

Transnational drug trafficking in Southeast Asia: identifying national limitations to look for regional changes

Tráfico transnacional de drogas en el Sudeste Asiático: identificando las limitaciones nacionales para buscar cambios regionales

Tráfico Transnacional de Drogas no Sudeste Asiático: identificação de Restrições Nacionais à Procura de Mudanças Regionais

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Abstract

Over its fifty years of established existence beginning in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has expounded its consolidated and integrated model in political relations, economic developments, and cultural values. However, confronted by threats to global security, ASEAN has also faced the complex impacts of transnational narcotics trafficking (TransNT). The study uses grey literature as secondary data to illustrate the current situations of TransNT in Southeast Asia by way of examining drug trafficking starting from the original countries (Myanmar) through the

transit points (Vietnam) to final destination countries (Malaysia). Besides reviewing more than four decades of collaboration, the paper analyses ASEAN's milestones in building its cooperative mechanism and assesses its institutional framework for combatting TransNT with specific initiatives. The study notes the main barriers and practical challenges that constrain the process of regional cooperation. Some brief recommendations are also suggested for further research in the near future to enhance regional cooperation in combatting transnational crimes.

Keywords

Drug trafficking, law enforcement, international relations (source: Criminological Thesaurus - United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute - UNICRI). Borders, ASEAN (source: author).

Resumen

A lo largo de sus cincuenta años de existencia, desde 1967, la Asociación de Naciones del Sudeste Asiático (ASEAN) ha demostrado su modelo consolidado e integrado en materia de relaciones políticas, desarrollo económico y valores culturales. Sin embargo, ante las amenazas a la seguridad mundial, la ASEAN también se ha enfrentado a los complejos impactos del tráfico transnacional de estupefacientes (TransNT). El estudio utiliza la literatura gris como datos secundarios para ilustrar la situación actual del TransNT en el Sudeste Asiático mediante el examen del tráfico de drogas desde los países de origen (Myanmar) a

través de los puntos de tránsito (Vietnam) hasta los países de destino final (Malasia). Además de repasar más de cuatro décadas de colaboración, el documento analiza los hitos de la ASEAN para construir su mecanismo de cooperación y evalúa su marco institucional para combatir el TransNT con iniciativas específicas. El estudio señala los principales obstáculos y desafíos prácticos que limitan el proceso de cooperación regional. También se sugieren algunas breves recomendaciones para seguir investigando en el futuro cercano con el fin de mejorar la cooperación regional para combatir los delitos transnacionales.

Palabras clave

Tráfico de drogas; aplicación de la ley; relaciones internacionales (fuente: Tesauro Criminológico - Instituto de Investigación Interregional de Crimen y Justicia de las Naciones Unidas - UNICRI). Fronteras; ASEAN. (fuente: autor).

Resumo

Ao longo de cinquenta anos, estabelecida desde 1967, a Associação das Nações do Sudeste Asiático (ASEAN) provou o seu modelo consolidado e integrado nas relações políticas, desenvolvimentos econômicos, e valores culturais. No entanto, perante as ameaças da segurança global, a ASEAN também enfrentou impactos complexos do tráfico transnacional de narcóticos (TransNT). O estudo utiliza a literatura cinzenta como dados secundários para ilustrar as atuais situações do TransNT no Sudeste Asiático através do exame do tráfico de droga dos países originais (Myanmar) através de pontos de trânsito (Vietname) para

os países de destino final (Malásia). Além de analisar mais de quatro décadas de colaboração, o documento analisa os marcos da ASEAN para construir o seu mecanismo de cooperação e avalia o seu quadro institucional para combater a TransNT com iniciativas específicas. O estudo aponta para as principais barreiras e desafios práticos para limitar o processo de cooperação regional. São também sugeridas algumas breves recomendações para aprofundar a investigação nos próximos tempos, a fim de reforçar a cooperação regional no combate aos crimes transnacionais.

Palavras-chave

Tráfico de droga; aplicação da lei; relações internacionais (fonte: Thesaurus Criminológico - Instituto Inter-regional de Pesquisa em Crime e Justiça das Nações Unidas - UNICRI). Zona fronteira; ASEAN. (fonte: autor).

Introduction

As partly effect of transnational organized crime's threats (TOC) in Asia and the Pacific region, the transnational narcotics trafficking (TransNT) in Southeast Asia has become increasingly one of the newest concerns of its activities since the past two decades. The latest report of the United Nations on Drugs and Crime UNODC (2019b) on TOC in East Asia and the Pacific estimated the illicit methamphetamine and heroin market of Southeast Asia at about US\$25.7 and US\$6.3 billion annually, respectively. Even though, the spreading out of the COVID-19 currently did not impact significantly on

the trend and patterns of illicit markets at the regional level (UNODC, 2020b, 2021a). As discussed at the 9th ASEAN Drug Monitoring Network (ADMN) last September 2020 via the virtual platform, all leaders have realized that drug cases after around twenty years since the adjustment of timeline toward 'drug-free zone,' the drug trafficking have not yet decreased sustainably year-by-year period (ASEAN-NARCO, 2020). In the old bottle's stories, the Golden Triangle area, mainly in Shan and Kachin states (Myanmar) and to a lesser extent in Thailand and Laos, has been still recorded as one of the most productive regions for opium cultivation worldwide. In contrast, in the new wine stories, these areas have been warning as the most challenging region to face an increasing trend in

methamphetamine and heroin with several adoptable factories to produce, particularly across the border between Myanmar and Thailand, Laos, and China's Yunnan province (Luong, 2021). Ironically, although many states have still maintained their harshest punishment for drug offenses including applying the death penalty in both law and practice (Laos, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam) and using the war on drugs (Philippines), the drug user's rate still high in almost ASEAN countries. Alongside huge profits to traffickers, to turn, the booming of drug trading is not only to boost drug consumption and addiction but also to raise the level of violent crime, affects the health of the consumers, and spreads HIV/AIDS through intravenous drug users (UNODC, 2021a, 2021b).

After around one decade reached the top of the world's largest producer of illicit opium in the 1980s, Myanmar has placed at second-largest grower of opium poppy in the world after Afghanistan since 1991. After decreasing around one decade, cultivation has doubled and is estimated at 33,100 hectares in Myanmar in 2019 and 4,924 hectares in Laos in 2018 (ASEAN-NARCO, 2019; UNODC, 2020a). However, the unstable political conditions with potential corruption risks in Myanmar's military contributed to the supply reduction of opium cultivation in Shan and the Kachin States more difficult to control and solve (International Crisis Group, 2019). Additionally, regional and national leaders are still fumbling about specific solutions and practical approaches to opium cultivation. Yet, a comprehensive framework of harm reduction and access to health for drug users in Myanmar and establishing alternative development programs to poverty's decline for local minority farmers still unclear implement in Myanmar (IPDC, 2019). These unclear policies contributed to practical gaps and challenging deals between poppy growers and authorities. However, there was a significant shift in the supply and demand market from opiates to meth in recent years.

This paper reviews and analyzes law enforcement agencies' capacities, approaches, and challenges (LEAs) in combat TransNT rather than balancing between harm-and-demand reduction and supply reduction. This study uses secondary data from the ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Centre (ASEAN-NARCO) and UNODC and social media releases from ASEAN's meetings regarding drug-related matters. It combines policy analysis in the ASEAN's Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs 2016-2025. We highlight that the dream of a 'drug-free zone' in ASEAN is still a holistic approach

if no said fail. Based on these points, some basic recommendations are also placed and called for special attention among ASEAN's leaders to improve the effectiveness of regional cooperation.

Emergent Challenges of Illicit Drugs Trafficking in Southeast Asia

Although no data can update continuously and precisely the number of traffickers is arrested each year for trafficking illicit narcotics in Southeast Asia, the high profits of the drug trade continue to lure thousands more into the business. According to (UNODC, 2020b), the number of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) and new psychoactive substances (NPS) seized in East and Southeast Asia in 2019 reached a record of 115 tons, an increase of 210 percent compared to five years ago. In particular, there were 554,234 criminal drug cases in the region, with an increasing trend in Myanmar, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, Laos, Singapore, and Vietnam and a decline in Thailand, Cambodia, and Brunei (ASEAN-NARCO, 2019, p. 8). Over the last few years, seizures of both crystal meth and meth tablets have been rising remarkably across the region at record-breaking rates (UNODC, 2020b). Both forms of the drugs recorded seizure amounts double in the last year alone, part of an ever-increasing trend since 2015. In particular, LEAs seized at least 40,000 kg of crystal meth in 2018, more than 30,000kg in 2016; meanwhile, around 745 million meth tablets were taken in 2018, double the previous year's amount. Notably, the amount seized in Thailand in 2018 is 17 times larger than the combined amount of the drug seized a decade ago (nearly 30 million tablets) by all countries in the region (UNODC, 2019a, p. 3). In Vietnam, in the only first quarter of 2019 alone, police arrested 6,552 drug-related crimes and seized around six tons of illicit drugs – more than the number of cases and quantities captured in the whole of 2018 (Luong, 2019c, 2019e). In the official launch of trend and patters of synthetic drugs in the region, UNODC (2021a) confirmed that there was no remarkable influence on the scale of those drugs in the period of covid-19. Due to the pandemic threats, while banning borderland and restricting air's transportation, traffickers still took advantages of maritime routes to shift illicit drugs from Myanmar to regional countries and beyond (UNODC, 2020b, 2021a).

While these seizures are undoubtedly impressive achievements, other data in the report suggests that they're hollow victories. There's been no corresponding change in the purity of methamphetamine at the retail and wholesale levels in the region. The price for methamphetamine across the region has dropped dramatically over the past two years. The UNODC reports that the wholesale price of one kilogram of methamphetamine in Vietnam dropped from US\$13,500 in 2016 to US\$8,000 in 2017. In Myanmar, the cost of crystal meth per gam has halved from US\$33 in 2016 to US\$16 in 2018. Malaysia and Philippine prices have dropped by a third (US\$45.60 in 2014 to US\$12 in 2017) and under 10% (US\$173.60 in 2015 to US\$130.10 in 2018), respectively (UNODC, 2019a). Although the number of clandestine methamphetamine laboratories dismantled each year by law enforcement in East and Southeast Asia has declined by 75% since 2015, the 'unprecedented amounts of methamphetamine seized in 2018 by so many countries at the same time suggests an uninterrupted supply of the drug' (UNODC, 2019a, p. 5).

Drug trafficking in Southeast Asia, both structure and operation, is proliferating and dynamic. In the last decades, some syndicates have been steered by small groups or armed conflict organizations in Myanmar colluded with their counterparts to monitor opium cultivation and heroin shipments on a domestic scale and transfer into third countries. However, when both international and regional pressures and the local government's request to eradicate poppy size and the drug user's trend of opium and heroin replaced by ATS's preferences, that led to the change of drug trafficking's invested market. Several organized crime groups in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), which includes Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, have maintained an uninterrupted amphetamine supply chain across the region and beyond. Their organizational structure has also changed, more adaptable and dynamic to adjust their modus operandi to avoid law enforcement's monitors. However, non-ASEAN's anti-narcotics authorities' records asserted officially; they are Italian mafia, Chinese-triad, and/or Japanese Yakura. As a result, almost all drug traffickers were changing routes and tactics to exploit any available vulnerable points along the various national and international borders (Chouvy, 2013). Many countries of the mainland Southeast Asia region have weak and/or challenging to implement border controls where customs services have to monitor the heavy volume of people and vehicles crossing certain land boundaries,

including Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Similar cases were reported by Myanmar and Thailand, where drug traffickers used many techniques to conceal drugs from being distributed or transported to other areas. Most nations in this region have porous, inaccessible, mountainous areas. Some have extensive waterways and coastlines where traffickers took these advantages to transport the illegal drug from this country to others with diverse modus operandi particularly in the period of covid-19 (Luong, 2021). Furthermore, the worsening drug situation in the region is also linked to ASEAN's geographical proximity to the Golden Triangle, where shares around 950,000-square kilometers among the borders of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos has a reputation as the center of the world's drug trafficking.

Accordingly, heroin is almost entirely sourced in Myanmar and distributed for other countries through the number of "trafficking hot-spots," including Northeastern Myanmar, across Vietnam's borderland with Northern Laos, the northernmost part of Thailand, and the Vietnamese border with Cambodia. Some heroin shipments are transported by land across Laos and Thailand; other shipments are trafficked by sea through ports in southern Myanmar (Chouvy, 2013). Besides that, after the intense crackdown on drug trafficking activities of the Thai army and police in the early 2000s (particularly across Thailand's borderland with Myanmar), traffickers were forced to use new journeys for delivery. However, there has been a substantial shift in drug consumption from opiates to methamphetamine after one year. Accordingly, except for Vietnam, the rest of ASEAN's countries firmed that methamphetamine was their primary drug of concern in 2018 (UNODC, 2019a). Since 2009 in which methamphetamine pills were predominantly used in countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand; whereas, crystalline methamphetamine was the primary drug of concern in Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines (ASEAN-NARCO, 2019; UNODC, 2020b). In Singapore, there were only 300 meth users in comparison to 500 heroin users in 2010. Still, since 2015, the number of meth users has accounted for 50% of all drug abusers and continues to rise for around 2,140 people in 2018, while heroin abused has drooped back to just 700 (Pazos & Chen, 2019).

Similarly, in Malaysia, the number of meth users detected by anti-narcotics authorities surpassed that of heroin users for the first time in 2017. According to the latest report of ASEAN-NARCO (2019, p. 5), across the Southeast Asian total population, the rate of drug users per 100,000 population in

2018 was 76.7, which is an increase from 50.6 in 2017 and higher than 2016 at 176% increased rate. Furthermore, the number of drug admissions rose in 2018 in comparison to 2017, with over 500,000 drug users recorded, in which ATS users accounted for 85-90% between 2017 and 2018; mainly, the number of ATS users was ten times higher than other drugs in every period and cannabis ranked lower at the second preference (ASEAN-NARCO, 2019, p. 15). Despite the alarming status, data related to drug users remain imprecise as many ASEAN member countries do not conduct regular surveys. In contrast, some do not even conduct them at all. This lack of consistent data creates unique problems.

National Limitations: Cases by Cases

This section uses typical evidence of selected states among group-based classifications to show their challenges in combat drug trafficking. Each dot will be reflected briefly in its complicated features, with the most challenging concerns impacting national limitations to combat drug trafficking.

Source's Dots: Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand

When the region witnessed a substantial shift from opiates to methamphetamine, Myanmar still recorded the most concerned resource supply. Several non-government organizations, civil society groups, and scholars call for human rights, land access, healthcare services, and alternative developments for farmers of local minorities (Luong, 2019b). An increase of meth's production with its complicated activities to smuggle precursor chemicals surrounding Myanmar and the two biggest pre-precursor manufactures (China and India) is undeniable issues (Cachia & Lwin, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2019). Trafficking and smuggling illicit drugs as a business model, those traffickers and smugglers have steered by organized criminal groups combined supported by misconducted officials. Accordingly, they are often taking advantage of the natural geography of the porous jungle, poor border control, and poor law enforcement management to implement their cunning *modus operandi* to manufacture, trading, and transport in both domestic demand and regional markets (International Crisis Group, 2019; Pazos & Chen, 2019). Efforts of local government and their supported

LEAs with funding UNODC have just modeled to achieve supply reduction through reducing poppy's cultivation year-by-year statistics or investing some alternative development program via coffee-replaced growing in these opium villages. Paradoxically, the most significant concerns in 'informal compromises' among Myanmar military's authorities with militias and other paramilitary units still 'takes place in safe havens in Shan State' to produce crystal methamphetamine with an estimated value of tens of billions of dollars (International Crisis Group, 2019, p. i). Besides that, under the ceasefire agreements between the Myanmar military (*Tatmadaw*) and armed conflict groups, some pro-government militias operate as semi-autonomous groups to pursue criminal activities, mainly drug trading (Buchanan, 2016; Meehan, 2016). It benefits from a collision between high-level corruptive officials and army-backed militias or non-state armed groups that create many good chances for manufacturing and trafficking meth-based productions in both qualities and quantities (Cachia & Lwin, 2019). It leads not only to reducing residents' beliefs in the unstoppable crisis among political-economic, decisive leadership, and corruption roots, but also to hamper efforts to end the state's long-running ethnic conflicts among minority groups and government (Cachia & Lwin, 2019). Furthermore, at the time of covid-19 in February 2020 and of a military coup in February 2021, manufacturing and transporting synthetic drugs from Shan and Kachin State have not yet decreased significantly and are still recorded as significant resources in the region (UNODC, 2020b, 2021a).

Transit's Dots: Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam

Locating on the periphery of the Golden Triangle via neighboring country – Laos, Vietnam is often used as a transit place before transporting to third markets. Thus, the risk of Vietnam becoming a drug transit hub is not new. In 2019, anti-narcotics enforcement agencies informed that it is the most significant year to seize all types of drugs, including 1,222 kg of heroin, 6,253 kg and 1,053,099 tablets ATS, 614 kg of opium, and 768 kg of cannabis. Mainly, meth seizures in 2019 were higher fivefold in 2018, with at least five new NPS explored in Vietnam (Tran Cuong, 2019). Currently, Vietnam is not recorded as a source country to produce illicit drugs, except for very few cases relating self-manufacturing meth with low-purity qualities (Luong, 2021). Thus, over 90% of confiscated drugs originate from Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and

China, in which heroin remains the most commonly abused and traded drug in Vietnam, followed by ATS in the form of tablets and ice (UNODC, 2020b, 2021a). Vietnam's Minister of Public Security admitted that as part of the 'balloon effect,' Vietnam has become a come-and-go destination, 20% for domestic demand and 80% for third countries in recent years (Nam Phong, 2019; Tran Cuong, 2019). Using porous borderland and loose management on land, air, and sea territories, traffickers used cunning modus operandi to conceal diverse vehicles. They conspired with misconduct officers to transfer illicit drugs into the internal domain before ship beyond.

Traffickers took advantage of geographical, topographical, and climatic conditions to transport illegal drugs to and/or through Vietnam through passing many official and unofficial pathways (Luong, 2019a, 2019d). Vietnam is an S-shaped country on the map, with two large ends and narrow middle, with around 1,650 kilometers from North to South where the most comprehensive place is approximately 500 kilometers, and the thinnest is about 50 kilometers with many porous border spanning between Vietnam and three neighbors (Cambodia, China, and Laos). In terms of topographical issues, three-quarters of Vietnam's territory comprises mountainous and hilly regions with distinctive mountain zones (Luong, 2021). Each has its unique features that create the particular characteristics of typological figures that traffickers and smugglers could explore for TransNT. They took these advantages to transport heroin into China after collecting from Laos.

Furthermore, they imported precursor chemical ingredients from China turn back into Central Highland areas (Nghe An, Quang Binh, and Kon Tum) and the Southern region (Ho Chi Minh City) Binh Duong) to produce meth at remotest factories. As a result, the large volume of heroin, cannabis, and ATS have been pushed into domestic Vietnam's markets across the borderland between Vietnam and Cambodia before spreading out to others countries in the region via land, seas, and air (Luong, 2019a, 2019d, 2019e). For sea routes, illicit drugs were often mixed in other goods and packed in cargo containers and then gathered at the Southcentral areas such as Ho Chi Minh City and Ba Ria-Vung Tau to wait for distributing or transporting to a third country and beyond (Nam Phong, 2019; Tran Cuong, 2019).

Besides, Vietnam is considered one of the weakest countries to control pharmacy industries' policies in the region. As a result, traffickers transferred chemical engineers into Vietnam and collude with enterprisers who already owned factories and stores

in remote and isolated areas to set up meth factories (Nam Phong, 2019). To cover their modus operandi to produce meth, those criminal groups frequently rent larger storages with high prices and also inform both owner and local administrators of the purpose for making fertilizers or insecticides. However, after almost the Southern region's routes have been dismantled in recent times, they changed their modus operandi. Accordingly, many Chinese suspects have located at the Highland Central provinces such as Kon Tum, Binh Dinh, Dak Nong, Binh Duong, and Ho Chi Minh City to hire Vietnamese factories manufacturing (Luong, 2019a, 2019e).

Destination's Dots: Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Singapore

In the Mekong region, especially in Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, the distribution structure of methamphetamine from the Golden Triangle has changed remarkably. On the periphery of the Golden Triangle and the outcoming of 'balloon affect' situations when LEAs attacked vigorously at current locations in the region, the source of ATS distributed to Malaysia is increasing in recent three years. In 2018, the number of confiscated ice drugs in southern Thailand bordering Malaysia accounted for one-third, while in 2013, only 7% (UNODC, 2019a). (ASEAN-NARCO, 2019, p. 53) The latest development of meth reflected the significant demand and higher prices in the market, although LEAs have monitored both internal and external locations to curb traffickers looking for Malaysia as an attractive destination of international drug trafficking syndicates (ASEAN-NARCO, 2019; Luong, 2019b). It also explained the increase in drug user's trend in Malaysia from only 20,887 drug dependents in 2013 to 25,267 people in 2018, in which there was 16,384 meth user's country (ASEAN-NARCO, 2019, p. 53).

Furthermore, trending social media channels such as Facebook, WeChat, and WhatsApp, to promote and sell drugs increased to target young groups. Accordingly, youth aged 19-39 in Malaysia have still dominated the number of users with a percentage of 72.9% in 2018 (18,417 drug dependents). Alongside a warning of teenagers (aged 13-18 includes 560 people), they created a prevalent shift from opiate-based (heroin and morphine) to the ATS's category in this country (AIPA, 2019, p. 10; ASEAN-NARCO, 2019, pp. 54-56). However, most of Malaysia's efforts will not cover and control their domestic markets when the most prominent drug trafficking rings are

often operating outside, organized, and steered by Malaysian drug lords and their accomplices from the Golden Triangle to beyond Laos and Thailand. Malaysia amended Section 39B of the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 to withdraw the mandatory death penalty for traffickers with hope for human rights and encourage those offenders to support and cooperate with LEAs in the open-investigation process to look for a drug kingpin in or outside of Malaysia. However, it does not mean to deter trafficker expand their operations with lucrative benefits of illicit flows from overseas (AFP, 2018; AIPA, 2019). For example, Tun Hung Seong is a Malaysian citizen, nicknamed 'Malaysian drug lord' or 'Iceman' and acted as a gatekeeper to the Malaysian drug market just over the border and laundered money through karaoke bars, hotels, and restaurants. He was arrested in April 2017 when he steered his narcotics syndicates to transport 282kg of ice drugs into Malaysia. Only two days later, 'Iceman' was sentenced to death (16 August); on 18 August 2017, Thai police have continued to arrest more than 14 million *yaba* tablets, worth \$ 45 million, in Ayutthaya province. It was originated from Shan state (only US\$3,000 for wholesale and US\$15,000 for retail) on transit to Malaysia to reach up Australian market (up to US\$180,000 for wholesale and US\$600,000 for street value (International Crisis Group, 2019). All these drug production's confiscations also came from Myanmar, firmed that Malaysia is not only as a potential customer of drug traffickers in the Golden Triangle but also as either a specific destination or flexible transit in the pull-and-push process of transnational drug trading in the Southeast Asia region and beyond.

Important Milestones to Combat Drug Trafficking in Southeast Asian

It can say that the ASEAN's initial efforts to suppress transnational drug trafficking can be recorded to the early years of the 1970s when they organized the first ASEAN Expert Group Meeting on the Prevention and Control of Drug Abuse.¹ Further, a positive encouragement to support this topic was derived from the Bali Accord of 1976 through signing and ratifying the Declaration of ASEAN Concord between the Heads of Government/State of founding members. With the purpose for calling the intensification of regional cooperation among ASEAN's participants and with

¹ This forum has re-named as the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) in 1984.

relevant international bodies to combat and eradicate drug abuse and trafficking in illegal drugs, the Bali Summit of 24 February 1976 was considered as one of the first official meetings of ASEAN to focus on dealing with TransNT. After four months later, the ASEAN Declaration of Principles to Combat the Abuses of Narcotics Drugs was also ratified in Manila, the Philippines; on 26 June 1976, identified that the fight against transnational drug trafficking's threats needs to apply to both internal and external cooperation. With the former, the ASEAN called for the study on building judicial collaboration between its members, particularly with the possibility of an ASEAN extradition treaty; meanwhile, with the latter, the ASEAN also decided to enhance the international cooperation against drug trafficking with the United States (Parameswaran, 2000; Severino, 1999). During ten years, between 1976 and 1985, Heads of State/Government of ASEAN have continued to express their grave concerns about drug abuse and trafficking in illegal drugs as one of the potential harms to erode the stability and development of the region (Severino, 1999). Thus, at the 18th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in July 1985, through 'Joint Statement on the International Strategic for Combating Drug Abuse and Trafficking,' they re-confirmed their extensive efforts to deal with the effects of drug concerns (Parameswaran, 2000).

At the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) of July 1996, the foreign ministers discussed trends and patterns of drug trafficking alongside other categories of transnational crimes such as human smuggling and trafficking, money laundering. To keep up these concerns, at the first informal ASEAN Summit in November 1996 in Jakarta, they continued to mention the possibility of regional cooperation to control TransNT's risks as one of the highest inquiries for all members to ensure the progress of political, societal, and economic security among ASEAN nations. The 30th AMM in July 1997 stressed the necessity for continued regional cooperation to tackle terrorism, narcotics, arms smuggling, piracy, and human trafficking (ASEAN 1997a). In December 1997, at their meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, they adopted the ASEAN Vision 2020 profile, which identifies a broad vision for ASEAN forward a typical community in the year 2020 with one expect for 'drug-free zone' in Southeast Asia. Alongside the internal efforts of this association and its bodies to ensure effective mechanism regional cooperation to combat TransNTs, at the 32nd AMM in Singapore in July 1999, the Foreign Ministers emphasized the critical role of implementing drug control programs with the assistance of the international community.

At the 33rd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in July 2000, in pursuit of its commitment, governments reiterated their concerns on the threat from the manufacturing, trafficking, and abuse of illegal drugs on the security and stability of the ASEAN region. They agreed to advance the target year for realizing a Drug-Free ASEAN to 2015 (ASEAN, 1999). Besides, the International Congress in Pursuit of Drug-Free ASEAN and China (ACCORD), in association with the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (UNODCCP), also adopted the Plan of Action to formulate their operations, strategies, and mechanisms to implement this ambition. Five later, following the formation of ACCORD in 2000, the Plan of Action in 2005, endorsed by 36 countries, including China and 10 ASEAN members, continued to specific a roadmap for strengthening regional cooperation towards the goal of a 'drug free ASEAN and China' by 2015, albeit without specifying expected outcomes and quantitative benchmarks. ASEAN Secretary in the mid-term progress with the support of UNODC (2008, p. 2), admitted that lacking a more comprehensive implementation of mutual legal assistance, barriers in information-sharing mechanism, and unclear. Non-professional data collection and analysis are 'significant obstacles to the achievement of the overall goal.'

Leaders of ASEAN recorded these helpful recommendations of UNODC and 'promise' to fix up with an updated version. However, their insufficient efforts in ASEAN Work Plan on Combating Illicit Drug Production, Trafficking and Use 2009-2015 have still failed to curb the booming of drug trafficking across the region. Accordingly, LEAs seized at least 65 tons of pure heroin in 2011 (about US\$16.3 billion in street retail) and around US\$15 billion in 2010 for *yaba* and crystal (UNODC, 2013, p. 2). Both 'Drug Free ASEAN 2015: Evaluation and Recommendations Post-2015' and 'Regional Programme for Southeast Asia 2014-2017' pointed out that ASEAN member states need a more holistic approach. Notably, the ASEAN's anti-drug agencies must evolve from one-dimensional control to multi-dimensional management. Therefore, apart from five significant components, enhancing law enforcement with its specific activities has continued to reaffirm as the pillar priorities in ASEAN Work Plan 2016-2025, adopted by the 5th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters held in Singapore, October 2016. Although only halfway progress of this Work Plan now, the goals of a drug-free ASEAN will undoubtedly never be completed since Southeast Asia continued to identify as the most prominent world of illicit drugs

market with more complicated trafficking in ATS and NPS. The following section assesses the barriers, challenges, and difficulties to combat TransNT as one of the specific pieces of evidence to request regional changes to enhance regional cooperation's effectiveness in law enforcement activities.

Challenges and Barriers to Combat Drug Trafficking in Southeast Asia

Since implementing the 'drug-free' process in 1998, based on cooperation and integration' principles at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels, ASEAN has recognized the nature of TransNT's threats and emphasized its commitment to the most severe concern to combat it. Therefore, besides two-pillar priorities, demand, and harm reduction, to achieve sustainably supply reduction via enhancing law enforcement to combat drug trafficking, the section below reviews and currently analyses main concerns in Southeast Asia.

Regional Trusts: Convergence vs. Divergence?

The differences between domestic priorities and regional cooperation priorities in combating TransNT lead to ineffective enforcement. In the light of regional cooperation in the Southeast Asian region, Carlos (2005, p. 253) highlighted 'ASEAN is a loose regional intergovernmental organization that aims to foster fraternal relations among neighboring countries through cooperation in various areas of common interest.' Yet, this geopolitical region's features derived by distinguishing characteristics, namely 'the weak socio-political cohesion of the region's new nation-states, the legitimacy problems of several of the region's post-colonial governments, interstate territorial disputes, intra-regional ideological polarisation and intervention by external powers' (Acharya, 2014, p. 4). Consequently, in 1967, ASEAN intended to serve as a medium for cooperation and confidence-building among mutually suspicious states and not for regional integration when its highest priority is preserving national sovereignty and promoting national interest (Spencer, 2012). It is reflected in the fact that ASEAN does not have a centralized decision-making structure nor enforcement regime. Alternatively, it is driven by numerous meetings and

consultations at various levels of government year-by-year periods (Emmers, 2012). To address cross-border drug trafficking in the globalization context, the local efforts of each state are essential. Still, they will only displace the flow until a coordinated approach is adopted among regional cooperation. Each ASEAN's members cover different priorities to tackle TransNT at their national concerns, which means they may not consider all of these crimes as a regional threat that needs to be addressed urgently (Carlos, 2005; Dosch, 2005). As part of the 'balloon effect,' traffickers also took advantage of these unintegrated policies to adapt as flexibly as practically possible when one country pushed a brutal crackdown to move others for operating. For example, when Thailand's anti-narcotics enforcement agencies implemented their supply reduction campaigns drastically across the border of Thai-Laos, most traffickers and smugglers have changed immediately to alternative routes via Cambodia, Malaysia, and Vietnam.

Among countries, LEAs still have 'untold stories' regarding political powers and related drug policies' priorities in combating drug trafficking. Meanwhile, almost all countries declared 'no boundaries' in the war on drugs, such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam; others are still quite opaque to follow this slogan. Particularly in some states are under pressures of political conflict between government and ethnic armed organizations like Myanmar or political scandal's suspicion between government's relatives and drug lords like a case of the daughter-in-law of the former prime minister of Laos in the point of drug kingpins, Xaysana Keopimpha. In which, after 'ASEAN drug lord' arrested in January 2017 at a Bangkok airport, Thai's police concerned that 'Lao authorities said to us that if we couldn't arrest [Xaysana] here, they wouldn't be able to do anything in Laos' when Laos media still raised suspiciously about Lao leader's connections with Xaysana, who was known for his underworld's bridges on both sides of the Thai-Lao border (AFP, 2018; Hutt, 2017). On the other hand, national-priority policies in supply reduction among ASEAN's provisions are also different approaches that lead to controversial disputes in legislative regulations. For example, Malaysian lawmakers and policymakers have continued to persuade their national assembly to withdraw the death penalty for all crimes, including drug-related offenses. However, the rest of the countries remain this harsh punishment for drug trafficking as one of the highest policies in their drug policy (Cheong *et al.*, 2018; Sander *et al.*, 2020).

In contrast, in Singapore, the wealthy city-state has a zero-tolerance policy for drug trafficking with

mandatory death penalty rather than Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and Brunei with similar punishment but no executions in many recent years or Vietnam with several trafficker's lethal injecting per year (Cheong *et al.*, 2018; Sander *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, most countries in ASEAN are moving forward to balance all three pillars in drug policies, namely supply-demand-harm reduction. However, each country adjusts and regulates their priorities by themselves, to a lesser extent to harm reduction in comparison to supply reduction. For example, over ten years ago, in 2009, when Vietnam was the first country in Southeast Asia to decriminalize drug use in their criminal code without jail for drug users but still send to compulsory detention centers (Hai, 2019c). The rest of the countries continued to apply year-imprisonment forms for drug users (Luong, 2019c). However, when supply reduction's campaigns have been facing many pressures from external factors, particularly with the booming of drug trafficking from the Golden Triangle and China push back in the domestic market in recent times, Vietnam's Minister of Public Security wanted to re-enact criminalization drug use again in the soon time (Luong, 2019c).

Capacity building: Insufficient Investments?

Currently, it is a lack of appropriate institutions to establish and maintain effective coordination among dozens of agencies to combat TransNT. From Manila (1998), Bangkok (2000), Phnom Penh (2012),² to achieve the goal of a 'drug-free zone' in political statements, the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) has been considered the heart of the steering mechanism to cooperate, collaborate, and coordinate. In essence, their primary responsibilities for handling drug-related matters have to balance all five working groups rather than

2 At the first declaration in Manila (1998), leaders called for strengthening and promote linkage among existing regional institutional mechanism involved in the fight against drug abuse and traffickings, such as the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD), ASEAN Chiefs of National Police (ASEANAPOL), the ASEAN Senior Law Officials Meeting (ASLOM), the ASEAN Sub-Committee on Youth (ASY) and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), the 1993 MOU countries on Drug Control, and the ASEAN Secretariat. 15 later on, ASEAN's leaders still put more other institutions to fight drug matters through strengthening institutional linkages and coordination between the various ASEAN mechanisms involved in the fight against illicit drug trafficking and other transnational crimes, particularly the AMMTC, ASOD, ASLOM, ASEANAPOL, the ASEAN Finance Ministers' Meeting (AFMM), the ASEAN Directors General of Customs, the ASEAN Directors-General for Immigration Department and Heads of Consular Affairs Divisions of Ministries of Foreign Affairs Meeting (DGICM).

focusing only on law enforcement.³ However, ASOD is not an appropriate institution to operate independently to ensure a sustainable response to combat drug trafficking established in 1976 as ASEAN Drug Experts. Additionally, it met annually to review the implementation of its duties between mid-review in 2012 and final assessment in 2015. Yet, it only plays an objective observer's role to oversee activities about the drug-related matters of ASEAN bodies such as the AMMTC, ASEANAPOL, DGCIM, ASEAN Airport Interdiction Task Force (AAITF) ASEAN Seaport Interdiction Task Force (ASITF), ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Centre (ASEAN-NARCO). It absences a compliance mechanism to strengthen tie down between these organizations (EMCDDA, 2014; Nuansyah, 2015). Therefore, ASOD is still fumbling about integrated policies among institutional frameworks with different functions and responsibilities to deal with each priority.

ASEAN has recognized the importance of establishing the ASEAN Centre for Transnational Crime (ACTC), including drug trafficking, since adopting the Action of Plan in 1999; however, it still seemed a 'regional initiative of ASEAN...in principle' after over two decades (Douglas, 2014; Kranrattanasuit, 2014). One of the main reasons is because the AMMTC and the essential organs like ASEANPOL,⁴ ASOD and ASEAN-NARCO were dependent operations and different policies to deploy their responses, and among these are lacking effective coordination and production coordination. Additionally, these ASEAN bodies have established separated institutional arrangements to be responsible for their respective fields of cooperation within the ASEAN framework (ASEAN, 1999; Nuansyah, 2015). The ASEAN-NARCO is only a center-based operating since 2015, which has to report and under review directly by ASOD. However, it claims a professional task force to combat TransNT at the airport's domains via the AITF in the joint investigation across the region based on their particular officials at

hot-spot locations (ASEAN-NARCO, 2015). In theory, the ASEAN-NARCO only consists of interior/home/public security officials. They include mostly Thailand officers and, to a lesser extent, from ASEAN member states under borrowing office space of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board (Ministry of Justice of Thailand), with minimal authority to build long-term and short-term strategies to combat TransNT. In particular, as an initial idea of ASOD since 2015, there were limited operations to combat TransNT among countries, except for some successful investigation via AITF's cooperation at airports. Therefore, the ASEAN-NARCO is an internal channel to reserve their private intelligent data sharing among memberships unless a joint investigation team is established (ASEAN-NARCO, 2015).

Legal Matters: Different Thoughts?

The ineffectiveness of mutual legal assistance and extradition issues has been considered two practical challenges in combating TransNT among LEAs. Many senior officers of the criminal justice system in ASEAN admitted that the lack of knowledge in terms of other legal policies and traditions within the region due to they are different legislations that led to insufficient information and ineffective cooperation (UNODC, 2017, p. 7). While mutual legal assistance ensures the fair exchange and regularizes its procedures between parties involved, an extradition treaty, including bilateral and multilateral level, creates the delivery of suspected or convicted them (Bassiouni, 2008, p. 582). Both are thus essential instruments to support fighting TransNT in the region that always calls for special attention in any multilateral meeting among ASEAN's leaders for over 40 years until the latest ministerial meeting on enhancing cooperative effectiveness in combating TransNT in September 2020 at Bangkok via online meeting. Ironically, while international agreements incorporating extradition obligations have been widely adopted, every state in the region has criminalized its domestic extradition legislation. The ASEAN extradition frameworks are often 'outdated and/or underutilized due to a lack of sufficient mechanisms, procedures, and provisions to apply to extradite suspected or convicted criminals' (Spencer, 2012, p. 143). Besides, almost all agreements or treaties on mutual legal assistance among ASEAN member states or between individual member states and non-ASEAN states are still bilateral (Nuansyah, 2015). Therefore, though one multilateral agreement on mutual legal assistance among ASEAN member

3 The ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) has been the main ASEAN body responsible for handling drug-related matters. It is the main body to monitor the ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs 2016-2025 and is supported by five working groups, namely, *Preventive Education, Treatment and Rehabilitation, Law Enforcement, Research, and Alternative Development*. To further provide political impetus and take a more focused and combined effort, the AMMD has been institutionalized. The ASOD will report the progress of implementation of the Work Plan to the AMMD, which will meet once every two years beginning in 2016.

4 The first formal meeting of the Chiefs of ASEAN Police in 1981 at Manila, Philippines, with attendance of 5 first countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) to initiate regional police cooperation. After six years later, the rest of the states also joined this organization, Royal Brunei Police in 1984, Vietnam in 1996, Laos and Myanmar in 1998, and Cambodia in 2000.

states has entered into force since 2004,⁵ it did not apply to critical vital matters such as the transfer of persons in custody to serve sentences, the arrest or detention of any person to the extradition of that person, and the transfer of proceedings in criminal matters. Furthermore, after ten years of adopting this Treaty, the number of requests from/to other ASEAN countries to tackle criminal issues that have not relatively considerable (Nuansyah, 2015). For example, according to the Malaysia Attorney-General's Chambers, which hosted the official website of this Treaty, there were no requests from Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam from other ASEAN countries from 2005 to 2012. Meanwhile, at least six members, namely Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, have not yet requested other ASEAN countries in mutual legal assistance in criminal matters.⁶

Information Exchange: Long-term Changes?

Across borderless countries in the region, exchanging information and sharing intelligence are the most important and compulsory activities to combat TOC, particularly for transnational narcotics trafficking (Hufnagel *et al.*, 2012; Lemieux, 2013). The success of an investigation drug-related case is largely dependent on having specific types of knowledge: knowledge about the criminals, their relationships and organization (if any); learning about the transport and financial infrastructures which facilitate TOC; learning about the criminal laws; and knowledge about illicit markets (Harfield, 2008, pp. 486-487)—lacking this knowledge and understanding of the nature and extent of drug trafficking groups/networks is caused for failed investigation and difficult capture real drug lords. From Khun Sa – king of opium to Sam Gor – Asian El Chapo, intelligent data sharing is considered the most apparent hampers to improve the effectiveness of regional cooperation to combat drug trafficking. Yet, mutual trust is still questioning in reality, although all ASEAN's states voted for their united community

5 The ASEAN Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty in Criminal Matters has been proposed by Malaysia at the 8th ASEAN Senior Law Officials Meeting (ASLOM) since June 2002 and discussed explicitly at the First Meeting of ASEAN Working Group held in Malaysia in June 2003. It has also continued to analyze and develop at the Second Meeting of ASEAN Working Group held in Malaysia in May 2004 before being adopted and signed by eight ASEAN members on 29 November 2004. In January 2006, both Thailand and Myanmar signed it as well.

6 It further details on the official website of ASEAN Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters with the note of last updated on 15 May 2012 (retrieved from http://www.agc.gov.my/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=922&Itemid=395&lang=en).

annually (Allard, 2019; Lintner, 2019; McCoy, 1999). Accordingly, the process and ability to develop, collect, manage, analyze and share data related to transnational illicit activities, particularly TransNT, are still problematic concerns and need to improve collection techniques and capacities (ASEAN-NARCO, 2019; UNODC, 2019b). These limitations and barriers explained why nearly 30 years since launching a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to combat drug trafficking in 1993 between UNODC and six countries in the Mekong region (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and China) still need more solves. Remarkably, two sides integrated to sign their specific agreements in share intelligent information officially 'more organized, systematic, and efficient since November 2019 (quoted by Jemery Douglas, UNODC's Chief in Southeast Asia, cited in Reuters, 2019). Yet, most countries admitted that TransNT syndicates often utilized multiple borders to conceal, transport, and trade and laundered money laundering through various businesses across the Mekong, which are necessary to regular intelligence-sharing conducting more integrated cross-border investigation together. It is not a new complaint in dealing with TransNT between UNODC and ASEAN since the first review of 'drug-free 2015' in 2008 and recent recommendations of 'post-2015' in 2019 (UNODC, 2008, 2019b)

Developed Training: Imparity's Views?

In addition, the differences in prioritized training LEAs of each nation created gaps in a cooperative partnership. While law enforcement officers in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam at all three levels, including headquartered, provincial, and district ranking, must complete their relevant degrees concerning drug enforcement's knowledge, professional skills, and investigative tactics focus on anti-narcotics. All recognition and certification of anti-narcotics enforcement officers were often educated and trained at national police institutions and combined with intensive courses annually to enhance their professional skills to combat TransNT. In contrast, in less and developing countries such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, almost all anti-narcotics agencies are insufficient to educate and train by regional standard and national requirements. Some intensive cohorts at regional training centers such as International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA), the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC), and the Asian and Pacific Regional Law Enforcement Management Program (ARLEMP) that

only provided fundamental knowledge and necessary skills for officers as well as create their network's connections to others. Therefore, it is difficult to fix their national standard requirements to prevent and fight cross-border drug trafficking.

Further, those countries often expected international sponsors and/or regional donors to supply well-resourced equipment and professional techniques to combat drug trafficking. For example, until 2011, the National Police Academy of Lao PDR was established as the central police education with several limited resources. As just a new system, it needs more enhancement and improvement in curriculum and program to train LEA's officers in terms of anti-narcotics strategies through supporting the police academy of Vietnam, both human resources and materials (Luong, 2019d). It is clear evidence that this incomplete training resource from two sides was likely to lead to the limitations to upgrade LEA's capacity to match that of their counterparts across the border.

Looking for Regional Changes

Over fifty years of establishing, ASEAN had much vaunted for its tremendous strides in promoting peace and stability since 1967. Amongst multiple contributions, economic cooperation is often considered as fundamental progress to boost regional gross domestic product, with more than doubled from US\$1.3 trillion in 2007 to US\$2.8 trillion in 2017 within a decade. Meanwhile, moving forward, an ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025, they have never imaged the picture of *narcotics* disaster will call their name on the map. However, it is a true story when the Golden Triangle's countries and peripheries have contributed to making Southeast Asia one of the world's largest methamphetamine markets. By setting the 2015 deadline for eliminating drugs, ASEAN leaders seemed to confuse their victory 'war on drugs' could mysteriously triumph through an orthodox combination of vigorous eradication of opium cultivation, enhanced crackdowns on drug trafficking, and ruthless law enforcement. Year by year, although leaders firmed that they will still 'robust enforcement to keep their streets free from drugs' (Amin, 2018) through developing enforcement's operations across the land, air, and sea checkpoints. The trend of increasing seizures and arrest drug-related matters across the region since the 'drug-free' slogan launched in 2000 demonstrates real challenges for ASEAN.

However, they still kept developing 'law enforcement as the most prioritized issues in supply reduction for concretizing 'drug-free zone'-planning in the ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs 2016-2025. As the above sections argued, there are several difficulties and barriers to ensure the 'law enforcement' priorities of ASEAN Work Plan 2016-2025 to achieve unless these concerns are solved in the harmonization and balance among ASEAN member states in this battle. Some recommendations are needed for further implementations and re-assess its implications regularly to improve the mechanism of effective evaluations.

Improving Regional Sharing Database

Firstly, leaders should improve the ASEAN-NARCO regional information and ASEANAPOL local database to facilitate sharing and analysis of critical intelligence information such as wanted and arrested persons and modus operandi of TransNT. Second, establishing a regional repository to contextualize summaries of national laws of ASEAN Member Countries about TransNT contributes to assisting party's members in getting these sources. Third, encouraging LEAs to share typology of TransNT in the ASEAN region can determine the organizational structure, trends, and modus operandi of these crimes. Fourth, calling members to apply modern telecommunications technology in facilitating the exchange of database in terms of criminals, methodologies, arrests, legal documents, requests for assistance, and ensure its restricted transmission. Finally, identifying relevant contact persons in the policy, legal, law enforcement, and academic institutions of ASEAN Member Countries and facilitate networking and lateral coordination among persons and agencies with similar functions.

Enhancing Education and Training

While the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2025 is generally positive, boosting economic growth will also provide potential chances for TransNT. Border agencies in almost all countries of the region currently lack skills and strategies to address TransNT. While there is wide variation between countries, well-understood crime problems in countries with higher training levels are inadequate. Accordingly, governments need to improve their training processes significantly. Candidates must go through

comprehensive basic training before they are sent to the border. This training should design and deliver at the national level to ensure comparable skillsets across all border sections. A standard curriculum needs to be devised to ensure comprehensiveness and similar quality of training. Furthermore, looking forward to an ASEAN Community, one idea to establish ASEAN Police College that should be implemented as a regional initiative, to train and educate professional skills and knowledge in combating TransNT in particular and TOC in general for LEAs (police, customs, border guard, and immigration) such as the model of European Police College.⁷ This College would focus on establishing a universal training curriculum, which considers localized needs and provides a basis of minimum standards for law enforcement performance for all those LEAs to deal with trafficking across the region (Brady, 2008, p. 107).

Establishing Forensic Capacity for Law Enforcement

In reality, the evidence of a ninefold growth in meth tablets seized between 2008 and 2015 and also is facing an upsurge of NPS with 168 synthetic drugs have been identified in the period 2008-2016 that takes a question about LEA's capacities to detect and examine these emergent trends (IPDC, 2019). Every time a precursor is listed as a controlled substance by the United Nations, drug dealers find new meanings to create synthetic drugs. Therefore, countries need to coordinate closely and regularly update the list of banned chemicals. In Vietnam, over the last three years, hundreds of new types of ATS and NPS have been found, and the numbers are overgrowing, from 292 types in 2015 to 559 varieties in 2017; ironically, the precursors are not banned but are widely used in the pharmaceutical and chemical industries (Luong, 2019e). Unfortunately, many Southeast Asia does not have the forensic capacity to detect and identify these drugs, which led to perplexity in examining

and seeing. Besides, many countries have drug data; almost all of them, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, had neither prioritized implementations nor lacked capacities to collect data on precursor trafficking (Luong, 2019e). A strategic plan to boost LEA's abilities as solid and professional as possible in reality to maintain their excellent investigation in the age of synthetic drugs that need to approve for ASEAN's anti-narcotic leaders. An ideal proposal is that ASEANPOL and ASOD should integrate to establish one independent unit or center that focuses on forensic science to examine and analyze ATS and NPS types. Ideally, these examples can be extracted and collected from each ASEANPOL and/or ASEAN-NARCO's joint operation cases or individual LEAs' raids.

Conclusion

To ensure the effectiveness in combat TransNT thus, ASEAN should address all these barriers and obstacles as its top priority. ASEAN will be required to identify and adopt effective and appropriate mechanisms to prevent TransNT from applying its measures more comprehensively and practically. Perhaps, ASEAN's leaders should deploy as soon as possible to establish the ASEAN Centre for Combating Transnational Crime (ACTC). It will play a central role in promoting data source sharing and archive information on national legislation of individual member states and assisting the implementation of programs, plans, and strategies. After then, it is establishing ASEAN Police College should be prioritized in the following steps.

Additionally, ASEAN should solve overlaps between domestic priorities and a need for regional cooperation in combating TransNT as a consensus decision-making organization to show its internal integration. To do it, creating a mutual trust in data sharing and exchange information among LEAs in terms of preventing and combating drug trafficking have continued to maintain and upgrade as a win-win mechanism among ASEAN member states. Moving forward an ASEAN Community, lessons and experiences from other local and international organizations in establishing institutional mechanisms such as Europol would be helpful to identify how the ASEAN institutional framework could further improve its effectiveness to combat TransNT in the following times.

⁷ CEPOL was established by Council Decision 2000/820/JHA in 2000, which was modified in 2005 by Council Decision 2005/681/JHA. It has initially been seated at Bramshill House in Bramshill, Hampshire, England, but was relocated to Budapest, Hungary, in 2014 following a European Council decision the previous year. CEPOL is an agency of the European Union to develop, implement, and coordinate training for law enforcement officials with the main task to bring together a network of training institutes for law enforcement officials in the EU Member States and supports them in providing frontline training on security priorities, law enforcement cooperation and information exchange. Since 1 July 2016, the date of its new legal mandate, CEPOL's official name is "The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training." See more detail at <https://www.cepol.europa.eu/who-we-are/european-police-college/about-us>.

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