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through Indo - Latin American
Cooperation: Tackling Narcotics
Trafficking and Transnational
Organised Crime

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Abstract

This paper explores the international challenges of narcotics trafficking and transnational organised crime, focusing on the roles of Mexican drug cartels, the fentanyl epidemic, and India's increasing vulnerabilities. These specific challenges are chosen due to their interconnected nature: Mexican cartels operate sophisticated global supply chains that fuel drug epidemics, such as the fentanyl crisis in the United States, while India faces escalating pressures as a key transit and emerging consumer market. Understanding how these dynamics interplay is crucial for developing effective, collective countermeasures.

While geographically distant, India and Latin America are significantly affected by drug networks that exploit governance and institutional gaps. This paper examines the activities of key players such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco Mexican drug cartels as an example and explores collective frameworks to disrupt their operations. It highlights the importance of intelligence sharing, legal harmonization, and multilateral platforms in combating these issues, presenting a roadmap for global collaboration to address this transnational menace.

Keywords: Latin America, Cybersecurity, Narcotics, BRICS, Brazil, Mexico, Drug Cartels

Introduction

The globalization of crime has interconnected regions, creating a unified web of narcotics trafficking and organised crime that transcends borders. This interconnectedness complicates policy-making and enforcement strategies by necessitating cross-border collaboration, harmonization of laws, and shared intelligence systems. Without such coordination, efforts to combat these crimes often fall short, allowing criminal networks to exploit jurisdictional gaps. The rise of synthetic opioids like fentanyl and the involvement of powerful criminal syndicates, such as the Mexican cartels, have amplified the scale and complexity of the issue.

Simultaneously, countries like India face growing challenges as transit points and consumer markets for these illicit substances. The sheer magnitude of the problem is staggering. In the United States, over 700,000 people have died from overdoses in the past decade, primarily driven by fentanyl. Meanwhile, Latin America serves as the production and transit hub for cocaine and fentanyl precursors. India, with its porous borders and rising drug abuse rates, is an emerging hotspot for narcotics trafficking. This paper examines the global scope of narcotics trafficking and explores how international collaboration can offer effective solutions.

Shared Challenges of Narcotics Trafficking

Trump's Migrant Tariff Stance and Its Implications

In 2024, Donald Trump reignited debates on narcotics trafficking by threatening significant tariffs on Mexico, Canada, and China unless stricter measures were implemented to curb fentanyl production and illegal migration. This stance highlights the interconnected nature of migration and drug trafficking issues, where border security measures often have ripple effects on the movement of narcotics. While this approach seeks to pressurize foreign governments into action, critics argue that unilateral measures like tariffs risk destabilizing trade relations without addressing the systemic factors driving these crises. Such actions underline the need for comprehensive, cooperative frameworks rather than isolated policy maneuvers.

The Mexican Cartels and Global Supply Chains

The Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels dominate global narcotics trafficking, supplying vast quantities of fentanyl, cocaine, and heroin. The Sinaloa cartel alone is estimated to control over 60% of the global fentanyl market, with operations extending across the United States, Europe, and increasingly into Asia. In 2024, Mexican authorities seized over 300 kilograms of fentanyl connected to these groups, valued at more than \$400 million. Their methods—including the use of narco-submarines, drones, and encrypted communication networks—demonstrate a high level of operational sophistication, enabling them to bypass conventional interdiction strategies. These networks exploit smuggling corridors across Latin America, leveraging weak institutional oversight and porous borders.

However, the cartel threat is not confined to Mexico. Colombia remains the largest cocaine producer, responsible for over 70% of global supply in 2023, with over 230,000 hectares under coca cultivation. Brazil, as a key transit and distribution hub, is critical to narcotics routes heading to Europe, Africa, and increasingly South Asia. Indian cities have reported a 30% increase in cocaine seizures between 2022 and 2024, often linked to shipments transiting through Latin American ports. The convergence of these cartels' operations into the Indian Ocean Region signals an evolving threat landscape that demands India's proactive engagement with Latin American enforcement and intelligence agencies.

India's Growing Drug Crisis

India faces escalating drug-related challenges, serving both as a key transit hub and a rapidly expanding consumer market. According to the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), drug seizures in India have surged by over 70% in the past five years, reflecting the intensification of trafficking operations. Heroin, originating from Afghanistan, continues to pass through India en route to Southeast Asia, while methamphetamine production in the Golden Triangle fuels supply into northeastern India. More concerning is the recent uptick in cocaine trafficking with direct and indirect links to Latin American cartels. The 2023 Mumbai drug bust, which uncovered 20 kilograms of high-purity cocaine valued at \$3 million, was traced back to a Brazil-based syndicate using African and Middle Eastern transshipment points.

Additionally, the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) reported that between 2021 and 2024, cocaine seizures at Indian ports increased by over 35%, with many consignments originating in Colombia and Brazil. This trend underscores the widening reach of Latin American drug cartels into the Indian subcontinent, facilitated by maritime vulnerabilities and evolving smuggling logistics. India's position along global drug routes, combined with rising domestic consumption, makes it an emerging hotspot for traffickers, warranting closer cooperation with Latin American enforcement agencies and intelligence networks.

Economic and Social Impact

The economic and societal toll of narcotics trafficking is profound. In Latin America, cartels destabilise governments and perpetuate cycles of poverty. In India, rising addiction rates, especially among youth, strain public health systems. The fentanyl crisis in the United States, with over 100,000 annual overdose deaths, emphasises global scale of the issue.

Opportunities for Global and Indo-Latin American Cooperation

Intelligence Sharing and Joint Operations

A robust intelligence-sharing framework can dismantle transnational drug networks. India's Information Fusion Centre –Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) offers a model for maritime intelligence collaboration. Expanding such initiatives to include Latin American partners can enhance global efforts to monitor smuggling routes and intercept narcotics shipments.

Tackling the Fentanyl Epidemic

Combating the fentanyl crisis requires a multi-pronged, globally coordinated approach, as the drug's potency and small volume-to-value ratio make it particularly difficult to intercept. Mexico's recent crackdown on pill mills and precursor chemical trafficking signals a strategic shift toward targeting the production chain rather than just downstream distribution. However, this effort alone is insufficient. The precursor chemicals required for fentanyl synthesis—such as NPP and ANPP—are primarily sourced from China and India. As a major pharmaceutical manufacturing hub, India has emerged as a critical node in this supply chain.

While most exports are legitimate, diversion of precursor chemicals into illicit markets remains a serious concern. India must tighten export monitoring mechanisms through end-use certification, digital tracking systems, and enhanced oversight of bulk chemical transactions. Establishing a trilateral regulatory framework among India, Mexico, and the United States can bolster enforcement efforts. Furthermore, expanding the mandate of institutions like the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) to monitor pharmaceutical supply chains, and engaging the private sector in compliance training, could reduce vulnerabilities. A robust forensic and customs cooperation mechanism with Latin American partners would also help track illicit flows. Without upstream intervention, downstream crackdowns will continue to be reactive and limited in effectiveness.

Recent intelligence indicates a gradual rise in fentanyl consumption within India, marking a concerning shift in the domestic drug landscape. The UNODC notes that synthetic drug seizures in South Asia have sharply risen, with fentanyl analog interceptions becoming more frequent. The influx of high-purity fentanyl heavyweights from Latin American cartels—particularly via clandestine maritime routes—raises the risk of local consumption networks emerging. To pre-empt a domestic epidemic akin to North America's, India must integrate consumption prevention into its upstream enforcement and international cooperation strategies.

Addressing Cartel Violence

The recent escalation in cartel violence in Mexico highlights the necessity of coordinated military and civilian responses. Urban combat between Mexican military forces and cartel factions, such as in Culiacán, demonstrates the complexities of confronting these networks. India's counterinsurgency experiences in its border regions offer valuable lessons for tackling entrenched criminal groups through joint military-civilian strategies.

Legal and Policy Harmonisation

International legal frameworks must address disparities in prosecution and extradition. Mutual legal assistance treaties (MLATs) and harmonised evidence-sharing protocols can strengthen cross-border investigations. The UNODC's conventions on drug control provide a foundation for aligning national policies with global standards.

Multilateral Platforms for Action

Platforms such as the United Nations, BRICS and G20 offer critical avenues for coordinated global action against narcotics trafficking and transnational organised crime. The United Nations has long been the cornerstone of international drug policy, with key instruments like the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961), the Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971), and the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988), forming a legal framework for global cooperation. Through the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), member states are supported in enforcement, capacity-building and data collection. However, growing complexity of synthetic drug trafficking demands updated mandates, including stronger digital forensics and supply chain mapping.

BRICS, particularly through its Anti-Drug Working Group, has emerged as a vital platform for South–South collaboration. Recent BRICS summits have acknowledged the growing threat of synthetic opioids and called for intelligence sharing, forensic cooperation, and cross-border surveillance mechanisms. India and Brazil, both BRICS members and emerging narcotics transit points, can drive momentum for a regional enforcement agenda.

The G20, while historically focused on macroeconomic stability, has increasingly recognised the socioeconomic destabilisation caused by organised crime. Initiatives to trace illicit financial flows, disrupt cryptocurrency-based laundering, and bolster anti-money laundering frameworks can be further aligned with narcotics control priorities. G20 can thus serve as a policy synchroniser, integrating financial regulation with global drug enforcement.

Addressing Root Causes: A Developmental Perspective

Poverty and Inequality

Poverty and inequality drive participation in narcotics production and trafficking. Development programs focusing on education, employment, and infrastructure can provide alternative livelihoods, reducing dependence on illicit activities.

Harm Reduction Strategies

Harm-reduction measures, such as widespread Narcan availability and public awareness campaigns, have proven effective in reducing overdose deaths. Expanding these initiatives globally can mitigate the human cost of addiction while complementing enforcement efforts.

Gender-Sensitive Approaches

Women, disproportionately affected by the drug trade, require targeted interventions. Empowering women through education and economic opportunities can reduce their vulnerability to exploitation by traffickers.

The Role of Technology in Combating Narcotics Trafficking

Surveillance and Interception

Technological advancements, including AI-driven surveillance, satellite imaging, and predictive analytics, can enhance narcotics interdiction. For example, use of drones equipped with thermal imaging has been instrumental in identifying and destroying clandestine drug labs in Latin America. Similarly, India's Cartosat satellites have successfully tracked maritime routes used for heroin smuggling in the Indian Ocean Region. Predictive analytics powered by machine learning has enabled law enforcement agencies in the United States to anticipate drug trafficking patterns, leading to several high-profile busts in 2023. These applications demonstrate the potential of technology in countering sophisticated narcotics networks.

Cybersecurity and the Dark Web

Traffickers increasingly rely on the dark web and cryptocurrencies for transactions. Joint cybersecurity initiatives between India, Latin America, and international agencies can target these digital channels, thus disrupting the financial lifelines of drug networks.

Case Studies: Global Responses to Narcotics Trafficking

Plan Colombia

Plan Colombia, a US-backed initiative, successfully reduced coca cultivation through a mix of military operations, economic aid and judicial reforms. However, it has faced criticism for its heavy reliance on militarisation, which often led to human rights abuses and displacement of rural communities. Furthermore, while coca cultivation was initially decreased, it has resurged in recent years, highlighting the program's limited sustainability. Critics also argue that focus on eradication overshadowed the need for broader socio-economic reforms, leaving the underlying issues of poverty and inequality unaddressed. Lessons from this program can inform similar efforts in Mexico and India, tailored to local contexts.

Fentanyl Crackdown in Mexico

Mexico's intensified crackdown on fentanyl production—spurred by mounting international pressure, especially from the United States—demonstrates the potential of focused,

high-impact enforcement strategies. In 2023–2024 alone, Mexican authorities dismantled over 1,400 clandestine labs and seized record quantities of precursor chemicals, disrupting several major production hubs linked to the Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels. These efforts have led to a temporary disruption in global fentanyl supply chains and highlighted the importance of targeting upstream components of the synthetic drug trade.

Given India's pivotal role as a global pharmaceutical supplier and a significant producer of precursor chemicals like NPP and ANPP, it becomes a natural partner in the global effort to dismantle fentanyl networks. Strengthening regulatory frameworks in India—particularly around chemical manufacturing licenses, end-user verification, and export controls—can complement Mexico's efforts. A bilateral enforcement framework, supported by real-time intelligence exchange and joint forensic analysis, would amplify the impact. Furthermore, cooperation through multilateral forums such as UNODC and BRICS can embed these efforts into a global architecture of synthetic opioid control. Without India's proactive engagement, gains made in Mexico risk being undermined by the re-routing of chemical supply chains.

Cartel Infighting and Government Response

The ongoing cartel infighting in Mexico, exemplified by the Sinaloa cartel's internal power struggles, provides insights into the dynamics of organised crime. Military interventions, while necessary, must be complemented by long-term socio-economic reforms to stabilise affected regions.

Policy Recommendations

- **Global Intelligence Sharing Network:** Establish an international network linking law enforcement agencies in India, Latin America, and other affected regions.
- **Strengthen Precursor Chemical Regulations:** Tighten controls on chemical exports and manufacturing to prevent diversion into narcotics production.
- **Bilateral and Multilateral Agreements:** Expand MLATs and create expedited extradition protocols to prosecute high-level traffickers.

- **Invest in Development Programs:** Fund initiatives addressing poverty, inequality, and lack of education in vulnerable regions.
- **Enhance Cybersecurity Measures:** Develop tools to monitor and disrupt dark web narcotics markets and cryptocurrency transactions.
- **Harm Reduction Policies:** Promote global access to overdose-reversal drugs like Narcan and public health campaigns.

Conclusion

Narcotics trafficking and transnational organised crime represent a global crisis that demands an international response. The interconnectedness of cartels in Latin America, synthetic opioid production, and trafficking routes through Asia necessitates coordinated action. The global community can create a united front against these threats by fostering Indo-Latin American cooperation and leveraging multilateral platforms. Addressing root causes and adopting harm-reduction strategies will ensure sustainable solutions, paving the way for a safer and more equitable world.

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