with each other and cannot deal with the concept of security independently. Hence, an analyst needs to decode the relation between each sector from the individual, State and international system level. It may be considered as a micro/macro methodology of dealing with the 'National security problem'. In this regard, Buzan focuses on the military sector as a significant and decisive factor in influencing all other sectors. It is true because it creates such a threat perception that can create existential problems for a State, both from individual to international arena levels. Meanwhile, the concept of force applied in the military sector can influence both the action and reaction of a State.

Following which, for Buzan, the second most important sector is Political. This sector poses ambiguous challenges hence demanding multifaceted responses. In fact, it can come at par with the military threat, as State itself is a political entity and ambiguity in this sector can also cause existential challenges. The referent object as mentioned in Fig 2, is indeed sovereignty, which is posed challenges by competition of ideologies, or political attack on the internal affairs of a State. These kinds of threats are either intrinsic or motivated from outside the State.

Consequently, the comprehensive understanding of security provided by Buzan supports the underpinnings of regional security. Buzan states in his book that: *security is a relational phenomenon*. Hence, the national security of a State cannot be viewed separately from the international and regional pattern of security, bringing us to the concept of security interdependence. It envisages the following concepts:

- a) Inter-State Relationships: The enmity and amity between States, can illustrate a wide spectrum of alliances and friendships at the regional level based on fear. This would be misleading if viewed solely from the prism of balance of power. Other factors play a major role like ethnic divide, historical and territorial linkages and also overarching ideologies.
- b) Security Complex: This complex is a leading factor of inter-state relationships. As Buzan defines it in form of a cluster of States whose main security concerns are intertwined with their national securities. In this regard, it is important to understand that they cannot be deemed apart from each other. This explanation of Buzan presents the idea of a security complex which comes under the umbrella of a mutuality of interests of regional States.
- c) Insecurity, threats and Vulnerability: states in a region if focus their all-out efforts on maintaining their national security in order to reduce its vulnerability, there is a chance that its regional and international security is threatened with lack of preparedness. According to Buzan, it is pertinent to find a policy which intermixes elements of national security with international one, however, it is quite difficult. It will be further complicated once combined with perceptions and politics. This explains why creating a policy which works at multiple levels is difficult.
- d) Macro-securitization: Ole Waever a close colleague of Buzan came up with this idea of Macro-securitization particularly after the 9/11 twin tower attacks in New York. It suggests that an issue is in fact ‘securitized’ once it is considered as a threat by the State, he wrote: “something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so”<sup>1</sup>. Following which, it becomes a security problem once accepted by the citizens. The idea is the same as suggested by Buzan but the canvas is much larger. It frames agendas, issues, and inter-state relationships as a security problem. Based on Universalist perceptions of threats, or objects for reference, according to Buzan, Globalization and Universalist ideology played a pivotal role in shifting the spectrum of security at the Macro level.

Nonetheless, the understanding of security complexes once employed on Pakistan’s region particularly amidst the illicit drug trafficking provides a meaningful framework for policy formulation. If solutions are found from the notion of complexes, then the policies should also be formulated from within the context. The idea of a regional security complex is significant, as States like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, may be viewing their security with relation to any one of the complexes. The most relevant to this study is the regional terror-narco nexus. If we use the illicit drug flow from Afghanistan which is fueling numerous terror outfits like the ISIS, Jabhat Fateh-al-Sham in Syria and TTP in Pakistan. As an example, we can clearly see how the security of countries from which the drug flows to other areas, is tied up with the regional security complex. Responding States like Pakistan cannot maximize its national security in isolation of these regional threats.

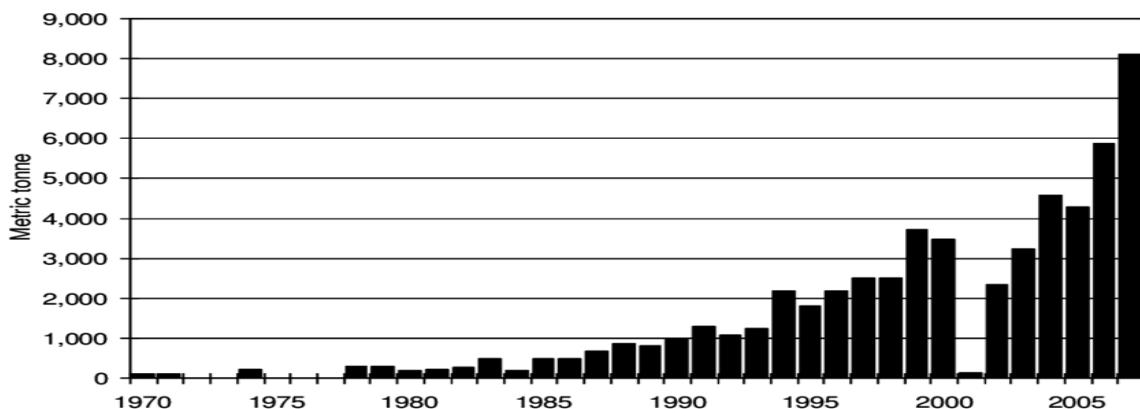
Consequently, we are brought to one of the most significant points about interdependence and regional security: It is part and parcel of a hierarchy presented in a security issue, resting amidst the national and international security and may not be brought out of the puzzle. Hence, the

consequences of avoiding issues pertaining to regional security may be disastrous. Pakistan-Afghanistan and Iran are bound by geography in this security complex, and it is also a fact that due to their inter-state relationships, attaining absolute security is easier said than done. The sacrifices by any State and its citizens required to achieve this may be monumental. Thus, we discuss the main conundrum, once the idea of a successful regional security policy is discussed: when are means justified by ends? Let's discuss this in the next section with reference to Pakistan's regional compulsions.

### **Regional Security Compulsions viz-a-viz narco-terror nexus:**

Pakistan is bound together with its neighboring countries by an overwhelming shared sense of history and geography. Strategically placed at the crossroads of Eurasia, Africa, the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea, this linkage has proved to be both an asset and a liability. This is true because, this 'Greater Middle East', *albeit* political and military upheavals is also a major route for the global illicit drug trade (given its position at the cross roads of regions). The major categories of drugs, opiates and cocaine flow from Afghanistan to destinations like Australia, Canada, Russia, Europe and the United States. Three routes are of significance in this regard, Balkan, southern and northern, reaching their respective destinations in Europe, Russia and Africa. The southern route is primarily used for drug trafficking of opiates from Afghanistan using Iran and Pakistan as a transit state. This 'Golden triangle', is one of the most significant global drug trade routes leading to destinations on both Western and Eastern branches.

Consequently, this exponential business with huge amount of profit is highly lucrative for terror groups in the region. In West Africa it has fuelled groups like Boko Haram, and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), while Al Shabab in Syria has benefitted in Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania as well (Chandra, 2020). Meanwhile, contemporary terrorist movements from Afghanistan, the global epicenter of drug production, have benefitted enormously from the opium trade; particularly, the ruling Afghan Taliban, Hizbul Islami, and other Al-Qaeda affiliates. They have used this money on recruiting, training cadres, acquiring weapons and equipment and also for bribing locals and officials for a safe passage of drugs.

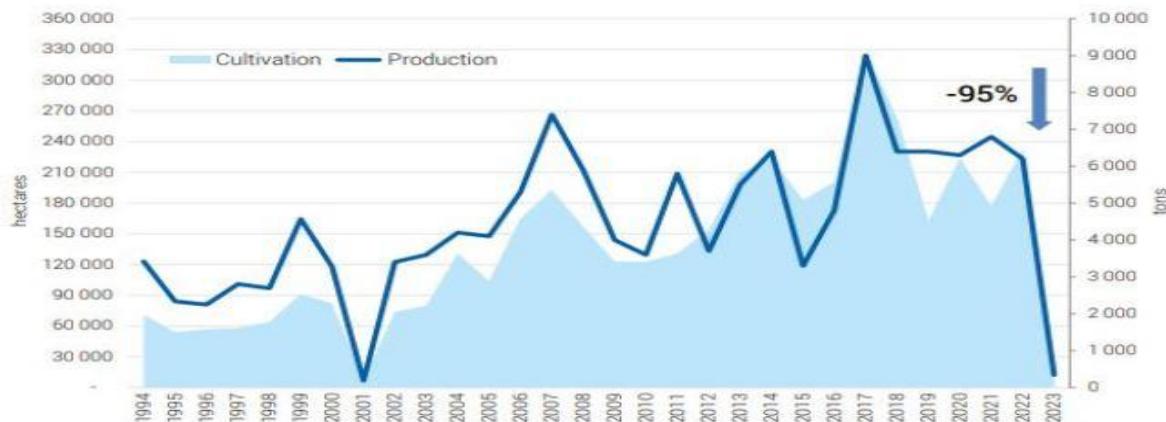


**Figure 3: Source: Windle, James. (2011). Ominous Parallels and Optimistic Differences: Opium in China and Afghanistan. Law, Crime and History. 2. 141-**

As for Afghanistan, in the year 2021, it accounted for 85 percent of global opium production. A United Nations Security Council (UNSC) report by a monitoring team in the same year revealed that, the trafficking of poppy based drugs, like heroin, and other synthetic ones remained the Taliban Government's single source of income (UNSC Report, 2023). Meanwhile, they had also expanded their production in Methamphetamine, popularly known as meth, whose clandestine labs were under Taliban control once they were not in power (UNSC Report, 2023). In fact, opium kept the Taliban going amid the US boots on ground in Afghanistan. The graph illustrates how the opium production increased and sustained during the US led war on terror.

After the Taliban came into power, in the year 2022, they banned poppy production altogether. This ban initially did not yield any results, in fact during the two-month grace period, production soared. According to a UNODC report, production rose by 32 percent.<sup>2</sup> Ironically most of the increase was viewed in Helmand and Kandahar, both strong holds of the Taliban. A smart downturn spike was viewed in its production in Helmand and Nangarhar in the year 2023, which were two major provinces of poppy production. However, as indicated in the fig 4, the downturn spike of production coincided with ample amount of cultivation.

**Opium cultivation and production in Afghanistan, 1994-2023.**



**Figure 4: UNODC Opium Survey 2023**

The question is, did this impact the production of poppy in Afghanistan for good? How did it impact its neighboring country, Pakistan? as for the impact, as discussed earlier, it is questionable. It is similar to the ban imposed by Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, on opium production in the year 2000. According to the US State Department report issued in 2001, the ban lacked credibility. Drugs were reported to be 'bursting across the borders' despite this ban (Fact Sheet, 2001).

Hence, yet again today in the year 2025, the most consequential effect of the Taliban government ban on poppy production was on Pakistan. Given the historic nature of its cultivation in Afghanistan and dependence of local farmers on the production of this crop, a mere ban may not have served the purpose. According to credible sources contacted by the author in ANF Balochistan, local poppy producers have shifted from Afghanistan to Balochistan's adjacent areas

in Pakistan and are hiring land from locals for the production of poppy. Gulistan, an area in Chaman, which is a border crossing between the two countries, is the most affected.

The ‘Golden Crescent’, where Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran converge, has remained as the most convenient drug trafficking hub. The porous border, deep cultural and historical ties between the three countries has allowed trafficking of drugs since time immemorial. Central Asia, too, remains a major route for drugs from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. Tajikistan is the most critical country in this northern route and reflects key counter-narcotics challenges in Central Asia. The capacity of counter-narcotics in both Pakistan and Iran is questioned due to their positions as central transit states. These countries have adapted to punitive regimes focused on military solution to the problem and targeting those who are at the lowest rungs of the criminal ladder.

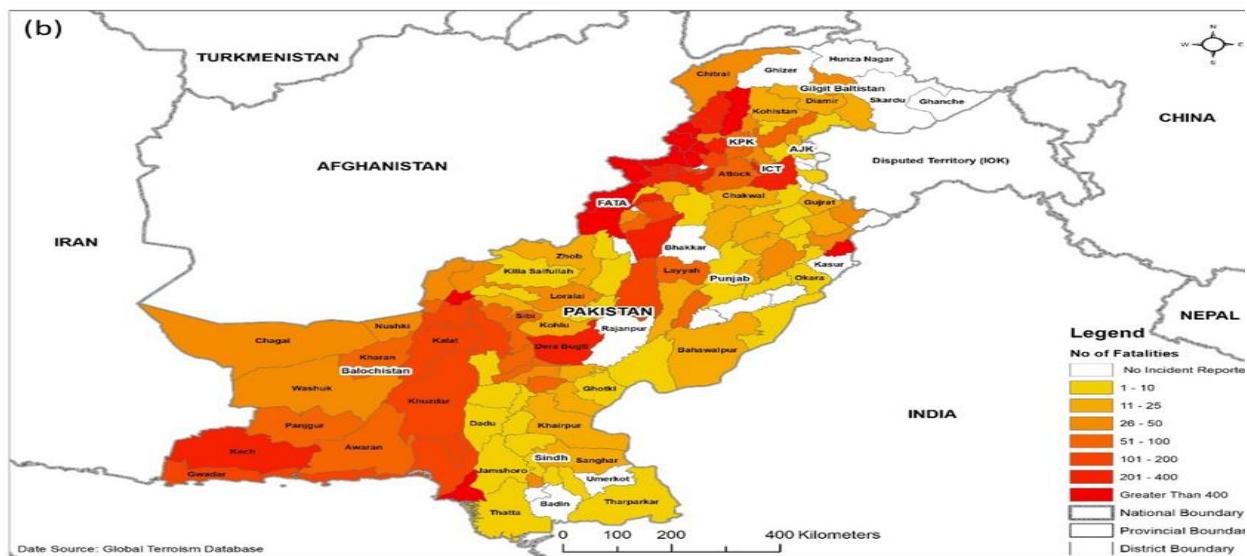
Earlier, in the year 2004, a UN report warned of a nexus between terrorism and illicit drug trade from Afghanistan (UN press release, 2004). It emphasized on the fact that, terrorists and warlords in Afghanistan, as well as insurgents in Russia, Central Asia, , and along the trafficking routes on the former Soviet Union’s Southern border all the way to the Balkans, shared part of the estimated US\$ 30 billion world heroin market (UN Press release, 2004). This clearly suggested a link between how terrorists remained resilient despite the crackdown by Governments on their economic and other activities.

Consequently, for Pakistan, this Golden Crescent has proven to be adjacent to the insurgent sites of Baloch separatist militant groups like Baloch Liberation Army- BLA in Balochistan and also TTP affiliated criminal networks in south of Afghanistan. Both Pakistan and Iran, carry drug seizures through their Anti Narcotic forces, however due to insufficient cross-border coordination between the border of these three countries, this tri-state area is a safe haven for terrorists and drug cartels to generate revenue even in desperate times (Global Initiative, 2023). Balochistan, in Pakistan in fact has a history of heroin processing plants infiltration in the era of 1980’s, particularly in Chaghi, which is adjacent to Nimroz in Afghanistan and Zahedan in Iran’s Sistan province (this in fact forms the Golden Crescent) (Rasmussen, 2017). It indeed is not possible to identify the amount of these plants still operational but this still serves as a major transit source for narco trade (Fazli, 2022).

However, the view point of ANF Balochistan officials interviewed by the author were different than the facts mentioned above. They revealed that, Chaghi district is not fertile enough for the production of large amounts of poppy or any other crop. In fact, all over Balochistan where there are terrorist hotspots they intertwine with drug production. Particularly in BLA hotspots like Neelipat, in Naukandi, Turbat, Panjgur, Mastung, Loralai, Dukki, Chaman-Gulistan and near the Iran border, in Mashakhel and Judar (as identified in Fig 5). This shows how their cross-border movement from Afghanistan-Pakistan and into Iran reinforces the illicit drug trade and generates money for the insurgents. These insurgents mainly provide a safe passage to drug traffickers in return of huge amount of money, and acts as a parallel economy. Due to the porous nature of border and vast area of Balochistan, neutralizing them entirely has become a challenge.

On the other hand, there are strong evidences of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), being involved in the production of poppy and trafficking of opium and heroin especially from the ex

Federally Administered Areas (FATA) (as discussed with an ANF official from KPK). However, this is not a new phenomenon, as a 2009 UNODC report suggested that the TTP are actively involved in the production of illicit drugs and its trafficking for generating huge amount of capital. In the year 2010, three TTP leaders namely Qari Zakir, Maulvi Faqir, and Muhammad were designate as drug traffickers by the US Department of the Treasury. Their assets were seized and US citizens were barred from doing business with them. During that period, Pakistan's law enforcement agencies also arrested Muhammd Asif, a TTP commander while he was actively engaged in the production and trafficking of drugs. In fact, he was heading the network from Mohmand Agency in ex FATA region. In addition, during the major offensive Zarb-e-Azb launched by the Pakistan Army in the year 2014, TTP's drug smuggling network was also targeted and security forces seized large quantities of drugs and arrested several TTP militants.



**Fig 5: Source: Imran, Shahid and others, (2023), Geographical spread analysis of terrorist attacks in Pakistan, Geo Journal.**

In 2018, Pakistani authorities arrested a TTP commander named Sher Muhammad alias Mullah Toofan in Karachi. Toofan was involved in the trafficking of drugs, which were used to fund the TTP's activities. According to a report by the UNODC, law enforcement agencies in KP seized a total of 2,214 kilograms of heroin and 85,032 kilograms of hashish only in 2019. These are some of the evidences which substantiate that TTP has been involved in the cultivation and trafficking of drugs, and the profits are used to fund their operations. Where the control of drug trafficking routes and territories has been a source of clashes between different militant groups, it has also fueled violence and conflict between the various tribes in the FATA region (Hilal Desk, 2023).

Nonetheless, for the purpose of this study, as mentioned earlier Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), justify the intertwined nature of national security compulsions in terms of Narco-terror networks between Afghanistan-Iran and Pakistan. The situation can be understood according to the theory in four broad categories:

Firstly, complex regional security architecture and Macro-securitization: Ever since the US led global war on terror launched on the Afghan ground, the idea of macro-securitization of issues has become relevant. Not only do the strategic interests of US coincide with the overall intrinsic differences of the region based on sectarian and ethnic divides, but also the Narco-terror nexus issue has magnified to become a major issue. In this regard, the US will have to play a positive role in facilitating the regional states in dealing with this major menace.

Second, lack of a multifaceted security policy: Pakistan-Afghanistan and Iran, are facing the brunt of narco-terror nexus together, however they are not dealing with it jointly. As the RSCT suggests that once a state focuses more on national security, the regional and international security becomes its insecurities. Their political differences and long-standing issues based on ethnic and sectarian divide create hindrance in achieving a multifaceted strategy.

Third, invigorating ‘security complex: at the heart of streamlining policies from the prism of security complex remains the idea that, the primary security concerns originating from narco-terror nexus between Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran, link together closely their national securities and realistically they cannot be considered apart from one another. This contemplates a security complex that is both at odds as well as one that is integrated under their shared interests. However, power struggles and competition to undermine one another has propelled an unwarranted security vacuum.

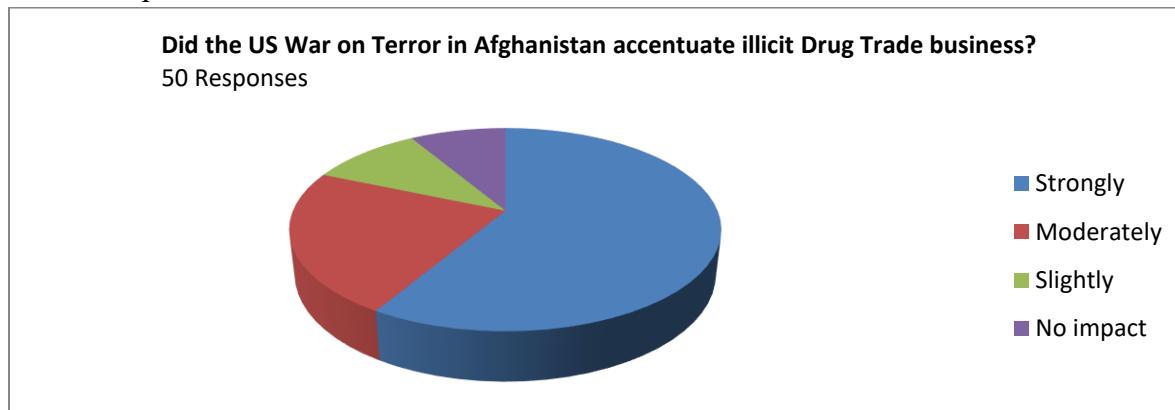
Fourth, strained regional relations: the vicious cycle of security-insecurity dilemma between these three states continue to undermine the prospects of achieving a regional solution to the narco-terror nexus. It will be delusional to view it solely from the prism of balance of power other factors play a major role like overarching ideologies, historical linkages and territorial claims.

In this regard, within the prism of RSCT, five approaches are available to deal with the menace of narco-terror nexus in the region: role of a hegemonic regional state, small to medium country alliances, cooperation for collective security like ASEAN, forming a pluralistic security community, or forming a formal institution. Interestingly, in the case of the ‘Golden Crescent’ none of these approaches seem to be doable. Due to which major regional security complexes defined by diplomatic disputes and chronic tensions have emerged and also military skirmishes between the three states. In this complex environment, the beneficiary remains the narco-terror nexus. Hence, in order to deal with it, the three countries will also have to subdue the chain of drug trafficking from supply to demand. The most credible step for Pakistan remains specifically investing in anti-drug campaigns in the youth and others, at least the last part of the chain, the demand, can be eliminated (in conversation with Dr. Amna Mahmood). As Barry Buzan had suggested, extending security to these non-traditional methods and sectors would contribute most to the traditional methods.

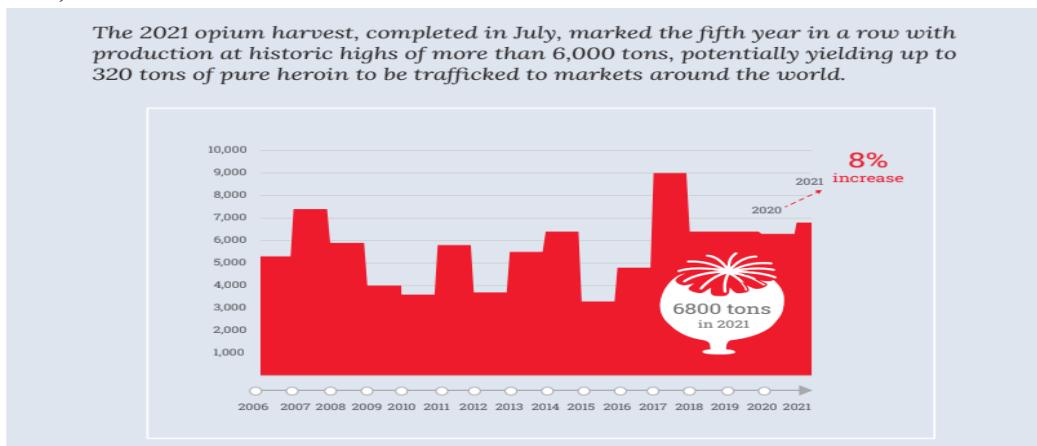
#### **4.0 Findings and Results**

According to some estimates provided by the UN, annual global revenue of \$32 billion is generated by illicit drug trafficking (UNODC Report, 2022) thus, making it the most lucrative trans-national crime. In this regard, nexus between drugs and terrorism has grown at light speed in the Middle

East. In the early 2000's, nineteen officially designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations out of the forty-three were related to some aspects of the international narco trade network. On the other hand, reportedly sixty percent of the rest of terror organizations were in some way related to narco trade (Braun, 2008). During a discussion with a retired official from the Anti-Narcotics Force, Balochistan, the author concluded that the terrorist organizations had numerous reasons to participate in the narcotics business in the 2000's; significantly, due to the US led Global War on Terror, other businesses like illegal oil trade was affected, hence the illicit drug trade business provided a respite in dire situations.

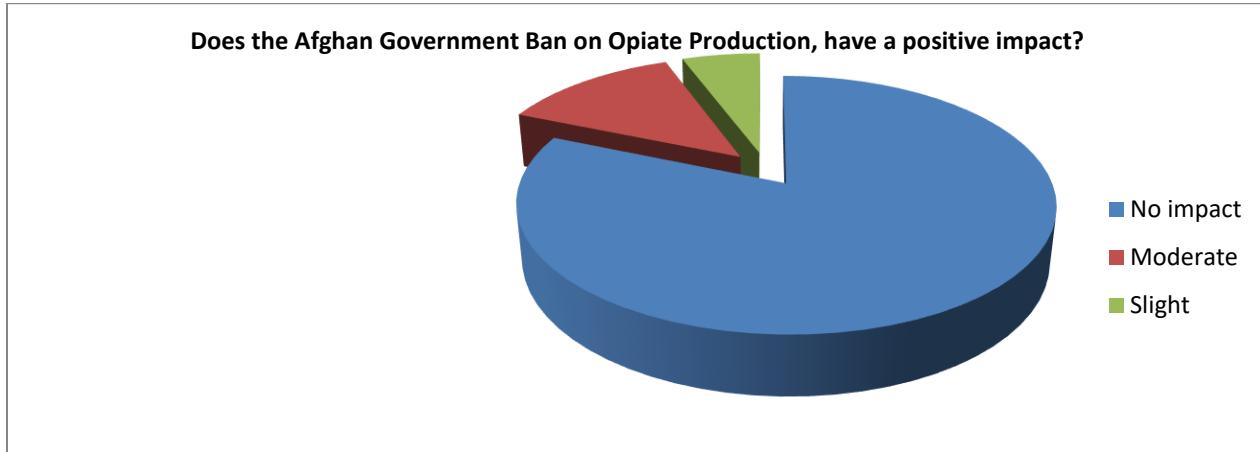


The pie chart illustrates 50 responses by retired and serving ANF officials and Frontier Corps Officers from Balochistan, to the author. More than 50 percent of the respondents agreed with a strong impact of US led Global war on Terror in accentuating the regional illicit drug trade business. According to an Atlantic Council report by Rupert Stone, due to the economic sanctions and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan from 2000's, drug trade provided a respite. The land used for poppy cultivation was triple the usual amount from the years 2002 to 2020, and the investments and production of methamphetamine also rose to unprecedented heights with the help of cultivation of an abundant local plant- ephedra (Rupert Stone, 2022). The graph illustrates how, from 2020 to 2021, an 8 percent increase was marked in the drug production in Afghanistan (UNODC, 2021).



Today in the year 2025, under the Taliban rule, illicit drug trade is yet again booming. Interestingly,

despite the ban on opium cultivation imposed by the Taliban Government, huge profits are still being made by drug traffickers and terrorist organizations, especially TTP. A senior ANF officer remarked that, *a total of 13,200 tonnes opiate stocks were produced in Afghanistan at the end of the year 2022, it was enough to meet the opiate trade demands till the year 2027! These profits are being used by trans-regional terrorist organizations, further destabilizing the Afghan economy and strengthening organized crime. The chart illustrates how the responses by practitioners to the author overwhelmingly believe to have no positive impact of Afghan opiate ban.*



Meanwhile, it is also a reality that the ban imposed by Afghan government has a spill over effect on the opiate trade from Pakistan. As already mentioned, Pakistan is a transit state for the trade of opiate from Afghanistan and forms a ‘Golden Triangle’, from Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran. Due to the ban imposed by Afghan government and porous nature of border with Afghanistan, Afghan nationals have infiltrated in the areas of Balochistan adjacent to Afghanistan. According to a senior ANF officer in Balochistan, *areas such as Gulistan in Chaman, Loralai and Mastung have seen record amount of Poppy cultivation, all sponsored by Afghan nationals. A poppy eradication drive in form of operations to eradicate the crops is also underway, however, due to the involvement and facilitation by locals this drive is challenging. They are provided with different sources of revenue, in addition to the opiate trade itself, like bribes and money in exchange of land requisition and provision for facility of cottage drug factories. In this garb, terrorist organizations, like TTP and Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), are generating massive revenue. However, it is also a fact that such organizations do not require huge sums of money to conduct their operations. With support from across the border in Afghanistan, they have specific needs like infrastructure, training equipment and logistics* (response to the author).

From secondary sources like books and newspaper articles it was revealed that, the Balkan route is used to facilitate opiate trade from Afghanistan. It passes traditionally through Afghanistan and Iran entering Turkey from its South-Eastern corridor by land and remotely by sea for markets in Central and Western Europe. While, the Pakistan transit route is used for opiate trade to Africa and majorly Middle Eastern region. This has been a practice since time immemorial due to weak border control and also increased amount of experience.

Primary sources and discussions of author with ANF officials and local Government

officers revealed that, in the Middle East, countries like Saudi Arabia, and other Arabian Peninsula countries are a lucrative market for illicit drugs not just from Afghanistan but also Syria. A Drug named Captagon is produced and trafficked in large numbers by terrorist organizations like Jabhat ul Sham and also in some cases Al-Qaeda in Syria. Due to the prolonged conflict in Syria, and lack of law and order this trade has flourished. For the production of such illicit drugs, a simple and mobile production facility is required with limited knowledge of chemicals. Hence, it is a highly profitable source of income for drug cartels and terrorists both.

In a discussion of the author with Prof. Dr. Abdul Wadood, who is an expert on Afghan affairs, serving as Professor and former Dean of Social Sciences at Balochistan University of Information Technology and Management Sciences, it was illustrated that, the issue of illicit drug trafficking from Afghanistan and presence of Afghan nationals in Balochistan who are acquiring land from local farmers for the cultivation of poppy, is indeed a reality. Despite the opiate band by Taliban government, its production remains on the rise and its destination states are in the Arabian Peninsula and also Western countries through the sea route. The solution lies in breaking the supply-transit-demand chain, for which a regional dialogue of Greater Middle Eastern Countries is important. In the absence of a shared matrix of response by the regional countries, this trade is rampant. In fact, it will not be wrong to say that at the regional level there is no realization of this trade being a convenient source of funding for terrorist organizations like TTP and Al-Qaeda.

In the Middle East, as far as illicit drug trade is concerned, no considerable steps are taken for its eradication at the regional level. There is indeed an absence of a shared matrix of response to this menace. In fact, there is no formal realization of illicit drug trade as a source of funding for the terrorists. Saudi Arabia being one of the major regional countries does time and again emphasize on the need for adopting Confidence Building Measures. However, due to its differences with Iran, such measures were not taken as yet. Nonetheless, a silver lining emerged in the mid- 2023, with the facilitation of China, both the countries have now normalized relations. There is still room for further research on how this normalization will facilitate in dealing with the illicit drug trade, particularly, as mentioned earlier, with the backdrop of long-term interests of US in the region.

However, it is also a fact that, Iranians have time and again advocated for inclusivity in a regional security dialogue. It is ready to also include Israel but not the US. Ahmed Zarif, Iran's Foreign Minister stated on 8<sup>th</sup> Dec' 2020 that: this region is ours and we will not talk to the Europeans or Americans for fixing our problems, in fact they are the ones who created our problems at the first place. Iran also links any kind of compromise with regards to its nuclear program, to the complete drawdown of US military from the region. It is not a country which is undermined by the Saudi or Emirati capabilities. All it desires is a complete withdrawal of American military from the region and also non-interference in the regional issues by the American Government. So, while the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a considerable step, however, practically speaking, with Iran's enmity with the US, consensus on dealing with issues like illicit drug trade may not be achieved. On the other hand, Iran is also a party to a tripartite dialogue with Afghanistan and Pakistan, dealing with illicit drug trade in the

region. The United Nations Office of Drug and Crime (UNODC), brokered a Triangular Initiative (TI), in the year 2007, which intended to engage the three countries for finding tangible solutions to the organizational crime of narco trafficking in the area. It received a commendable response from the three countries and under the TI umbrella they aimed to target the source in Afghanistan, and also the transit points of morphine, opium, and heroin, which is trafficked through Pakistan and Iran to reach destinations in Europe and Western markets through Turkey (UNODC, 2023).

## **5.0 Recommendations**

Nonetheless, it can be agreed that despite the urgency for regional coordination between Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran in order to deal with Narco trade and its linkages with terrorism, the probability of it remains low. In light of this study and its analysis from the prism of RSCT, there is room for five approaches:

- a) Regional hegemonic state: a hegemonic state can ensure regional security, by employing the tools of soft and hard power which may also help in preventing other hegemonic states from interfering. As an example, we can view how United States ensured stability in North America and South Asia for a limited period.
- b) Regional Coalitions: alliance formation persists as a key to balancing of power against revisionist States in some region. To recall, during the World War I and II, European countries in the West, maintained this phenomenon.
- c) Regional Institution: Coordination and integration amongst smaller States in a region persists as an idea of collective security. As an example, we can view the cooperation amongst the Association of Southeast Asian Nations
- d) Regional Organization: the fourth approach refers to creating a community of pluralistic security. Where there are no formal institutions, but still out of mutual understanding and consensus, set rules are established and agreed upon. These rules include, solving conflicts through mutual consensus, disarmament and not using military power against each other. The success and failure of this approach rests in political and economic consensus amongst States, with a higher interdependence level.
- e) Regional pluralistic community: the fifth approach requires countries to establish a regional organization which can ensure collective security, like North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

As postulated by Buzan, adopting any of these approaches specifically for countries like Pakistan-Afghanistan and Iran, there is a need for accepting the nature of shared threat perceptions. They need to have a consensus on qualifying an issue as a threat and also on the tools to deal with it. Any of the aforementioned approaches would lead to a sustained framework for collective security which is different than military coalitions.

In the past, interactions between Pakistan- Afghanistan and Iran have strictly been military centric and due to their strained political relations, any tangible collective steps are far out of sight. Hence, this study suggests that the demand part of the illicit drug trade regional business should be tackled vigorously by Pakistan.

## Conclusions

Most of the regional and external attempts to create a collective security architecture dealing with the Narco-terror nexus in Pakistan's region has remained military centric. This was in fact a Cold War concept of security, which needs to be revisited in the light of the newer realities. Security has transcended borders and concepts and non-traditional security has also gained significance after the twin tower attacks on 9/11. Pakistan-Afghanistan and Iran remain embroiled in a love-hate relationship, where either country does not sustain cordial political relations. In view of the RSCT, as discussed in this study, these countries need to first realize that, threats may travel more easily over short distances which create an environment of security interdependence in their region, as articulated earlier as security complexes. This pattern of security complex creates three realities in the region that are responsible for hindering any effort to develop a working collective security scheme for these three countries against the Narco-terror nexus: Perception of threats: if the Afghan government will not consider how the narco trade is benefitting TTP and BLA in acquiring finances which support terrorist activities in Pakistan, as a regional threat, the issue will persist. Common threat perception is the key!

Second, narrow concept of security: it continues to shape the interactions between Pakistan-Afghanistan and Iran, which leads to militarization of issues. They have common issues beyond security like poverty, illiteracy and social evils. The horizon should be broadened for the interactions between these three countries. The third reality is the Political rivalry: As Clausewitz suggests, 'war is continuation of policy in other ways', the 'Golden Triangle' can be diminished if political issues are kept at the fore. Nonetheless, the Narco-terror nexus continues to reshape the security outlook of Pakistan's region. On one hand, it has shifted the perceptions of security threats in Pakistan. On the other hand, it calls for ensuring 'regional national security' a priority. Nonetheless, it is up to the countries to delve on the significance of shifting the narratives of dealing with the demand of illicit drugs within their countries, so that the chain of supply is broken for good.

**Beenish Sultan:** Problem Identification, data collection, analysis and Theoretical Framework

### Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest in this article's research, authorship, and publication.

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