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Arms and Drug Trafficking as Non-Traditional Security Threats in Central Asia: Convergence, Divergence and the Limits of Regional Security Governance

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses illicit small arms and light weapons (SALW) trafficking and narcotics trafficking in Central Asia as Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats. Central Asia is bordered by Afghanistan, which has been a source of illicit drugs and is now a source of abandoned weapons. Afghanistan's opiate production entered into Central Asia's through "Northern Route". Trafficking estimated 90 tons of heroin and 35–40 tons of opium annually across porous, poorly governed borders chiefly through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan then into Kazakhstan and onward to Russian and European market. The paper uses the Copenhagen School of Securitization and Regional Security Complex Theory to describe these systems of illicit drug and arms trafficking and how they interact with the forces of economic marginalization. Using a mixed-method approach that combines policy analysis with UNODC data from 2021-2026, treated as enforcement indicators, the paper describes the governance loopholes that traffickers exploit. The paper argues that arms and drug networks create illicit economies in unstable regions, such as the Fergana valley and Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, with particular attention to region growing production of synthetic drugs. The paper also claims that the illicit networks, unlike the widely accepted crime–terror assumption, are sheltered by state institutions and that the weapons that entered the region after 2021 have created a state-embedded political economy. Finally, the research examines the limits of current regional structures, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and CARICC, and presents a strategy to address protection markets, regulation of precursors, the enhancement of digital investigation frameworks, and the shift from dominant military approaches to border control, towards localized socio-economic stabilization.

Keywords: Central Asia, Non-traditional security, Drug trafficking, SALW proliferation, Northern Route, Securitization, Regional Security Complex Theory

INTRODUCTION

Since the Cold War ended, there has been a seismic shift in how we conceptualise the meaning of "security". In the twentieth century, security was predominantly construed in state-centric terms. For instance, state security was primarily concerned with military threats, territorial consolidation, and intersocietal conflicts. States made wars and alliances to secure their interests. But this is no longer the case. With globalisation, the rapid advancement of technology, expanding transactional networks and the increasing salience of transnational actors, the security landscape has changed. Additionally, an increasing number of threats to the international community are transnational and, more importantly, non-military in nature. These include terrorism, organised crime, transnational drug crime, and climate change, human trafficking, illegal arms trafficking and illegal immigration. These are regarded as Non-Traditional Security (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Swanström, 2007; Kumar, 2022). This article applies the Non-Traditional Security paradigm to analyse drug and arms

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trafficking in Central Asia. The geography of these countries heightens their risks of exposure. Central Asia is a gateway where Europe meets Asia. Central Asia is geographically connected Russia with China and the Middle and South Asia and Europe. It also makes Central Asia attractive to criminal and trafficking syndicate. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have an Afghan border of over 2,300 kilometres. Afghanistan has long been among the leading illicit opium producers. All of the above have made the Northern Route opiate trafficking network one of the most advanced and profitable in the world. It transports illicit drugs to the Russia and other countries in Eastern and Western Europe and China (UNODC, 2018; Fazli, 2023). Weapons are traded along the same routes as narcotics. Unauthorised weapons are also traded along the same routes. The combination of stockpiles that were left after the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 results in weak arms control in the Central Asia region, and conflicts in the neighbouring countries have resulted in a ready availability of SALW in the Central Asian region (Burnashev, 2007; Jackson, 2005). In the Central Asia region traffickers use weapons to control trafficking routes, protect consignment and confront law enforcement. Since drug trafficking profits fund the purchase of these weapons, these two trades so mutually beneficial. The symbolic Relationship between arms and narcotics This also leads to a corruption among these countries such as loosening of public institutions and border control, violent extremism, money laundering and the expansion of criminal enterprises.

There are two recent phenomena that have disrupted this conventional understanding. The first is the drop in Afghan opium production after the de facto authorities issued their narcotics edict in April 2022. Successive crop estimates conducted by the UNODC have shown a dramatic decline in opium poppy cultivation, dropping from around 232,000 hectares in 2022, to 12,800 hectares in 2024, and further to 10,200 hectares in 2025. The estimated potential opium production in 2025 may be around 296 tons, which is a mere four percent of the potential production prior to the Taliban ban (UNODC, 2024a, 2025a). The farm-gate income from opium production is estimated to have decreased by 48 percent between 2024 and 2025, with a projected income of $134 million in 2025, down from $260 million in 2024 (UNODC, 2025a). The second factor is the materiel abandoned in Afghanistan after the August 2021 withdrawal. It includes an estimated US$ 7.12 billion of United States-procurement equipment, including around 600,000 weapons almost of all calibre with advance technology such as night-vision devices and communications equipment (SIGAR, 2025; Action on Armed Violence, 2021).

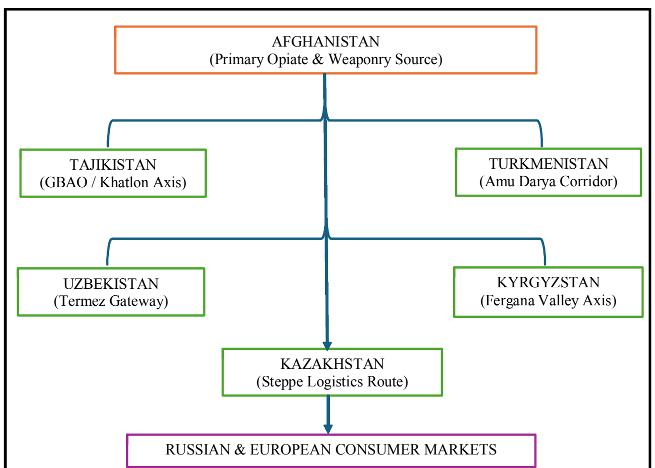
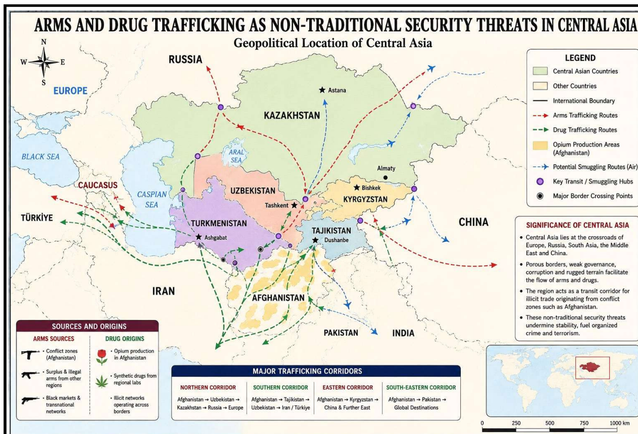


Fig. 1 : Trafficking of Drug and Weapons



Map 1 : Geopolitics of Central Asia

These developments create a puzzle. If drug revenue funds armed groups, the collapse of Afghan opium production should have left such groups weaker. If weapons increase their capacity, the materiel abandoned in 2021 should have made them stronger. The evidence supports neither expectation. Revenue did not fall away. It moved into synthetic stimulants, which are now made inside Central Asia rather than imported through it, and the sale of stored opium provided the capital for the shift. The picture for weapons is no clearer. Most of the abandoned materiel moved south into Pakistani markets. What little evidence exists for northward movement points to networks tied to state security agencies, not to groups opposed to the state. Regional opioid seizures have fallen over the same period while domestic drug prosecutions have risen, a combination usually found in stable and protected markets rather than contested ones.

The article also deals with how these issues have been studied. Drug and arms research have grown apart, and some of it can be attributed to the UN system, with drugs going to the UNODC and traditional arms to the UNODA. Scholars have mostly followed the same split, and Central Asia provides little evidence to support that. Both trades span the same borders, bribe the same government officials, launder money through the same informal networks and use the same couriers. What looks like two problems is actually one. Secondly article tries to look on securitization theory. In securitization theory, declaring something an existential threat provides a government with powers it would not ordinarily have. Central Asia provides a situation that the theory does not cover, as the government that is making the claim is actually profiting from the network. The powers that are gained in this way are then used against the competing networks. This way, the networks that the government supports are protected, while the seemingly ongoing war against trafficking in the region continues.

Significance of the Research

Four considerations give this research its scholarly and policy value in the current international security environment.

Analytical re-evaluation after August 2021

The strategic withdrawal of United States and NATO forces and the resurgence of the Taliban shifted the regional security paradigm and opened new unlawful supply routes for external illicit arms trafficking. The changes in the practice of enforcing poppy cultivation in Afghanistan and the corresponding changes in trafficking have altered the security landscape in Central Asia and its surrounding regions in ways that make most of the literature prior to 2021 obsolete. It is necessary to evaluate how Central Asian security arrangements address new threats.

De-siloing the Arms and Drug Crises

Presently, the majority of the literature views narcotics trafficking and the proliferation of SALW as distinct policy issues and treats them as having separate custodians. This has been equally true in the case of scholarship on the two issues. This research identifies and clearly describes the intersection of illicit drug and SALW trades in Central Asia.

Replacing Unsourced Flow Estimates with Attributable Evidence

In policy commentary concerning the Northern Route, there are still flow estimates in circulation that cannot be traced methodologically, and figures generated in the mid-2000s are often cited as though they are reflective of the current situation. In this study, these estimates are replaced with an explicit account of what current monitoring data can and cannot state, with cited sources. In addition, this study considers seizure statistics to be an indicator of enforcement behaviour, and not an indicator of the volume of trafficking.

Refining Non-Traditional Security Theory

Using Copenhagen School securitization theory and RSCT in the context of Central Asia, this paper investigates the interaction of weak post-Soviet border peripheries with state-level security systems. It also introduces a boundary condition that the original securitization theory does not account for: where the actor who is securitizing is also a participant in the market in question, securitization ceases to function solely as a mechanism for justifying the implementation of exceptional measures, and becomes a tool for competition within the illicit market. This directly impacts the design and evaluation of counter-trafficking assistance.

Objectives of the Study

This research centres around four main objectives:

1. **Deconstructing Operational Architecture**: Identifying routes, major hubs, and methods of operations of trafficking networks in the five Central Asian states.
2. **Examining Institutional and Socio-Economic Impact**: Considering the effect of illicit trafficking on state institutions and worsening socio-economic conditions and corrupt practices in the most marginalized border areas like the Fergana Valley and the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO).
3. **Investigating the Threat-Multiplier Effect**: Analysing transnational organized crime networks and their link to violent extremism in the context

of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Jamaat Ansarullah and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and assessing the connection of trafficking networks to the funding of politically motivated acts of violence and religious extremism.

4. **Analysing Regional Governance Configurations:** Evaluating multilateral security frameworks like the (SCO), (CSTO), (CARICC), (BOMCA) and (CADAP) for their utility and developing deliberate policy recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-method design that integrates qualitative theoretical analysis and e empirical quantitative data, constituting a theory-informed approach with triangulation of three evidence streams. The focus of analysis is the regional security complex, with the five republics as embedded cases, which enables a systematic comparison of exposure profiles. Afghanistan is considered the main external driving force within the complex, but is not examined as a separate case.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative component takes a structural-functional approach to primary legislative frameworks, national security strategies, border control protocols, and bilateral and multilateral agreements within the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and European Union border assistance frameworks.

Theoretically, it applies the Copenhagen School conception of securitization to how Central Asian political leaderships interpret NTS threats in order to justify particular security policies, and Buzan and Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory to the interdependencies linking the security profiles of the five republics to one another and to Afghanistan.

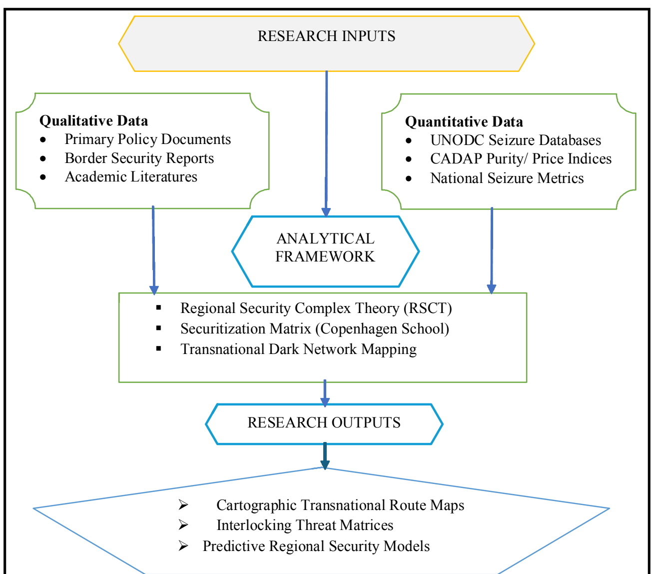


Fig. 2 : Research Design

Quantitative Data Integration

Quantitative data come from verified international and regional monitoring sources: the UNODC Afghanistan Opium Survey and Afghanistan Drug Insights crop-monitoring series for 2022 through 2025; the World Drug Report series for 2025 and 2026; reporting from the UNODC Regional Office for Central Asia; documentation of the UNODC Programme for Central Asia 2022–2025, including the Border Liaison Office network; and national law-enforcement reporting where it is independently corroborated. Arms-proliferation data come from United States Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

The Validity of Seizure Data

Policy literature routinely uses seizure statistics as a proxy for trafficking volume. They are nothing of the kind. A seizure is the joint product of the quantity trafficked and the intensity, competence and impartiality of enforcement. Where enforcement is selective, as the literature establishes for several Central Asian jurisdictions, seizure series track enforcement behaviour and political competition at least as closely as they track flows (Kupatadze, 2014; Peyrouse, 2018; Marat and Botoeva, 2022).

The study therefore uses seizure data in three restricted ways: to establish direction of change within a single reporting system over time; to compare the relative composition of seized substances, composition being less sensitive to enforcement intensity than absolute quantity.

Review of Literature

Scholarship on Central Asian security has passed through several conceptual shifts over three decades. Tracing them is necessary both to place current work on arms and drug trafficking and to separate what the field has established from what it has simply repeated.

The Geopolitical and "Great Game" Paradigm

In the early post-Soviet years, scholarship relied on traditional geopolitical thinking in framing the security of Central Asia. For example, Rashid (2002) characterized the region as the vanguard of the militant Islamist surge, while a broader body of literature characterized the regional politics as a "New Great Game." According to this view, the United States, Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China were vying for influence and access to the region's hydrocarbons. On this view, the security of borders meant the state had to defend itself against military invasion or proxy state-sponsored incursions. It was believed transnational networks of organized crime were a by-product of weak statehood and thus had little impact on the regional security. This approach was particularly lacking in thinking about the competition of great powers, which is still needed for analysis, but it assumption treating state as coherent unit with a singular interest opposite to that of the traffickers.

The shift to Non-Traditional Security

From the late 1990s, scholars began to challenge the state-centric framework, arguing that the main threats to Central Asian stability were internal and transnational more than they were inter-state. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) supplied the conceptual vocabulary. Swanström (2007) applied it to narcotics, arguing that in producing and transit regions alike the drug trade generates interlocking political, economic, human and military insecurities that call for integrated responses in place of sectoral ones. Kumar (2022) formalised the application to Central Asia, treating drug trafficking as a paradigmatic NTS threat that displaces the state as the referent object of security in favour of the individual, and documenting the societal, economic and public-health consequences of the trade across the region. Zhekenov, Jakubayeva and Ahmadzai (2022) extend the line, arguing that narcotics revenue has consolidated the position of extremist religious formations across the economic, political, security and social dimensions of regional order. This body of work showed how weak border infrastructure, entrenched poverty and institutional corruption let illicit networks put down deep roots, and it remains the foundation on which any NTS analysis of the region has to build.

The Crime–Terror Nexus Thesis

Critical to understanding NTS literature was the crime-terror nexus thesis. Following the work of Makarenko (2004), who proposed a crime-terror continuum in which organizations move between violent, ideologically-driven, and profit-oriented activities, Cornell (2005a) placed the framework in Central Asia, characterizing the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) as a trafficking organization that controlled opiate routes and levied taxes. Subsequently, Cornell (2005b), generalized this idea and argued that, when existing drug production coincides with armed violence, insurgent groups will enter the drug trade, and, as a result, grow the problem that state will eventually have to face. Engvall (2006) expanded on this in the case of Tajikistan and argued that the merger of criminal and terrorist groups posed a grave threat to both the territory and the population, the institutions, as well as the very essence of the state. Burnashev (2007) posed the question of whether crime-terror groups operate along the same routes of drug and arms trafficking. The terrorist organizations most likely to uses the same way which used for drug trafficking to operate in this region was through financing their activities via the trafficking of illicit goods.

The State–Crime Critique

A third wave, built on field research instead of institutional reporting, qualified the nexus thesis in a sustained way. Jackson (2005) set out the distance between international perceptions of Central Asian trafficking in narcotics, arms and humans and what the record actually showed, tracing how ad hoc donor projects were reorganised around a securitised narrative the evidence did not fully support; she went on to argue that international organisations reproduced security dichotomies which obscured the very phenomena they claimed to address (Jackson, 2006). Paoli, Rabkov, Greenfield and Reuter (2007) estimated that the opiate industry added at least 30 per cent to Tajikistan's recorded gross domestic product, and concluded that the trade had penetrated the political system so thoroughly that the leaders of the most powerful trafficking groups worked from inside the state rather than against it.

De Danieli (2014) put the argument in more direct way. Reviewing evidence from all five republics, he found that traffickers and state officials had built durable working alliances to divide up drug rents between them. He suggests that the grip of criminal money on politics was tightest in the region's two poorest countries *i.e.,* Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The evidence of strong ties between criminal cartels and radical Islamist groups was thin after 2001, with the IMU operations of 1999–2001 making up nearly the whole evidentiary basis for the nexus claim. Kupatadze (2014), drawing on fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan in early 2012, showed that both the "virtual narco-state" thesis and its decentralised alternative found partial empirical support, that smuggling networks are made up of organised crime groups and law-enforcement representatives in varying roles, and that institutional incentives favoured externalising blame. Levi-Sanchez (2017), on the basis of extended fieldwork in Afghan and Tajik Badakhshan, showed that imposing formal institutional structures at the border, with United Nations and other international backing, can backfire by marginalising local leaders and alienating populations in ways that work to the advantage of illicit traders.

Van Santen (2020) drew the critique together into a policy argument: leaving the state out of the analytical frame yields an incomplete picture and, worse, robs the crime–terror paradigm of practical value, since it points resources at actors who are not the principal organisers of the trade. Marat and Botoeva (2022), combining large-scale event data with expert interviews, found that illicit drugs move through the region with help from security-sector and political elites with a long record of protecting and taking part in trafficking, and that drug-related violence is comparatively rare and low in visibility, which is what one expects of a stable market, not a contested one.

Quantitative Reassessment and the Political Economies of Violence

The most methodologically ambitious intervention is that of Omelicheva and Markowitz (2019), who tested the drug–terror relationship at sub-national level across Central Asian states, combining geospatial visualisation of drug seizures and terrorist incidents with statistical modelling. Their findings cut both ways by design and are routinely over-read in both directions. Drug trafficking is positively correlated with the frequency and magnitude of terrorist events, and heroin trafficking has a larger substantive effect than opium; but the effect is relatively minor, violence in the region is rare and multifaceted, it is seldom driven by religious or ideological motives, and terrorist groups are far from the only actors in the market. Omelicheva and Markowitz (2021) later reframed the research programme, arguing that crime–terror scholarship should be rebuilt around political economies of violence, attending to which non-state actors form intersections, under what conditions and with what varied effects, and theorising ties to state actors explicitly.

Theoretical Framework

Two bodies of theory anchor the analysis of arms and drug trafficking as NTS threats in Central Asia: the Copenhagen School account of securitization and Regional Security Complex Theory. From their intersection the paper derives a third, infrastructural account of convergence.

Securitization Theory and the Compromised Securitizing Actor

Securitization theory, developed by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998), holds that security threats are not simply objective facts but are constituted through speech acts by actors with sufficient standing. Once an actor successfully labels an issue an existential threat, it leaves the sphere of normal politics and emergency measures become defensible.

Central Asian leaderships securitize arms and drug trafficking frequently, and the practice has served two well-documented purposes. Outwardly, it mobilises international counter-narcotics funding, technical border assistance and equipment from donors including the European Union, the United States, Russia and China. Inwardly, it lets regimes invoke cross-border criminal and terrorist infiltration to justify controls on political opposition, restrictions on civil liberties and the militarisation of peripheral border areas.

As already noted in state–crime literature with respect to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, some state agencies may even organize the trade (Paoli et al. 2007; De Danieli 2014; Kupatadze 2014; Marat & Botoeva 2022). In these cases, the process of market regulation may be complemented by state-sponsored crime. Because of the way that state agencies are securitized, the selective enforcement of the law can be directed against the rivals of the protected networks, resulting in arrests and seizures that justify the claims of the state agencies and reinforce the control of the protected networks. This is the case in Tajikistan, where, according to Peyrouse (2018), the only people arrested are petty drug dealers and the rivals of politically powerful drug traffickers. Fazli (2023) arrives at the same conclusion, stating that a solid record of arrests and seizures exists along with a highly permissive de facto legal order.

Regional Security Complex Theory and the Insulator Problem

The Regional Security Complex Theory begins with the understanding that threats diminish with distance and therefore the greatest concern of states should be their immediate neighbors. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), a regional security complex refers to a state cluster that possesses a significant degree of interrelated security. Central Asia creates a sub-complex within the wider South Asian and Afghan security dynamic. These states have many interrelated issues that stem from the Soviet legacy of state and ethnic border imposition. Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's problems can potentially be Uzbekistan's problems too. For EXAMPLE, the rise of drug trafficking and arms smuggling in Tajikistan directly impacts the security of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Due to the interrelated issues described above, solutions that a single state or group of states provide will always be insufficient**.**

Burnashev (2007) builds on this by calling Central Asia an unstructured security region: a small complex sitting as an insulator between the East Asian, South Asian and Middle Eastern regions on one side and the complex centred on Russia to the north. The implications of this description are rarely considered. An insulator is a situation where the security dynamics of the bordering regions converge and states in this situation are likely to be more dependent on an external patron than on each other. The policy of positive neutrality has kept Turkmenistan outside the CSTO and the SCO. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are in the customs area of the Eurasian Economic Union Turkmenistan's policy of positive neutrality keeps it outside of both the CSTO and the SCO. Security interdependence is high while institutional interoperability is low, and trafficking networks exploit the gap directly.

Illicit Convergence as Infrastructure

The crime-terror continuum theory focuses on the conflation of criminal and militant groups. Evidence from Central Asia disputes this view. The main overlap between the arms and narcotics trades is not their organization but their infrastructure. In Central Asia, arms and narcotics trades share the same networks of border crossings. They use the same illicit trade protection bought from state officials. They also share the same networks of money, including the hawala system and money laundering that involves real estate, as well as the same grounds for recruitment in the impoverished districts surrounding border crossings. These connections do not require that heroin wholesalers and arms merchants hold the same beliefs. They need only that the tolerance of the state official is for sale, and that both trades are profitable enough to pay for it.

The Transformed Opiate Economy

The Magnitude of the Supply Shock

Nothing in the modern history of illicit drug markets matches the contraction in Afghan opium production, and no current analysis of Central Asian security can proceed without it. Table 1 and Figure 1 give the UNODC series for the analytical period.

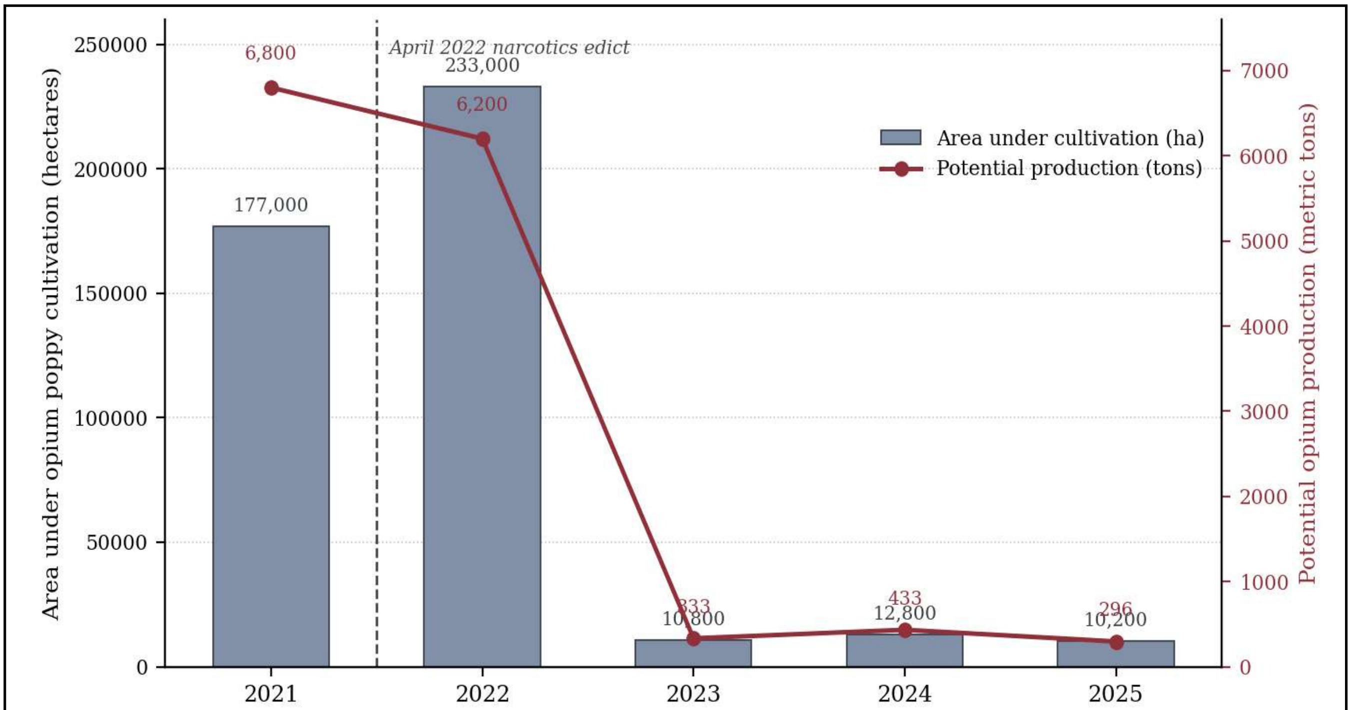
The Table 1 provides literacy rates for both males and females in Odisha for the years 2001 and 2011. It shows the gender-specific literacy rates as well as the overall literacy rate, highlighting the changes over the 10-year period.

For Central Asia, three features of the series matter in particular. The contraction is real and has held across three consecutive enforcement seasons; it is not a reporting artefact, and UNODC assesses that most farmers kept to the ban through the 2025 season. Price has partly offset volume. Dry opium settled at about US$730 per kilogram in the first half of 2024, against a

Table 1 : Afghan Opium Poppy Cultivation, Potential Production and Farm-Gate Income, 2021–2025

Indicator	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Area under cultivation (hectares)	177,000	233,000	10,800	12,800	10,200
Year-on-year change (%)	?21	+32	?95	+19	?20
Potential opium production (metric tons)	6,800	6,200	333	433	296
Year-on-year change (%)	+8	?10	?95	+30	?32
Farm-gate income (US$ million)	425	1,360	110	260	134
Average yield (kg/ha)	38.5	26.7	—	—	—

Data Sources: UNODC, Figures are rounded as reported by UNODC. Yield figures reported only for 2021 and 2022 in the sources consulted. For historical reference, the peak year recorded by UNODC monitoring was 2017, at 328,000 hectares and approximately 9,000 tons.



Data Source: constructed by the author from UNODC (2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a)

Diagram 1 : Afghan Opium Poppy Cultivation and Potential Production, 2021–2025

pre-ban average near US$100 per kilogram (UNODC, 2024a), so the value of any given consignment moving north rose roughly seven-fold even as the number of consignments fell. Whatever the ban's humanitarian consequences, price blunted much of its effect on the profitability of trafficking as opposed to cultivation.

The third feature carries the most weight here: what remains of production has moved towards Central Asia rather than away from it. Cultivation shifted out of the south-western provinces, long the heartland of Afghan opium, into the north-east. Some 59 per cent of 2024 cultivation took place in north-eastern provinces, a 381 per cent increase on 2023, concentrating the residue in Badakhshan, directly across the Panj river from Tajik Badakhshan (UNODC, 2024a). The 2025 survey names Badakhshan the principal producing province and attributes the steeper fall in production relative to cultivation partly to crop failure and drought stress there (UNODC, 2025a). A smaller opiate economy has thus become, in relative terms, one that faces Central Asia more squarely.

Stocks Rather Than Flows

The World Drug Report 2026 judges that, at pre-ban levels of consumption, stocks of opium in Afghanistan could last to the end of 2026 (UNODC, 2026). UNODC had already observed in 2023 that seizure data pointed to traders selling off inventories built up during past record harvests in order to ride out the production shortfall (UNODC, 2023).

The consequences are significant. The Northern Route saw most of its supplies between 2022-2026 from confiscated inventories. During this timeframe, the trafficking systems effectively operated as a liquidation system. Liquidation systems differ from production systems in three major policy- relevant ways. First, they are less likely to be disrupted since systems can contain inventories and simply wait for sales to be made. In Central Asia, storage capacity and political protection bring trafficking network closer to state structure. In Central Asian states, state proximity enables secure large-scale storage of illicit goods. At the same time, these disposal systems generate high rents which can be reinvested into other money-making ventures. In Section 9, you can see where the reinvestment is into synthetic stimulants.

Regional Interdiction Trends

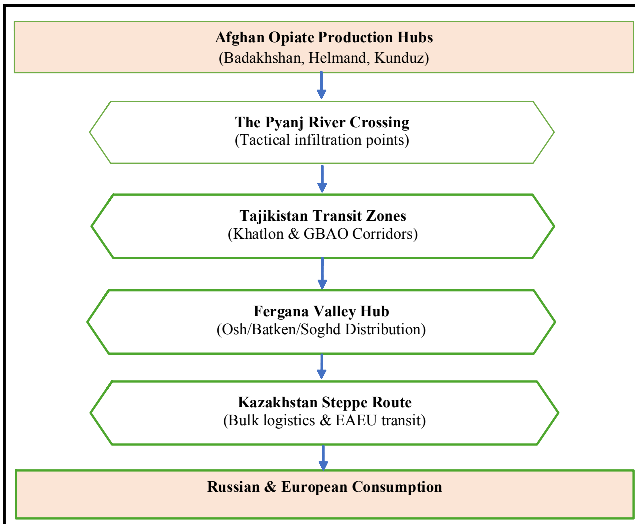
UNODC's Regional Office for Central Asia reports that illicit opium production in Afghanistan has fallen by more than 95 per cent from its 2017 peak, while regional opioid seizures have dropped to roughly half their pre-2022 levels (UNODC, 2025b). The gap between a 95 per cent fall in production and a 50 per cent fall in seizures is instructive, and three readings of it are possible, none of which excludes the others: stock liquidation is holding flows above what current production would support; enforcement has intensified relative to flow; or seizures now consist more of accumulated inventory moving in larger consignments. All three fit the liquidation hypothesis set out above.

Tajik authorities reported interdictions of 2.43 tons in 2020 against 1.6 tons in 2019, and claimed a further rise of nearly 70 per cent in 2021 after the Taliban takeover, including a single October 2021 seizure of some 500 kilograms of heroin, opium and hashish (Fazli, 2023). Tajikistan ranked eleventh in the world by quantity of opiate seizures in 2020.

The Operational Architecture of the Northern Route

The Tajikistan Axis

Tajikistan shares a long 1,344-kilometre border with Afghanistan. That makes it the primary entry point along the Northern Route. With a rugged terrain in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast and Khatlon Region, as well as the option of crossing the Amu Darya and Panj rivers by foot, the region offers a lot of opportunities to smugglers. Tajikistan is described as the leading entry point for Afghan opiates. The opiates then travel to Russia via Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, or along a secondary route via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Fazli, 2023; Marat & Botoeva, 2022; UNODC, 2018).



Source: Designed by the Author from Basis on literature

Fig. 3 : Schematic architecture of the Northern Route and the emerging precursor counter-flow

Two characteristics of this axis are worth noting, and both cut against the militarised border paradigm. First, a large volume of contraband travels through formal, legal border crossing points more often than across unregulated or border zones. Observers have described this pattern as evidence to support claims that border officials are involved (Fazli, 2023). Second, kinship and ethnic networks that are border spanning and predating modern state borders facilitate the trade in contraband. Levi-Sanchez (2017) argued that official border controls which are meant to integrate the formal national borders and marginalise the local structures, have, ironically, benefited the illicit traders. For border controls, the Tajikistan example demonstrates that they are adding control to the wrong margin. Peyrouse (2018) shows that the illegal trade in Tajikistan has grown as smugglers carry small loads of contraband for subsistence in a country that has a large number of migrants (1.5 million) who earn a living sending remittances that amount to 50% of the GDP.

The Kyrgyzstan and Fergana Valley Pipeline

Once contraband enters Tajikistan, it is usually transported north to the Fergana Valley. It is economically thriving region densely populated and shared by Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The enclaves Sokh, Vorukh, and Shakhimardan and their poorly defined borders, especially around Osh and Batken, are convenient for the trade of illicit trafficking of narcotics and small weapon. Kupatadze (2014) found the Kyrgyz market to be contested rather than settled. He further argued that smuggling networks in Kyrgyzstan bring together organised crime groups and serving police officers. The role of such law enforcement officers differ from one network to the next. He concluded that neither the "narco-state" label nor the decentralised account of the trade describes the arrangement properly. The explanation lies in Kyrgyz politics. The upheavals of 2005, 2010 and 2020 each moved weapons out of official custody, and each also changed who was in a position to sell protection and to whom. The market in Kyrgyzstan has stayed competitive as a result. Tajikistan offers the contrast. Protection there is stable, and the trade runs quietly and with little friction. In Kyrgyzstan, protection changes hands whenever the government does, and the market stays open to anyone able to buy it.

The Uzbekistan Border Infrastructure

Uzbekistan has built border security over the 137 kilometres of its border with Afghanistan near Termez. Although the new border security prevents direct incursions, trafficking networks simply shift their routes to Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, and enter Uzbekistan using other land routes. Uzbekistan's new challenge is its growing internal market. The year before the 2025–2026 National Drug Strategy was adopted, over 11,000 drug-related crimes were recorded (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2025).

The Kazakhstan Logistics Funnel

Kazakhstan is a crucial area of trade to the Russian Federation. Its vast steppes terrain and its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union allow syndicates to cover their illegal trade within the borders of Kazakhstan, concealed by legal trade. However, its status as a transit member has changed, and it is becoming a hub of Synthetic production.

Turkmenistan and the Information Gap

Turkmenistan shares a border with Afghanistan that is 744 km long, the second longest in the region, along the Amu Darya and in the Serhetabat corridor. Compared to the rest of the Northern Route, information about trafficking along this border is scarce. This is due to the way the Turkmenistan government has positioned itself. The country's self-declared positive neutrality of 1995 means Turkmenistan avoids the CSTO, the SCO and collaborates with the CARICC to a limited extent. The country actively avoids any involvement in the information exchange framework that engages the other four countries. The Turkmenistan government publish very limited crime data, allow very few international observers, and have no independent media. For all of these reasons, the information about crime and trafficking relies on external sources. This has two major implications. The first is that no study along the Northern Route is complete without addressing this section of the border. The estimates for trafficking for other Central Asian states based on the records of seizures will be much lower than the actual amounts that are being trafficked across Turkmenistan, the country least likely to report or record such events. Second, traffickers are basically indifferent to the alignment position of a state. They would prefer a route that is not visible to bordering agencies than one that is difficult to patrol.

The Synthetic Turn

Substitution Rather Than Suppression

Between 2022 and 2026 the Central Asian drug market shifted structurally, with the rapid rise of synthetic cannabinoids, synthetic cathinones (mephedrone and alpha-PVP above all) and methamphetamine, growing alongside traditional opiate trafficking and increasingly displacing it. UNODC reports that production and trafficking of synthetic drugs, methamphetamine in particular, have kept increasing since the ban, with seizures in and around Afghanistan roughly 50 per cent more frequent by the end of 2024 than in the third quarter of 2023 (UNODC, 2025a). Across West and Central Asia, methamphetamine seizure events were about 50 per cent more frequent by late 2024 than three years earlier, and average seizure quantities more than doubled (UNODC, 2025b). UNODC's own assessment is blunt: as agricultural opiate production declines, synthetic drugs have become the new business model for organised crime groups, being easier to produce, harder to detect and unaffected by the weather (UNODC, 2025a).

Two factors drive the expansion. The contraction of Afghan poppy cultivation pushed regional criminal organisations to diversify their portfolios and, through liquidation rents, gave them the windfall capital to do it. And synthetic manufacture needs no agricultural land; it can be done in small clandestine laboratories in peri-urban areas around Almaty, Bishkek and Tashkent. The number of new psychoactive substances that Central Asian states reported to UNODC rose from one in 2013 to 48 by 2016, driven overwhelmingly by Kazakhstan, with synthetic cathinones and synthetic cannabinoids accounting for the large majority.

Domestic Manufacture and the Precursor Constraint

The most significant alteration is the shift from transit to manufacture. Kazakhstan's Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that a counter-narcotics effort lasting 10 days arrested 27 individuals and confiscated approximately 80 kilograms of illegal substances (mostly mephedrone and alpha-PVP). One of the raids conducted during that operation discovered a laboratory for the synthesis of alpha-PVP and seized around 2 tons of the precursor chemicals (Foreign Policy Research Institute 2025). Having 2 tons of precursor chemicals is indicative of a wholesale operation and certainly not a retail one. This is industrial capacity, sitting in the Eurasian Economic Union customs zone, to the north of all the border control donor assets that have been funded for over 30 years.

This also flips the strategic geography of the issue for border management. Typically, for border management, it is assumed that the threat will originate from the outside of the region, so the focus is on stopping it at the outer perimeter. However, domestic synthesis indicates that the threat will originate from within the perimeter and, as such, will have a bi-directional movement, both outward and inward. Kumar (2025) examined that Border management also indicates that the biggest threat will be from precursor chemicals, of which acetic anhydride, ephedrine, pseudoephedrine, and various cathinone precursors can no longer be simply as finished narcotics. Moreover, the precursors will continue to be traded as legitimate industrial commerce and will predominantly be from suppliers in East and South through the customs channels that have been progressively liberalized as a result of regional economic integration.

Distribution Architecture

Retail distribution has evolved into a system beyond the reach of border interdiction. Using Russian language darknet markets and encrypted messaging apps, a dead-drop system allows buyers and sellers to remain anonymous, as the payment, made with cryptocurrency, remains unobservable. The product is concealed at a location that is geotagged. The model best fits the new dominant substances. In particular, alpha-PVP and mephedrone. They can be produced with cheap precursors and fit the micro-consignment model due to their potency-to-mass ratios. Extensive market surveillance using European Monitoring Centre methodologies has recorded over 160 synthetic drug selling websites in Central Asia, with mephedrone being the most popular.

There are at least three implications for regional security policy. First, the focus of detection has shifted to a digital realm, where the capability of regional law-enforcement is lacking. Second, the consumer base is younger and widening, and domestic drug use is rising, placing a greater public health burden on the region, and reinforcing the concerns of Latypov *et al.* (2014) concerning HIV, hepatitis C and TB from the Central Asian prison population.

Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation

The illicit arms market in Central Asia works is different from mass-market commercial arms flows. It works along small, targeted consignments rather than bulk transfers intended for regional criminal syndicates, insurgent and radical organisations.

Soviet Remnants and Stockpile Security

Burnashev (2007) elaborates the most thorough classification of illicit SALW sources in the region. Most illicit arms in Central Asian countries are automatic rifles and are diverted from military stockpiles, smuggled from abroad, stolen from military or civil industrial plants, or are privately owned hunting arms, sometimes of an improvised nature. What characterizes the market is that criminal groups are the main buyers and military structures are the main sellers, who have access to unaccounted arms and ammunition, and the relationship goes through the state and not outside of it. They are a significant part of the market as well.

Episodes of state breakdown have periodically replenished this stock. The civil wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan spread illegal arms across the region (Burnashev, 2007), and the Kyrgyz political ruptures of 2005, 2010 and 2020 each moved quantities of small arms from official depots onto the black market. Jackson (2005) documents how weakly such transfers were tracked even while they were being rhetorically securitized.

The Afghan Weapons Influx After 2021

The August 2021 withdrawal introduced a discontinuity of scale. SIGAR and United States Department of Defense figures indicate that roughly US$7.12 billion of the US$18.6 billion in materiel supplied to Afghan security forces since 2002 was left in country: some 600,000 weapons of all calibres, close to 300 fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, more than 80,000 vehicles, communications equipment, night-vision devices and biometric systems (SIGAR, 2025). Action on Armed Violence (2021), reconstructing procurement records, itemises over half a million small arms transferred to Afghan forces, including assault rifles, pistols, machine guns and sniper rifles, and warns that the residual stock could drive regional small-arms proliferation, fuelling insurgencies and organised crime. Neither SIGAR nor United Nations monitoring has been able to verify that this materiel remains under the control of the de facto authorities.

For Central Asian security the most consequential items are not the aircraft, which need maintenance infrastructure the region's illicit actors do not have, but the night-vision devices, encrypted communications equipment and modern optics. These are portable, durable, valuable per unit and directly capability-enhancing at exactly the margin where border-security engagements take place. Reporting from adjacent theatres indicates that night-vision equipment in particular has shifted the tactical balance towards non-state actors operating after dark against state forces.

A caution is needed here, and the existing Central Asian literature does not impose it firmly enough. The documented downstream flow of abandoned Afghan materiel runs overwhelmingly south and east, into Pakistani markets and to actors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Evidence of systematic northward flow into Central Asia is considerably thinner, consists largely of assessment, not seizure documentation, and should be reported as such. What can be said with confidence is that a very large, unaccounted, high-quality stock now sits beside a border with documented permeability and documented official complicity in cross-border smuggling. The inference of leakage is reasonable; the quantification is not currently available, and Section 15 treats the resulting evidentiary deficit as a research priority.

A Typology of Illicit SALW in Central Asia

Table 2 sets out a qualitative typology of illicit SALW circulation by source vector and end-user profile.

Why Arms and Drugs Share Infrastructure

The answer lies in what is really being paid for by a smuggler. To some extent, rough terrain can be travelled over and patrols can be avoided though not without the loss of goods. A reliable route needs customs officials along the route who are willing to allow goods to pass. This collaboration cannot be made conditional by cargo. An official who is willing to turn a blind eye will not inspect one vehicle and then allow the next vehicle, with different cargo, to pass without inspection. Once the route is secured, it is viable to those who can afford it for whatever purpose.

There are two obvious implications of this. The first is that an heroin dealer and an arms dealer have nothing in common and no need to share ideologies and can have no idea who the other is. The only thing they require is the ability to pay the same official. The second is that because the payment is made for access, and not for each crossing, the network that has secured a crossing stands to gain from repeated crossings. Weapons fit this well because they have a large value to weight ratio, and because they are in demand by a multitude of criminal organizations.

The Crime–Terror Nexus Reassessed

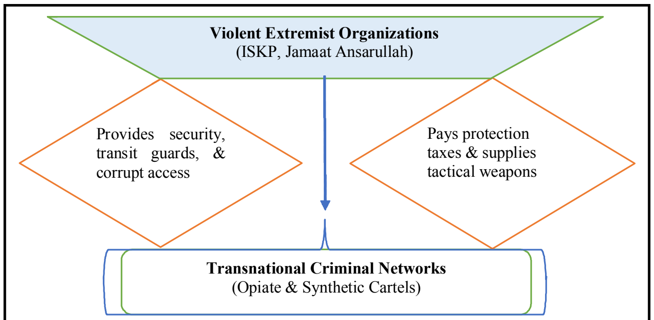
What the Evidence Supports

The meeting of organised crime and political-religious extremism is a core NTS concern in Central Asia. On the conventional account, violent extremist organisations use transnational trafficking networks for reliable income and supply armed protection for smuggling caravans in return. The strongest evidence on the question comes from Omelicheva and Markowitz (2019), and their findings deserve careful reporting, since they are regularly over-read in both directions.

Their provincial-level analysis does support a positive correlation between drug trafficking and levels of terrorism as measured by the frequency and magnitude

Table 2 : Types of illicit SALW circulation in Central Asia

Source vector	Characteristic materiel	Primary end users	Evidentiary basis
Diversion from state stockpiles	Kalashnikov-pattern automatic rifles; service pistols; ammunition	Organised crime groups; smuggling escorts	Burnashev (2007); Jackson (2005)
Depot leakage during political rupture	Automatic rifles and sidearms released during 1992–1997 Tajik civil war and Kyrgyz crises of 2005, 2010, 2020	Regional criminal clans; localised armed groups	Burnashev (2007); Jackson (2005); Kupatadze (2014)
Theft from production and maintenance facilities	Components, ammunition, service weapons	Black-market intermediaries	Burnashev (2007)
Cross-border smuggling from Afghanistan (pre-2021)	Legacy Soviet-pattern weapons; hunting shotguns	Contraband protection details; border-zone actors	Burnashev (2007); Jackson (2005)
Post-2021 Afghan materiel leakage	Western-pattern carbines; night-vision devices; encrypted communications; optics	Assessed, not yet documented, for Central Asia; documented flows are principally southward	SIGAR (2025); Action on Armed Violence (2021)
Civilian and improvised weapons	Modified hunting rifles; converted gas pistols	Low-level urban criminal activity	Burnashev (2007)



Source: Designed by the Author from Basis on literature

Fig. 4 : Core NTS concern in Central Asia

of terrorist events. Kumar (2025) define on Geospatial visualisation showed the drug trade and terrorism coinciding in space and time across the region, and statistical testing confirmed a positive impact of trafficking on terrorist activity, with heroin trafficking exerting a larger substantive effect than the opium trade. The authors themselves describe the effect as relatively minor, however, and the relationship as multifaceted and closely bound up with the state.

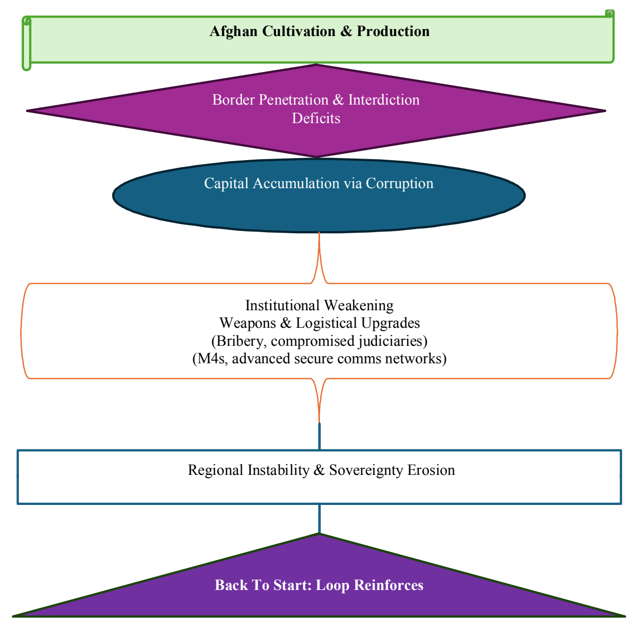
Kumar (2025) discuss in his research that the provincial characteristics associated with violence are structural rather than ideological: poor infrastructure and weak law enforcement indicating economic distress; higher male population shares and educated young people unable to use their skills in well-paid employment; exclusion from the rent-seeking opportunities attached to public service, health and education professions; proximity to territory used for transit, manufacture or consumption; the presence of natural resources; and multiple border crossings. The policy implication is that the causal lever is the exclusion of educated young men from licit rent-generating employment, not religious mobilisation as such.

The Criminal–Administrative loop

The article describes a five-phase, criminal-administrative loop that differs from the traditional criminal-militant loop, as illustrated in Fig. 5.

The Phases are:

1. **Supply:** While Afghan opiates remain stockpiled, more of the supply comes from locally manufactured synthetic stimulants.
2. **Passage:** While traversing the borders, shipments are often stopped, but officials have been bribed to allow them to continue moving throughout various points of crossing. Sometimes shipments use less protected routes.
3. **Monetization:** The money made is run through many different small businesses, and laundered through real estate and informal hawala value-transfer systems. Notable proportions are routed through the offshore infrastructure documented by Cooley and Heathershaw (2017).
4. **Reinvestment**: The money made is used to serve to finance protection from state authorities coupled with the purchase of coercive means of power, which includes upgraded arms and optics purchased from the Afghan market, which are primarily used against competitor
5. **Consolidation:** Selective enforcement against competitors produces interdiction statistics that validate the securitizing claim, attract further external assistance and entrench the protected network. The loop closes through a particular form of state strengthening, not state weakening



Source: Developed by the author from Paoli et al. (2007); De Danieli (2014); Kupatadze (2014); Cooley and Heathershaw (2017); Peyrouse (2018); Marat and Botoeva (2022); Fazli (2023).

Fig. 5 : The Criminal–Administrative Loop

The model challenges the standard understanding showing that the trafficking revenues does not lead to the disintegration of functioning states through institutional corruption. Rather, they reveal that institutional corruption constitute a sustained order of governance maintained by trafficking revenues, while its public legitimization is achieved through securitization. It is important that this distinction be made. Under the normal account, the appropriate response is to build the state's capacity since the stronger the state, the more resilient it is to erosion. Referring to the account of capacity in this case, when accountability conditions are not present, building capacity strengthens the corruption order of governance

Comparative Structural Exposure

How these security challenges play out depends on the domestic and geographic vulnerabilities particular to each republic (Table 3).

Two things stand out here. Exposure and institutional integration run in opposite directions in the two extreme cases. Turkmenistan combines the second-longest Afghan frontier with the lowest institutional integration, which makes it the region's principal information gap rather than simply its most opaque state. Kazakhstan's exposure profile, meanwhile, has changed in kind, not merely in degree. Its historic vulnerability was transit geography; its current vulnerability is manufacturing capacity inside a customs union designed to minimise internal inspection. No existing regional instrument addresses that.

Findings of the Research: Systematic Data and Models

Empirical Data Analysis

To illustrate the scale of these security challenges, the following data matrix synthesizes regional seizure trends and estimated illicit flows compiled from UNODC, CARICC, and national border security databases between 2022 and 2025 (Table 4).

The data below highlights estimated annual transit volumes alongside actual state interdiction metrics across the region.

The Table 5 traces the predominant types of illicit firearms seized within each state, tracking their primary point of origin and current end-user profiles.

The Threat-Multiplier Vulnerability Matrix

The operational impact of these security challenges is shaped by specific domestic and geographic vulnerabilities within each republic (Diagram 2).

- **Tajikistan (Risk Index: 8.5):** Border guards here are underpaid. Youth unemployment is high. Political unrest exists in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). Given these conditions, it is impossible to fully contain external drug trafficking networks on its long, rugged border. All of these contribute to an elevated risk.

Table 3 : Structural Exposure Profiles of the Five Central Asian Republics

State	Afghan border	Principal structural exposure	Institutional integration	Dominant illicit profile
Tajikistan	c. 1,344 km	High-altitude GBAO and Khatlon terrain; entrenched elite participation in trafficking; heavy remittance dependence; low border-guard remuneration; high youth unemployment	CSTO, SCO, CARICC; hosts Russian 201st Military Base	Principal opiate entry point; documented state–crime integration
Kyrgyzstan	None	Fergana enclave complexity (Sokh, Vorukh, Shakhimardan); incomplete demarcation; local economic dependence on informal cross-border trade; repeated depot leakage during political ruptures	CSTO, SCO, CARICC, EAEU	Transit and distribution hub; contested rather than consolidated market
Kazakhstan	None	Extensive steppe and rail geography; EAEU customs integration reducing inspection at the Russian frontier; industrial chemical availability; peri-urban laboratory capacity	CSTO, SCO, CARICC, EAEU	Final transit funnel; emerging centre of domestic synthetic manufacture
Uzbekistan	c. 137 km	Short, heavily invested southern frontier; centralised security apparatus; rising domestic consumption	SCO, CARICC; outside CSTO	Lower transit exposure; growing domestic demand-side problem
Turkmenistan	c. 744 km	Positive neutrality doctrine limiting intelligence-sharing; opaque reporting environment; Amu Darya and Serhetabat corridors	Outside CSTO and SCO; limited CARICC engagement	Under-documented transit corridor; principal regional information gap

Data Sources: Compiled by the author from Burnashev (2007); Jackson (2005); De Danieli (2014); Kupatadze (2014); Levi-Sanchez (2017); Peyrouse (2018); Marat and Botoeva (2022); Fazli (2023); Kumar (2025); UNODC reporting. Border lengths are approximate and vary across official sources.

Table 4 : Annual Narcotics Seizures and Estimated Flow Volumes (Metric Tons)

Sr. No.	State	Opiate Seizures (Annual Avg)	Synthetic Drug Seizures (Meph/Meth)	Estimated Annual Un interdicted Transit Volume	Primary Geographic Choke Points / Vulnerable Border Zones
1.	Kazakhstan	2.4 Tons	1.8 Tons	25–30 Tons	Karaganda Hub, Petropavlovsk Rail Axis, Caspian Maritime Vectors
2.	Kyrgyzstan	1.1 Tons	0.6 Tons	15–20 Tons	Batken Enclaves, Osh-Bishkek M41 Highway Corridor
3.	Tajikistan	4.8 Tons	0.4 Tons	45–50 Tons	GBAO (Khorog Axis), Panji Poyon, Khatlon Border Crossings
4.	Turkmenistan	0.9 Tons	0.1 Tons	10–15 Tons	Serhetabat Corridor, Dashoguz-Uzbekistan Border Zone
5.	Uzbekistan	2.1 Tons	0.9 Tons	20–25 Tons	Termez River Port, Surxondaryo Region, Fergana Border Segments

Data Sources: UNODC Report CAS Regional Systemic Risk Index 2026

Table 5 : Illicit SALW Proliferation Profiles and Sources

Sr. No.	State	Predominant Weapon Types Seized	Primary Source / Origin Vector	Key End-User Profiles
1.	Kazakhstan	Makarov PM, converted gas pistols, modified hunting rifles	Soviet-era leakage, domestic modifications, black-market imports	Peri-urban organized crime syndicates, extortion rings
2.	Kyrgyzstan	Kalashnikov AK-47/74 variants, TT-33 pistols	State depot leakages (2010/2020 unrest), regional black markets	Southern criminal clans, localized smuggling escorts
3.	Tajikistan	AK-74, US-made M4 & M16 carbines, RPG-7 launchers	Post-2021 Afghan black markets, civil war stockpiles	Cross-border smuggling syndicates, Jamaat Ansarullah militants
4.	Turkmenistan	Soviet-era hunting shotguns, legacy Kalashnikov rifles	Cross-border Amu Darya smuggling networks	Localized contraband protectors, tribal defense units
5.	Uzbekistan	Modernized semi-automatic pistols, legacy SALW	Interdicted transit cargo from external vectors, Afghan black market	Transnational syndicates, cells linked to extremist networks

Data Sources: UNODC Report CAS Regional Systemic Risk Index 2026

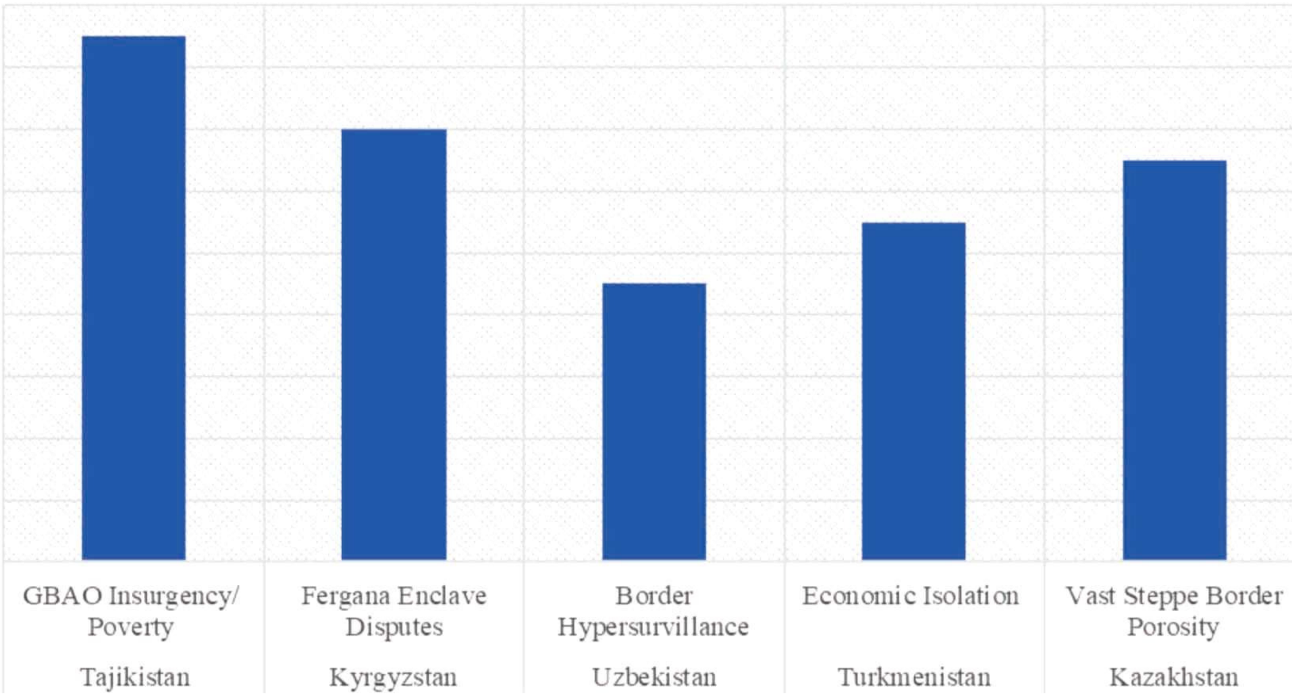
- **Kyrgyzstan (Risk Index: 7.0):** Transnational organized crime is mainly due to the complex enclaves of the Fergana Valley (Sokh, Vorukh, Shakhimardan). Poor definition of borders combined with the local economy's dependence on informal, cross-border trade makes it difficult to carry out institutional control.
- **Kazakhstan (Risk Index: 6.5):** Like Kyrgyzstan, there is no real institutional weakness here. The challenge is the geography of an expansive, mostly untamed desert. The unregulated, illicit movement of people and goods along remote, unfinished rail networks and highways is resource intensive.
- **Turkmenistan (Risk Index: 5.5):** The official policy of positive neutrality has no engagement in regional security, including the CSTO and SCO. There is limited institutional intelligence sharing within the regional network, consequently Turkmenistan has limited intelligence on recent cross-border illicit trade.
- **Uzbekistan (Risk Index: 4.5)**: The most robust border control encourages less cross-border illicit trade. The highly centralized security system and professional border control make this the least vulnerable area in the region.

Regional Security Implications and Governance Architectures

Three levels of Central Asian security are shaped by the expansion of arms and drug trafficking, which intersects with many misaligned institutional architectures.

De-democratisation and the consolidation of security regimes

Transnational organized crime reshaped internal politics among the Central Asian countries by pushing them security-first mode governance model into. Kumar (2022) explained that Central Asian leaders largely refer to the threats posed by cross-border trafficking and terrorism in order to widen domestic surveillance, impose restrictions on civil society and curtail political opposition.



Data Sources: UNDP Report CAS Regional Systemic Risk Index 2026

Digram 2 : Regional Threat-Multiplier Matrix

Regional Threat-Multiplier Matrix			
Sr. No.	Central Asian States	Primary Domestic Vulnerability	Systemic Risk Index (1-10)
1.	Tajikistan	GBAO Insurgency/ Poverty	8.5
2.	Kyrgyzstan	Fergana Enclave Disputes	7
3.	Uzbekistan	Border Hyper surveillance	4.5
4.	Turkmenistan	Economic Isolation	5.5
5.	Kazakhstan	Vast Steppe Border Porosity	6.5

Data Sources: UNODC Report CAS Regional Systemic Risk Index 2026

The public is offered a choice between firm state control and criminal disorder, and on that basis authoritarian structures are reinforced and the space for political debate is narrowed. This much follows the Copenhagen School account of securitization. What the Central Asian case adds is that the same measures also serve to regulate the illegal market from which parts of the state apparatus draw their income.

Institutional Weakening as Systemic Corruption, Redefined

The large profit margins from opiates and other synthetics market gives a large financial power in narco-weapon syndicates. Rather than dealing with state actors directly, they focus on undermining state capacity via corruption, including purchasing border, customs, police, and court officials. The typical understanding sees this as a breakdown of an otherwise working regulatory system. Looking at the evidence presented in Sections 4.4 and 11.3, it points to something different. Paoli and others (2007) noted that in Tajikistan, the link of traffickers to government officials had no close equivalent. Marat and Botoeva (2022) noted that protection offered by corrupt border guards allowed criminal syndicates in Tajikistan and Afghanistan to develop stable relationships. Similarly, Kumar (2022) observed that corruption and money laundering arising from the drug trade in these states have grown acute enough to acquire a political dimension, threatening state institutions. Such relationships extended throughout the region to syndicates

Table 6 : Comparative assessment of regional counter-trafficking architectures

Architecture	Principal sponsor	Operational emphasis	Structural limitation
CSTO	Russian Federation	Military border defence, rapid-reaction capability, forward basing	Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan outside the framework; military instruments poorly matched to a market-based, state-embedded threat
SCO / RATS	China and Russia	Counter-terrorism designation, information exchange, border infrastructure funding	Counter-terrorism framing reproduces the crime–terror model the evidence disputes; Turkmenistan outside
CARICC	UNODC-supported, regional	Operational information exchange, controlled deliveries, liaison among drug-control agencies	Depends on national agencies whose selective enforcement is documented; no mandate over precursors or SALW
BOMCA / CADAP	European Union	Integrated border management, training, demand reduction, drug-monitoring methodology	Long implementation cycles; capacity-building delivered to institutions that are themselves market participants
UNODC Border Liaison Offices	UNODC; Japanese and US funding	24 offices at key crossings; port control units; interagency mobile teams	Operates at the correct level and creates cross-agency visibility, but scale is limited relative to the length of the frontier

Data Sources: Compiled by the author. Assessment of institutional limitations draws on De Danieli (2014); van Santen (2020); Levi-Sanchez (2017); Marat and Botoeva (2022); Fazli (2023); Kumar (2022 & 2025); UNODC Programme for Central Asia documentation.

in Russia, enabling the flow of opiates and other drugs by increasingly sophisticated means, including through the air and rail. What this describes is not the decay of regulation, but the establishment of a different regulatory order.

Geopolitical Competition Over Counter-Narcotics Infrastructure

Because of Central Asia's critical geopolitical positioning, external powers have all begun competing in the region to establish their own counter-trafficking infrastructures. The Russian Federation focuses its efforts on the CSTO and prefers a more conventional military approach to border defence by deploying heavy equipment and maintaining a forward presence, including the military base in Tajikistan. The People's Republic of China is more active in the SCO and attempts to secure its western border in Xinjiang by building border posts on the Tajik–Afghan border and supplying surveillance technology to regional enforcement. The EU and the USA have taken a different approach by investing in the reform of institutions and the modernization of border control with a more technical focus, includes it different programmes such as BOMCA and CADAP.

Although all these efforts have introduced actual resources, the competing priorities have hindered the development of a coordinated regional strategy. Even worse, it lets recipient states pick the assistance modality least threatening to domestic rent structures, typically hardware and militarised capability rather than institutional accountability, and play sponsors against one another whenever conditionality tightens.

Comparative Assessment of Regional Architectures

The Border Liaison Office network deserves particular attention as the most promising institutional innovation now operating in the region. Set up under the UNODC Programme for Central Asia 2022–2025 with funding mainly from Japan and the United States, twenty-four offices work at key border crossing points across the five republics, bringing together ministries of internal affairs, border troops, customs services and drug-control agencies. What makes the model promising is that it operates at the level where the trade actually happens and that it creates cross-agency visibility which individual national agencies have institutional incentives to avoid. Its limitation is scale: twenty-four offices across some 2,225 kilometres of Afghan frontier and a far longer network of internal borders (Table 6).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are implications of the data outlined above that are outside of what the current policy framework considers. There are three findings, and each is substantiated by evidence that varies in strength. The most substantial of the findings relates to what the recorded seizure statistics truly reflect. In 2020, Tajikistan was ranked as the 11th highest country for seizures of the world's reported opiates, and numbers for Tajikistan continued to rise in 2021 (Fazli, 2023). At face value, this would suggest that their law enforcement is conducting their duties effectively. However, Tajik enforcement, as shown by Peyrouse (2018) and Marat and Botoeva (2022), primarily targets low level couriers, and traffickers without political patronage. Therefore, officially partaking in the narcotics trade would be consistent, if not dependent, on high seizure volumes.

This poses a challenge specifically for the external agencies that sponsor counter-drug efforts in the region. The primary agencies in this effort are the EU, through the BOMCA and CADAP projects, the US, Japan, and UNODC, and all have provided substantial resources. They try to justify their efforts by showing a positive outcome to their assistance. In this context, a positive outcome is demonstrated by an increase in seizures and arrests. The police can achieve this in two very different ways. They can target the drug trade, or they can target low level couriers and traffickers that do not have political patronage. The second option is more efficient, less resource intensive and poses no political risk, and, additionally, eliminates the traffickers that compete with the bureaucratic networks that have been paid off. Because the figures appear identical, assistance based on effective interdiction may actually strengthen the networks being protected rather than reduce them (Kumar, 2022 & 2025).

The second finding pertains to the gap that exists between how vulnerable a given state is and how the framework of its institutions engages with those of its neighbours. Although Turkmenistan has the second longest border with Afghanistan of all the states in the region, it is a member of neither the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) nor the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and has only the slightest engagement with CARICC. Thus, it is the largest evidentiary gap in any of the available accounts of the activity of the Northern Route. Kazakhstan is a variation of the same problem. Customs inspections have been eliminated in the Eurasian Economic Union, and the manufacturing of synthetic drugs has increased in cities such as Almaty (Kumar, 2022). No other body has authority over precursor chemicals within that customs space. This aspect of the argument is more concerned with how institutions are structured than how they actually function. Although networks behave strategically, it is accepted that traffickers intentionally design a route for consignments in such a way as to exploit existing gaps. However, evidence of this may be found in shipments that are publicly reported.

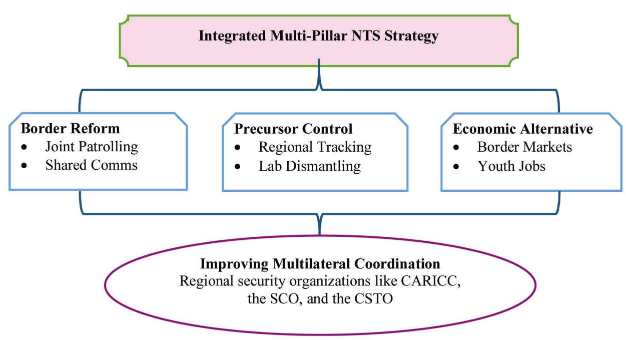
The third finding is about the relationship between drugs and arms. They come together through shared structure and not any merger between entrepreneurial criminals and militant groups. This is particularly true for drugs and less so for weapons. For the drug trade, crossing points, purchased official tolerance, informal systems of value transfer, and networks of kinship-based couriers all exist. Evidence for arms trafficking, as set out in Section 10.2, is largely based on evaluation rather than confiscation reports, thus is weaker. Establishing the point with certainty would require a comparable dataset as the UNODC crop-monitoring series for opiates with regard to weapon recoveries in Central Asia (Kumar, 2022). In its absence, the assertion is more plausible than it is proven.

These findings provide an alternative perspective on the impact of illicit trade on institutions in the region. The traditional view is that trafficking finances act as an external corrosive element on an otherwise constructive self-regulatory system. The findings presented here show that rather than self-regulation eroding, it is self-regulation that coexists with illicit trade. Paoli et al. (2007) identified trafficking leaders who operated from within the Tajik state. Kupatadze (2014) showed that various roles in smuggling networks are filled by law enforcement personnel. Marat and Botoeva (2022) showed that buying border protection creates trading relationships with officials that then extend to Russia. In all of these examples, officials determine which networks will operate and which networks will be subject to arrests; this is done by operating through state institutions. If this perspective is accurate, the usual response to the problem has been focused on the incorrect target.

By the mid-2000s, crime–terror nexus research was more advanced (Jackson, 2005, 2006; De Danieli, 2014; van Santen, 2020), but it still influenced the design of counter-trafficking programs for two decades after. Examining the interests of the key actors provides an explanation. For funding organizations, there had to be a serious enough threat to justify the spending, and terrorist financing was less preferable to official corruption, which would have pointed to the governments from which the assistance was provided. In turn, Transformations since 2022 have the potential to disturb the region's crime–security balance more than three decades of external assistance have done. The shift from a trade in plant-based drugs that supports larger networks of organized crime and offers higher profits with a smaller number of producers to a locally sourced and encrypted network of synthetic drugs that is more difficult to secure at the border means that if the value of official state protection is reduced, the illicit regional economy may destabilize.

Conclusion and Strategic Recommendations

This article has argued that the analytical frame through which Central Asian trafficking is governed no longer matches the market it addresses. The Afghan opiate economy has contracted by more than 95 per cent from its peak while shifting geographically towards the Tajik frontier. The residual trade is substantially a liquidation of accumulated stocks. Illicit revenue has moved to synthetic stimulants increasingly manufactured inside Central Asia. Arms and narcotics converge through shared infrastructure and shared purchased protection, not through any organisational merger of criminal and militant actors. Regional architectures, meanwhile, remain built for interdiction at an external perimeter against an insurgent adversary, in a market that has moved inside the perimeter and is governed by actors embedded in the state.



Source: Designed by the Author from Basis on literature

Fig. 6 : Non-Traditional Security Strategy

Managing arms and drug trafficking as NTS threats therefore means moving beyond short-term military interdiction. These flows are transnational, embedded in local economies and highly adaptive, and neither single-state action nor heavy border policing alone will address them. Four interconnected strategic pillars follow from the evidence.

Pillar 1: Reframe the target from the border to the protection market

Modern integrated border management systems should replace highly militarized border strategies. Some of the newer systems include:

- Forming cross-border, joint intelligence teams to detect illegal cross border movements in high traffic areas such as the Fergana Valley.
- Installing automated scanning and integrated customs systems to streamline border crossing and help minimize corruption at border control.
- Establishing interoperable communication systems among border control to facilitate real-time response during cross-border smuggling.

Pillar 2: Better Controls on Synthetic Precursor Substances

With the rapid growth in the manufacture of synthetic drugs, border authorities will need to monitor the import of synthetic precursor chemicals. Key measure include:

- Establishing regional systems to monitor the legal import of industrial chemicals such as acetic anhydride and ephedrine.
- Training customs officials to detect industrial precursors and provide them with field testing kits.
- Collaborating with countries in East and South Asia with improved end-user verification prior to shipment.

Pillar 3: Creating Alternative Local Economies

In areas of economic deprivation border smuggling networks thrive. Implementing targeted economic alternatives will help stabilize these areas. these measures include:

- Developing localized, small-scale agricultural and infrastructure enterprises in remote, border areas such as GBAO and Batken.
- Establishing cross border trade and economic zones to provide regulated markets.
- Creating employment and vocational programs for the economically neglected and youth of rural border areas.

Pillar 4: Enhancing Multilateral Coordination

Regional security organizations including CARICC, SCO and CSTO need to coordinate efforts to integrate counter-trafficking databases and remove administrative obstacles on the sharing of information. Creating common standards of seizure reporting, analytical methodologies and legal definition in the five republics will enable the Central Asian states to construct an integrated response to these complex, non-traditional security challenges.

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Author (s) hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (Chat GPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of manuscripts.

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