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A Comparative Study of Transnational Organized Crime in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan: Trends, Networks, and Law Enforcement Responses

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Abstract

Transnational organised crime (TOC) presents a significant threat to national security, governance, and socioeconomic well-being in South Asia. This review article provides a comparative analysis of transnational organized crime (TOC) in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan by examining trends, criminal networks, and law enforcement responses in these three South Asian countries. Specifically, the article examines the important areas of illicit activity, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal migration, arms trafficking, counterfeiting and laundering, white-collar crime, and cybercrime. The study shows the role that geographical location, porous borders, political upheaval, systemic corruption, and poor law enforcement and governance have played in turning these countries into transit hubs and operational bases of transnational organised crime. In Sri Lanka, faced with the aftermath

of the civil war, insurgent logistics networks have taken on new forms, such as organised crime syndicates that trade narcotics, among other things, and smuggle goods over long maritime journeys. India shares a heavy burden due to its vast borders with neighbouring countries, which offer many opportunities for diverse and multifaceted threats, including drug trafficking, the Golden Triangle, domestic weapons production, and a growing cybercrime economy. Pakistan is located at the intersection of the Golden Crescent and has marched into a unique militant-criminal nexus, where terrorist organisations can use drug trafficking, arms smuggling and counterfeiting to fund their operations.

Despite numerous substantial reforms at the national level and the establishment of specialised agencies, law enforcement across the region is substantially hindered by political pressures and counterterrorism operations, fragmented state capabilities and institutional arrangements, and a lack of technological aptitude. The article also claims that regional cooperation in South Asia, particularly through SAARC, is underdeveloped, and some of the reasons for these difficulties have been political tensions that were longstanding in South Asia (particularly India vs Pakistan). The absence of a shared set of intelligence-sharing protocols weakens countermeasures against highly adaptive and networked criminals. The authors suggest improving interagency processes, communications, and intelligence sharing; enhancing and coordinating financial and cybercrime intelligence; judicial reforms that include witness protection; and regional

cooperation processes. Ultimately, for South Asia to address TOC, it requires a combined non-corrupt response process while recognising that organised crime is not only a law enforcement issue; rather, it is a security issue that impacts governance.

Keywords: Drug Trafficking, Law Enforcement, Regional Cooperation, South Asia, Transnational Organized Crime

1. Introduction

Transnational Organised Crime (TOC) is a grave threat to national and international security, social cohesion, and political stability in the South Asian region. In recent decades, modernization, globalization, and technological advancements have facilitated the expansion of criminal activities that transcend national boundaries. Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan, with their significant geographical and geopolitical positions, are key players in this issue. Ideally located at the centre of global maritime and land trade networks, these countries have emerged as both targets and operational centres for transnational organised crime syndicates involved in drug trafficking, people smuggling, arms trafficking, counterfeiting, and terrorism financing (UNODC, 2019).

The study of transnational organised crime (TOC) in South Asia, particularly in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan, unveils a complex web of criminal networks that are deeply rooted and highly adaptive.

These networks thrive on institutional weaknesses, corruption, and socio-economic disparities, taking advantage of inadequate enforcement measures.

Each country has its own unique political and legal landscape, but the cross-border nature of organised crime calls for a collaborative approach to understanding and tackling these issues.

This review article aims to critically analyse the trends, criminal networks, and how different states respond to TOC in these three nations. A regional comparative study is vital, as there is an alarming convergence between organised crime and terrorism, as well as the emergence of cross-border trafficking routes. Isolated national strategies have proven ineffective in dismantling these transnational criminal enterprises. Furthermore, South Asia lacks strong institutional frameworks like Europol or ASEANAPOL, and the level of cooperation within regional organisations, such as SAARC, is still very much in its infancy (Emmers, 2021). By examining these challenges together, we can better understand the broader implications of TOC in the region and explore more effective solutions.

1.1. Key Concepts and Definitions

Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) is a serious issue that affects many countries around the world. According to the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, these are crimes that are planned, committed, and controlled across borders. This means that organized groups involved in this kind of crime are often looking to profit from activities like drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and money laundering. The cross-border nature of these

crimes means that it's not enough for a single country to tackle them alone multilateral cooperation is essential for effective prevention and control.

In South Asia, the situation is even more complicated. TOC is deeply connected to various challenges such as weak governments, economic issues, political favouritism, and militant groups. This makes enforcement efforts both challenging and sensitive from a political standpoint. For instance, in countries like Pakistan and parts of India, there's a noticeable overlap between crime and terrorism. Groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba engage not only in terrorist activities but are also involved in organized criminal operations, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address these intertwined problems.

In the South Asian context, RAT illuminates the habitual movement of commodities, people, and capital across borders, as well as predictable patterns that can be reached by organized crime groups.

The overlapping borders, diasporic communities across the world, persistent political unrest and instability, and the technological network available to the inhabitants of India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan create a fertile environment conducive to the convergence of motivated offenders and profitable targets; this comes with a great impediment of guardianship (Natarajan, 2011).

1.2. Study Problem & Objectives

The main goal of this article is to explore and compare the issue of transnational organized crime (TOC) in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan. And the study dive into several key questions:

- What are the predominant trends and types of transnational organized crime found in these three countries?
- How are the criminal networks structured, and what methods do they use to operate across borders?
- What are the similarities and differences in how each country's law enforcement responds to TOC?
- Finally, what gaps and challenges exist, and what opportunities are there for enhancing regional cooperation and improving control mechanisms?

2. Methodology

The selection of these three countries, Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan, stems from several important factors. First, they hold significant geostrategic importance, especially concerning trade routes in the Indian Ocean. Each country also has unique experiences with conflict and the challenges of organized crime that often follow. They share similar colonial legal histories and face common border issues, yet their law enforcement structures vary widely.

In Sri Lanka, for instance, the period following the civil war has seen a notable rise in transnational organized crime, with Colombo becoming a central hub for narcotics and smuggling. India, with its expansive territory and numerous borders, contends with various organized crime threats, influenced by drug trafficking routes from the Golden Triangle in the northeast to the Golden Crescent in the northwest. Meanwhile, Pakistan's strategic location and ongoing security difficulties have made it a crucial route for heroin trafficking, arms smuggling, and counterfeit currency operations, often linked to militant groups.

Each of these countries reflects a complex web of interconnected issues that highlight the challenges of organized crime in the region.

To address these questions, the study will use a qualitative content analysis approach. Accordingly, the study analyses existing scholarly literature, UN reports, national security documents, and media sources, including materials produced by organizations such as UNODC, INTERPOL, FATF, and SAARC. By comparing these sources, the study aims to highlight both the similarities and the differences in criminal activities and enforcement strategies across the three countries. The study includes several relevant case studies, such as the 2019 heroin seizure in the Indian Ocean involving networks spanning Sri Lanka and Pakistan, to provide concrete examples of how these criminal operations function in practice.

Since this study adopts a qualitative comparative review approach based on secondary data sources, it does not test a formal hypothesis.

Instead, the research focuses on identifying patterns, trends, and institutional responses to transnational organized crime across Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan. This descriptive and analytical approach allows for a broader comparative understanding of regional transnational crime dynamics.

3. Structure and Networks of Criminal Organizations in South Asia

It is essential to know the organization and the networks of transnational organized crime (TOC) groups operating in South Asia to develop countermeasures to eliminate TOC. Although networks in Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan differ based on their respective history, political, and economic contexts, they share some important structural characteristics, namely the hybridization of traditional crime groups with insurgents, corrupt officials, and Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) groups, and the gradual shift away from hierarchical, traditional organizational models in favour of more network-based, decentralized models of crime.

Sri Lanka: Criminalisation of Post-Conflict Networks

To understand TOC networks and organizations in Sri Lanka, it is helpful to consider post-conflict criminalisation of networks, particularly those of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

During the civil war, the LTTE integrated sophisticated global procurement, supply and smuggling networks, and after the war concluded, these networks were reconstituted and re-purposed into organized enterprises of transnational crime, most notably in areas such as drug trafficking, human smuggling and arms movement (Gunaratna & Iqbal, 2011).

Current TOC groups in Sri Lanka, referred to commonly as "underworld gangs", largely located in Colombo and the southern districts, operate organized crime practices in cell-based or networked models that are responsible for the importation of dangerous drugs, contract killings, extortion, including kidnapping for ransom. Importantly to note, these TOC groups maintain their links to political figures, especially concerning elections. During elections, TOC groups increasingly gain funding from political associates of political parties and TOC outlets in Canada, Australia, and Gulf (Jayatilaka, 2020).

India: Unbounded, but Disaggregated Networks

India has a varied typology for criminal organizations. From mafia-style syndicates in Mumbai like D-Company, led by Dawood Ibrahim, to insurgency-crime hybrids in the northeast and central tribal belts, criminal groups in India exist through multi-layered, decentralized networks (Chandran, 2020).

- These networks generally consist of:

- Street-level enforcers
- Logistics personnel (for drugs, arms, or migrants)
- Financial operatives who make use of hawala or shell companies;
- Political intermediaries who provide protection.

D-Company engages in transnational narcotics and arms trafficking and counterfeit currency operations, and has current activities existing in Dubai, Karachi, and Southeast Asia (Raman, 2009). The Naxalite groups, on the other hand, fund the insurgency through illegal mining, extortion, and informal tax collection on forest produce (Sen & Nair, 2021).

Pakistan: Militant-Criminal Nexus

Pakistan's criminal landscape exhibits a militant-criminal nexus, and the links where the two intersect are especially evident in border provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Pakistan's criminal and militant networks, especially designated groups like the TTP and LeT, engage in both militant insurgent activity and overlap into criminal behavior like drug, arms, and counterfeit currency (Felbab-Brown, 2017) in order to fund their operations.

These organizations tend to mix with tribal smugglers, the hawala network, and corrupt legal officers/border officials. In urban metropolitans like Karachi, gangland groups like Lyari gangs have not only engaged in protection rackets and drug distribution,

but have also operated drug distributions, extortion, and political violence with virtual impunity (HRCP, 2021).

4. Comparative Trends in Transnational Organized Crime in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan

4.1. Introduction to Regional Dynamics

South Asia has become an essential area in the global matrix of transnational organized crime (TOC), with a population of over 1.8 billion people. The nations of Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan are particularly important because they border drug-producing nations, have large maritime boundaries, and experience complex domestic political and security situations. Together these factors formed a geography and environment that facilitate TOC that spans across national borders and takes advantage of institutional weaknesses and corruption, and the geopolitical tensions that inevitably arise in the region (UNODC, 2019; Felbab-Brown, 2017).

This area is bordered by the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran) and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, Thailand) two of the world's major opium-producing areas (UNODC, 2018). As such, South Asia serves as a transit and consumption route for narcotics and drug trafficking is one of the most common forms of TOC in the area (Chaturvedi, 2022). The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) also provides paths for illicit maritime trafficking, particularly drug trafficking, human smuggling, and trafficking of arms (UNODC, 2021; Jayatilaka, 2020).

The complexities of internal conflicts have further altered criminal geographies.

For example, Sri Lanka's civil war and corresponding aftermath brought about organized trafficking networks led by the LTTE (Gunaratna & Iqbal, 2011). In India, its insurrections and left-wing extremisms (for example in Kashmir, the northeast, and central tribal belts) have also become organized and coupled with arms and narcotics smuggling as a form of insurgent support (Chandran, 2020). Meanwhile, Pakistan's intricate state-militant relationship particularly along the Afghan border has produced a crime-terror nexus with regional and global implications (Raman, 2009; Yousaf, 2019).

The additional difficulty comes from the transnational nature of these crimes. Criminal groups often operate transnationally, and therefore unilateral responses are less than effective. For instance, heroin trafficked through Balochistan frequently ends up in the southern Indian states, or gets sent through the ports in Sri Lanka, showing a geographical connectedness (Shanty, 2008). Regional cooperation is limited under SAARC due to political competition and the lack of legal convergence between states, especially in the relationship between India and Pakistan (Emmers, 2021).

4.2. Drug Trafficking Trends

Drug trafficking continues to be one of the most financially lucrative and resilient types of transnational organized crime in South Asia.

Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan play different roles as source/transit/consumer countries and, because of their geographical closeness to global narcotics production areas and at important points on both international maritime and land trafficking routes, play a varying role in this industry as a regional hub. This study explores with comparing the patterns, actors, routes, and enforcement issues related to drug trafficking in each of the countries.

Sri Lanka: A Developing Maritime Transit Hub

Although Sri Lanka is not a narcotic producer, it has become a key transit point, especially for heroin and synthetic drugs. Its unique geographic position in the Indian Ocean, situated very close to major narcotic source countries in the Middle East and Southern Asia while perfectly spaced between consumer markets in Africa and Europe, makes it an ideal point for transhipment (UNODC, 2021).

The 2019 heroin seizure in Colombo serves as an illustration of this role when over 300 kg of heroin and additional 5 kg of cocaine were seized in a warehouse related to a smuggling group comprising of Pakistani nationals (Jayatilaka, 2020). Recently, the Sri Lankan Navy arrested seven suspects and seized 191 kg of heroin and 671 kg of methamphetamine. Such seizures reinforce the sophistication of trafficking networks, with the use of constituency commercial vessels, multi-flagged ships, and even smaller fishing boats attempting to evade screen and detection.

The post-civil war period has also facilitated illicit maritime activity. During the war, the LTTE operated highly organized arms and drugs smuggling routes. Although these infrastructures have been weakened the logistics have been commandeered by criminal groups operating on the southern and western coasts (Gunaratna & Iqbal, 2011).

The traffickers of Sri Lankan origin typically work with South Asian networks and also networks from West Africa, many of them supported by diaspora communities from Malaysia, Canada, and Australia (Interpol, 2023). In recent years, worries about domestic drug abuse, particularly amongst the urban young and other vulnerable prison populations, seem to indicate changes from merely being a transit hub to possibly being a fledgling consumer market for drugs (NDDCB, 2022).

In the period from January to December 2023, law enforcement agencies across the island reported significant seizures of various illicit drugs. A total of 850.749 kilograms of heroin was seized, highlighting the substantial presence and distribution of this narcotic. Cannabis seizures were even more pronounced, with law enforcement authorities seizing 10,220.462 kilograms, indicating its widespread cultivation and use. Additionally, 83.242 kilograms of methamphetamine were seized during this period, underscoring the growing concern over synthetic drugs in the region. These figures reflect the extensive efforts by law enforcement to combat drug trafficking and abuse. Most of these drugs were transported to the country by using maritime route (NDDCB, 2024)

India: The Complications of Production, transit, and consumption

India's drug trafficking landscape is dual; it is both a major transit country for heroin from Afghanistan and a producer of precursor chemicals and pharmaceutical opioids.

Furthermore, India harbours borders with both the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle, meaning it occupies a unique hub of heroin production and distribution on a global level (UNODC, 2018).

India's northwest border particularly Punjab and Rajasthan, is a major heroin trafficking corridor from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Heroin can be trafficked through land borders; via truck concealed in a cargo truck; by human mules; or by drone shot across fences (Chaturvedi, 2022). Between 2020-2022, Punjab Police and Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) reported record seizures of Afghan-origin heroin, destined for either regional metropolitan areas or international re-export via Indian ports (Narcotics Control Bureau, 2022).

Also, India is one of the largest legal producers of pharmaceutical drugs and precursor chemicals (with respect to precursor chemicals - acetyl anhydride, ephedrine, pseudoephedrine), some of which eventually get diverted for the illegal manufacture of heroin and methamphetamines (INCB, 2020). Then, in 2021, there were multiple illegal production factories making methamphetamines and synthetic opioids that were dismantled in both Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, with some having international ties back to Southeast Asia or Africa (Interpol, 2023).

India is also a major consumer of narcotics, including heroin, opium, cannabis, and pharmaceutical-based opioids. A national survey conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice (2019) estimated that over 2.6 million people in India were dependent on opioids. Urban drug crises are emerging in cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru, with isolated cases of synthetic drug use among youth involving rising numbers (Sen & Nair, 2021). The northeast region, adjacent to Myanmar, is especially at risk due to the continuous flow of methamphetamine pills (locally called "yaba") and heroin from the Golden Triangle. Trafficking in this area is usually woven with insurgent groups, and the porous topography makes interdiction challenging (Chandran, 2020).

Pakistan: The Guardian of the Golden Crescent

Pakistan occupies a key role in the heroin trade out of Afghanistan, which supplies more than 80% of the world's heroin (UNODC, 2019). Because of shared tribal affiliations, difficult terrain, and porous and poorly monitored borders with Afghanistan, drugs are routinely trafficked out of Afghanistan into Pakistan. Drug smuggling generally occurs through Baluchistan (Baluchistan) and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region (Felbab-Brown, 2017).

After arriving in Pakistan, drugs can be shipped via overland routes to Iran and India, or maritime routes via the Makran coast to East Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia (Yousaf, 2019). The drugs can be shipped in fishing boats, dhows, and container ships.

It is noted that many of the larger heroin shipments run far more risk of getting caught by law enforcement than shipment tonnes to other countries by way of legal ports (the larger heroin shipments are routed through Pakistan's ports, including Gwadar and Karachi, for trafficking purposes).

A salient aspect of the drug trade in Pakistan is its relationship with terrorist and insurgent groups. Organizations by the names of Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have been reported engaging in, and profiting from, the narcotics economy (Raman, 2009). In many instances these groups levy taxes on the smuggling routes, protect other traffickers and other times simply engage in the trade to fund their organization. The ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) in many instances has been accused of both tolerating or leveraging the work of these organizations for political gain or to fund covert operations (Shanty, 2008). Pakistan is also facing an escalating domestic addiction problem. The Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) estimates over 6.7 million people are involved in drug use in Pakistan, with heroin and hashish as the predominant substances used (ANF, 2022). Drug addiction is also pervasive in slums and major urban refugee camps, with tribal areas being highly impacted as well. There is little or no funding or resources for rehabilitation.

4.3. Human Trafficking and Smuggling of Migrants

Human trafficking and migrant smuggling persist as problematic complexities of transnational organized crime (TOC) in South Asia.

Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan are marked by socio-economic inequality, conflict-driven displacement, gender-based violence, and high levels of unemployment which create favourable conditions for exploitation.

The study will analyse the comparative patterns of human trafficking and migrant smuggling across the three countries in the following aspects; root causes, operational networks, vulnerable and target populations, and enforcement gaps.

Sri Lanka: Maritime Smuggling and Labour Exploitation

In Sri Lanka, human trafficking and migrant smuggling practices have adapted to the country's changing socio-political environments. Since the conclusion of the war, irregular migration has steadily been on the rise, especially among minority ethnic groups, many of whom are Tamils, who are either pursuing asylum or a means to escape dire economic situations. Sri Lanka is classified as both a source country and a transit country primarily for labour migration, and irregular maritime smuggling (IOM, 2021).

One prevalent form of smuggling is by boat to Australia and Southeast Asia. In Sri Lanka, smugglers usually operate in Negombo, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee, and charge exorbitant amounts for their smuggling service platforms' clandestine voyages on unseaworthy vessels, exposing individuals to being marine-victims (Jayatilaka, 2020). Most of those smuggled are men, apart from women and children, who are more frequently exposed to risk and vulnerability as migrants. Many of the

individuals who are trafficked are simply rejected which means a boat is abandoned at sea, or in foreign territories meaning they are arrested, deported, and victimised again (UNODC, 2021).

According to the Sri Lankan government (CID), from 2009 to 2012, 3446 number of passenger were arrested due to illegal migrations.

Table 01

Sri Lankan Irregular Migrants Detected by the Sri Lankan Authorities, 2009-2012

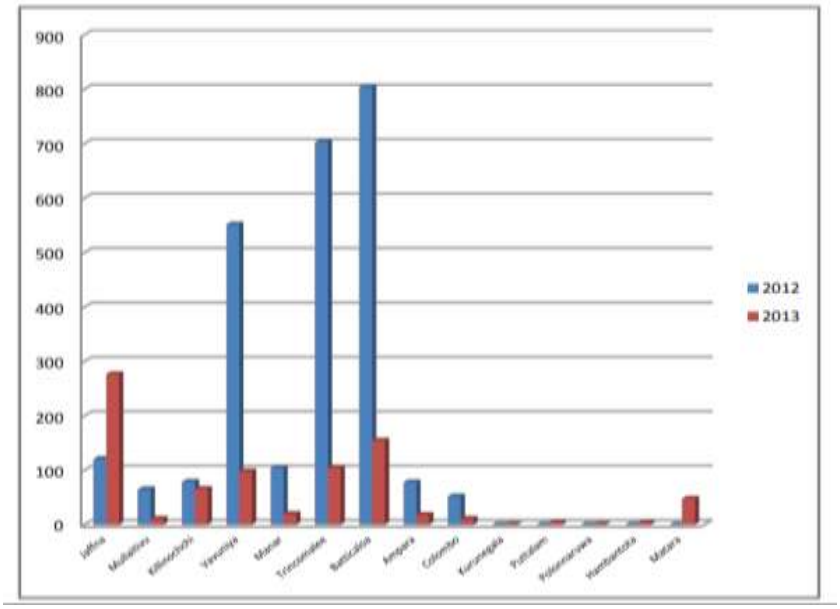
	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total
Total number of vessels detected	8	3	3	67	81
Total number of passengers arrested	182	10	115	3139	3446
Total number of facilitators arrested	35	19	12	304	370

Source: Criminal Investigation Department

The Northern district of Jaffna has produced many irregular maritime migrants while other districts both in the Northern as well as Eastern provinces have a smaller number of migrants. The most important feature observed between 2012 and 2013 was the substantial decline of irregular maritime migration in all the districts except Jaffna.

Figure 1

District of Origin of Irregular Maritime Migrants, 2012 and 2013



Source: Criminal Investigation Department

Sri Lanka is a source country for trafficked domestic workers, especially to the Middle East. Women are the main targets and are recruited by registered or unlicensed agents, and many women are lied to about expected wages and working conditions (HRW, 2019). Reports of sexual abuse, physical violence, and wage theft in regard to domestic workers abound in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Trafficking for sexual exploitation and trafficking for forced labour exist within the internal context, in urban and tourist areas, but they are less well documented.

India: The Bulge in Human Trafficking Regionally

India is a source, destination and transit country for human trafficking, to which it has one of the highest incidences.

According to Sen and Nair (2021), trafficking is shaped by factors surrounding poverty, caste discrimination, gender-based violence, displacement, and poor enforcement of laws. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports thousands of trafficking cases every year, but experts contend the actual numbers are even greater due to missing cases and misreporting.

The commercial sexual exploitation of women and children continues to be the most widespread form of trafficking within India. Victims are often drawn to urban centers, such as Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi, and Hyderabad by false promises of employment or marriage before being coerced into prostitution (Chandran, 2020). The Devadasi system, although formally abolished, is still practiced indirectly in some southern states, disguised as a religious practice exploiting boys and girls. India also serves as a source of cross-border trafficking, especially from Nepal and Bangladesh, where women and children are trafficked over porous borders into brothels or forced marriages (IOM, 2021). In this regard, traffickers typically work with extensive networks which include transporters, corrupt officials, and placement agencies.

Bonded labour, particularly in brick kilns, textile businesses, carpet weaving, and agriculture, is another significant issue.

In many cases, entire families are forced to work in unacceptable conditions to repay small debts, but are not able to seek legal recourse. Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha are some of the most affected states. Structurally vulnerable populations such as indigenous groups, Dalits, and displaced people face exploitative trafficking practices without fear of legal consequences (Sen & Nair, 2021).

India is also impacted by an increasing prevalence of migrant smuggling, with a recent trend of youth from Punjab paying high amounts to agents for fake documents or for dangerous smuggling routes via Latin America and Europe. Increasing numbers of deaths and detentions of Indian nationals in Mexico and at the US-Mexico border are being reported (Chaturvedi, 2022).

Pakistan: Labour Trafficking, Gender Exploitation and Refugee Vulnerability

The human trafficking and migrant smuggling patterns in Pakistan have been shaped by economic hardship, internal displacement, religious persecution, and a history of Afghan refugee migration.

Sandwiched between Afghanistan and India, Pakistan is positioned as a source, transit, and destination country. Human trafficking impacts men, women, and amalgams of disparate populations (women, child, non-national, refugee), and people of religious minority backgrounds (UNHCR 2020). Bonded labour is pervasive in Punjab and Sindh mostly in agricultural work, brick kilns, and carpet-weaving.

These workers, often from low-caste families with Christian or Hindu backgrounds, may be subject to debt bondage for generations, and experience beatings and sexual violence when attempting to escape (HRCP 2021).

Women and girls are trafficked within Pakistan and transported to the Gulf States, particularly the UAE and Oman, for domestic servitude and sexual exploitation. Human Rights Watch (2021) notes that agents often lure families with false job offers, only to be sold into exploitative situations abroad. The lack of oversight of overseas employment agencies and corrupt immigration services allows trafficking networks to continue operating.

The estimated 1.3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. Many are undocumented and outside formal labour markets, forcing them into the informal sector where they may be more vulnerable to exploitation. There have been many documented instances of children being trafficked from refugee camps to beg, for child labour, or to be employed by militant organizations (UNODC, 2019). Migrants are smuggled, often from Baluchistan and the Punjab. Smuggling routes cut through Iran, Turkey and on to Europe, frequently with the assistance of transnational criminal syndicates. Some of these risks are illustrated by the hundreds of lives lost to migratory routes where death included but was not limited to, dehydration, torture, left to die in the desert or on-board boats (Yousaf, 2019).

4.4. Arms Trafficking and Illicit Trade of Weapons in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan

The spread of illicit arms and small weapons is a key aspect of transnational organized crime (TOC) in South Asia. In Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan, this arms trafficking is often connected with insurgencies, terrorism, border insecurities, and criminal syndicates. The illegal arms trade causes not only domestic violence and instability, but also creates opportunities for a full-range of criminal actions, including drug trafficking, extortion, and political violence.

Sri Lanka: Post-war proliferation and maritime trafficking routes

The cessation of Sri Lanka's nearly three-decade civil war in 2009 fundamentally changed the arms trafficking landscape in the country. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), during the civil war, maintained one of the most advanced insurgent arms procurement plans known globally, sourcing weapons through international criminal syndicates and then building a maritime supply chain called the "Sea Tigers" (Gunaratna & Iqbal, 2011).

Post-war, the vast majority of hardware used by the LTTE including assault rifles, light machine guns, RPGs, and explosives either went missing or into the black market. While there are ongoing security operations, it is still impossible to secure all the firearms in northern and eastern parts of the country, particularly Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, and

Trincomalee districts where arms caches continue to be discovered (Jayatilaka, 2020).

Sri Lanka's fishing fleets and untrammelled sea routes are also susceptible to arms smuggling. Intelligence reports have suggested that gun smuggling still takes place across both the relevant sea routes between Tamil Nadu, India and Northern Sri Lanka via remnants of insurgent assimilation, as well as local organizations, or organized crime (UNODC, 2021). Moreover, as organized crime increases in Colombo metropolitan area, a growing demand for illegal firearms to engage in extortion, gang wars, and political repression increasingly exists (Silva, 2019).

India: Internal Workshops, Cross-Border Flow, and Insurgent Access

India faces a myriad of transnational and domestic threats related to arms trafficking due to its long and porous land borders, domestic insurgencies, and then illegal firearm manufacture. India is a destination and a source for illicit weapons. Also, India's northeast is a conduit for arms smuggling from Myanmar, China, and Bangladesh. Historic insurgencies such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) have procured weapons from Southeast Asian black markets (Chandran, 2020). From these countries, arms flow into India through the hills of Manipur and Mizoram which have histories of ethnic friction and limited border monitoring.

Along India's western front, arms are brought into the country through Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir, purportedly at the behest of transnational trafficking networks emanating from Pakistan. Weapons, including AK-47s, grenades, and pistols, are sneaked over the Line of Control (LoC) and the International Border (IB). There are also an increasing number of drone deliveries of arms and ammunition (primarily, this has occurred in Punjab), with security forces seizing dozens of armed UAVs attempting to cross the border in the last few years (NIA, 2022). India has several illicit arms manufacturing bases across a number of states, particularly in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand. These crude country-made firearms are known colloquially as 'kattas', and they are a ubiquitous part of many criminal enterprises, including dacoity, political violence, and communal riots (Sen, 2018). Black-market distribution of these firearms usually occurs via politically protected networks, or via criminal gangs.

In 2019, the Small Arms Survey calculated that India has over 61 million civilian-held firearms, of which almost 85% are unregistered (Small Arms Survey, 2019). The widespread availability of arms represents an immense internal security risk, particularly in districts affected by Naxalite violence, and in districts affected by extreme communal tensions.

Pakistan: Tribal Markets, Militant Link, and Regional Export

Arms smuggling in Pakistan leans heavily on a confluence of inadequate state control in tribal areas, a history of gun culture, and extremist and

insurgent organizations. The country is a producer and a transhipper to illegal arms. The Darra Adam Khel area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Province, is internationally recognized for its cottage arms manufacturing industry, producing replica Kalashnikovs, pistols, and other small arms for sale on the open market, some of which end up with criminal gangs, private militias, and even political muscle (Yousaf, 2019). Despite occasional interventions, the market continues because of the established family and tribal practices involved in the trade and the local economy's reliance on arms production. Militant groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) have sophisticated weapons supply chains that draw from Afghan war surplus, surplus stocks captured from military, and from international black markets (Felbab-Brown, 2017).

In addition, these groups smuggle weapons across borders mainly into India and Afghanistan. The ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) has been tied to these groups in transferring or turning a blind eye to these activities as part of the state's strategic statecraft (Raman, 2009).

Pakistan also acts as the starting point for regional trafficking of arms, especially Balochistan’s Makran coast, where weapons exports to the Middle East and Africa are shipped with narcotics. Arms trafficking in this context typically has connections to drug cartels and transnational terrorist funding networks (UNODC, 2020).

4.5. Counterfeit Currency, Financial Crimes, and Cyber-Enabled Transnational Crime in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan

The rise of cyber-enabled transnational organised crime and the ongoing challenge of counterfeiting currency and financial fraud are posing significant risks to national security, economic stability, and public confidence in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan. In each case, the overlap of online technologies with illegal financial operations has also allowed organised criminal networks to obtain new transnational reach, taking advantage of the structural weaknesses in regional banking systems, mobile financial services, and regulatory requirements.

4.5.1. Counterfeit Currency Operations

India: Primary International Target of Counterfeit Operations

India has consistently been the primary regional target of counterfeit currency trafficking, especially in the context of the proliferation of Fake Indian Currency Notes. Intelligence reports and police records, as well as NIA and RAW reports, have stated that the majority of FICNs are generated and introduced into the monetary stream by those operating out of Pakistan, with some level of support or allowance by the State (Chaturvedi, 2022). FICNs are typically routed through Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Gulf States, which provides significant relief via weak borders and weak customs agencies. When India initiated its demonetization scheme in 2016, the target was counterfeit currency as well; and although subsequent versions of counterfeit currency were

generated, apparently using more sophisticated printed techniques and excluding the security thread (NIA 2022).

Moreover, the FICNs are not only economic; the currency can also be used to create instability in financial systems, the monetary systems, to undermine the funding of terrorism, and potential underpinning insurgency groups, especially in Kashmir and the North-east (Raman, 2009).

Pakistan: Producer and Transit Point

According to various intelligence assessments, Pakistan has clandestine printing presses, allegedly supported by the state and non-state actors, including the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (Gunaratna & Iqbal, 2011). These networks of counterfeiters use diplomacy, international couriers, and hawala systems to inject bogus notes into Indian and Middle Eastern markets (Felbab-Brown, 2017). At the same time, Pakistan has domestic financial crimes, including fake check fraud, tax evasion, and illegal remittances. In Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar, criminal and insurgent networks tend to operate parallel economies, which sometimes include counterfeit banknotes, bogus identity documents, and illegal currency exchange (Yousaf, 2019).

Sri Lanka: Transit and Emerging Risk Location

While not a large producer of counterfeit currency, Sri Lanka has increasingly been a transit route for counterfeit currency ultimately heading to India through the Colombo Airport and sea ports.

The expansion of local tourism and banking industries alongside a lack of forensic capacity provides an alluring soft target for financial crimes or money laundering opportunities (UNODC, 2021). The Central Bank of Sri Lanka has raised alarms in relation to the rising reported incidents of forged local currency, particularly larger denomination Rs. 5,000 notes (Jayatilaka, 2020).

4.5.2. Financial Crimes and Illicit Flows

All three states deal with major challenges associated with money laundering, tax avoidance, terrorist financing, and illegal remittance flows. Mortgage fraud, the use of shell companies to funnel money, real estate and gold smuggling, and informal systems of banking, such as hawala, are among the mechanisms of these crimes. According to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), India is regarded as among the highest risks for money laundering, especially in sectors like real estate, gold market, and offshore business and investing (FATF, 2023).

Several criminal organizations launder profits from narcotics, arms trafficking, and human trafficking, using legitimate businesses, money and their politically connected allies to act without fear of detection or persecution.

Pakistan faces international scrutiny as the country operates as a "grey" state with FATF, thus having committed to reforms of its anti-money laundering (AML) and financing of terrorism (CFT). While there have been reforms to eliminate financial crime and ensure money laundering

is investigated and prosecuted, enforcement remains a problem. Several front companies linked to charities linked to terror have been documented along with illicit financial flows (HRCP, 2021). Sri Lanka had similar concerns with the FATF for non-compliance with AML standards, especially in the non-profit and casino industries. The bond scandal from 2015 is just one example of the interconnectedness of political corruption, financial crime, and laundering (Sen & Nair, 2021).

4.5.3. Cyber-Enabled Transnational Crime

As a result of greater digitalization, all three countries are seeing an increase in cyber-enabled crime (e.g., bank fraud, identity theft, ransomware, phishing, online extortion) as criminals increasingly integrate conventional methods of crime with digital platforms that facilitate low-risk, high reward type of crime that transcends international borders.

India: Explosion of Cybercrime in Urban Centres

India has seen exponential growth in cybercrime, especially in India's tech hubs, such as Hyderabad, Bengaluru, and Delhi NCR. A report from the Ministry of Home Affairs (2021) indicates that over 70% of reported digital crimes were cyber fraud, such as online banking frauds, mobile wallet compromises, and cryptocurrency scams (MHA, 2021). Cybercriminals or organized cybercrime syndicates (some of them originating from the Jamtara district in the state of Jharkhand, India) have become internationally known; often for phishing scams or OTP

frauds. In many cases, Indian cybercriminals have collaborated with international actors, including cybercriminals based in China, Nigeria, and Eastern Europe (Interpol, 2023).

Pakistan: Cybercrime and Extremist Propaganda

Cybercrime in Pakistan is rapidly becoming politicized. Alongside financial cybercrime, the state has reportedly seen an uptick in extremist and terrorist organizations using social media for recruitment, funding, and radicalization (Felbab-Brown, 2017). Furthermore, there has been a sharp rise in cyber harassment and defamation, while digital forensics are limited in their capabilities to address these threats (HRCP, 2021).

The dearth of a comprehensive legal framework for cybersecurity and avoiding confusion between intelligence agencies and civilian law enforcement and responsibilities for policing cyberspace creates grey areas in cyber policing. Several cybercrime statistics are believed to be underreported, due to fear of retribution, politicization, and stigma.

Sri Lanka: Emerging Threats from Digitalization

In Sri Lanka, digital financial platforms, such as e-wallets and online banking have expanded in use, especially following COVID-19. Yet, such digitization is not matched by the necessary cybersecurity. In particular, SIM card fraud, phishing, and e-commerce-related scams have increased, where organized groups mostly take advantage of the lack of accountability and target unsuspecting foreign tourists and investors

(Jayatilaka, 2020). Lack of a specific cybercrime taskforce, poor interagency coordination, and a lack of resources are all systemic barriers to effective response. According to the Sri Lanka CERT (2022), public institutions and small businesses have seen ransomware attacks and privacy breaches.

5. Law Enforcement and Policy Responses in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan

The responses of Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan to transnational organized crime (TOC) show a complex relationship of institutional capacity, political will, law reform and regional cooperation. Each has made meaningful strides with respect to enforcement and reforming its policies but has also failed to fully realize their potential (e.g., coordination, training, resources, intelligence-sharing).

5.1 Sri Lanka: Post-War Enforcement and Capacity Building

Sri Lanka's law enforcement system, particularly since the end of the civil war in 2009, has experienced extensive reform in response to TOC. The two main agencies focusing on organized crime, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, and financial crime, are the Police Narcotics Bureau (PNB) and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) (Jayatilaka, 2020). In addition to these, the Sri Lanka Navy plays an important role in 'maritime interdiction,' for example, disrupting drug shipments and smuggling routes.

Legal instruments such as the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2006, Offences Against Aircraft and Internationally Protected Persons Act, 1982 and Immigrants and Emigrants Act, 1949 have been used to prosecute TOC actors. However, other important institutional weaknesses, such as corruption, political interference and a limited capacity of forensic and cybercrime, limit enforcement effectively. (UNODC, 2021). Sri Lanka is also a member of international frameworks including Interpol, the Asia-Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG), SAARC's Mutual Legal Assistance treaty, however, its engagement in regional intelligence sharing is very low and is typically the result of bilateral friction, particularly with India (Emmers, 2021).

5.2 India: Broadening Legal System and National Coordination

India has developed an appreciable institutional structure to combat transnational crime with central agencies such as:

- Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) – India's best-known investigative agency;
- Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) – engaged in customs and drug-related crime;
- National Investigation Agency (NIA) – tasked with investigating terrorism and cross-border organized crime;
- Enforcement Directorate – deals with financial and money laundering offences.

The legal backbone consists of laws including the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (1967), Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (1985) and Prevention of Money Laundering Act (2002) (Sen & Nair, 2021). India has ratified key UN Conventions, including the UNTOC or UN Convention Against Corruption.

India is now introducing initiatives such as the Crime and Criminal Tracking Network & Systems (CCTNS) and the NATGRID, which will enable data integration nationally to assist in tracking criminals and crimes (MHA, 2021. However, enforcement is often impeded because of rivalry among agencies; political influence at the state level; and judicial traffic jams that slow down prosecutions. India's bilateral engagement with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh has strengthened in the past decade with a particular focus on counter-narcotics and protecting coastal populations however, problems with Pakistan inhibit the groups' ability to share intelligence on terror-related TOC networks (Emmers, 2021).

3.1. Pakistan: Security-Driven Policing and FATF Pressure

The response to TOC in Pakistan emerges from the country's' challenges with national security priorities as well as counter-terrorism. Agencies such as the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) assume a considerable responsibility when addressing drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, and also tackle cybercrime. However, these institutions often are not independent and have been accused of

politicization and of violating the human rights of offenders (HRCP, 2021).

In response to FATF pressure Pakistan also passed new laws such as the Anti-Money Laundering Act (2010) and the Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Acts, and established a National FATF Secretariat to monitor compliance and enforcement. While the country was removed from the FATF grey list in 2022, challenges remain over capacity to enforce laws and political will to take complex action against the diachronic linkages between militants and travelling criminals, and smugglers (FATF, 2023). Pakistan's border management system (especially along Afghan and Iranian borders) is porous. Local law enforcement typically does not have the personnel, training or equipment to effectively counter an organized transnational syndicate. Additionally, military and civilian coordination is often lacking and can be fragmented in operational effectiveness (Felbab-Brown, 2017).

Even though South Asian states share proximate boundaries and vulnerabilities to transnational organized crime (TOC), there is little regional cooperation against TOC.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1993) and the convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters (2008) have never been fully operationalized due to the geopolitical context, particularly the tensions of India and Pakistan (Emmers, 2021).

Bilateral coordination, particularly between India and Sri Lanka on maritime security, does exist. However, decades of distrust and limited connectivity between legal systems renders multilateral cooperation ineffective. The absence of a regional database, poor cross-border communication, and a limited capacity to undertake joint operations further undermine all stakeholders' collective effort to tackle transnational crime as a shared threat.

4. Challenges and Recommendations

Though Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan have made progress to some extent in responding to transnational organized crime (TOC), there is a multitude of institutional, political, legal, and technical obstacles that continue to hinder their response efficacy. These obstacles are further complicated by regional distrust, porous borders, repeated systemic corruption, and outdated enforcement practices.

4.1. Common Challenges Across the Areas

I. Fragmented Law Enforcement and Ineffective Inter-Agency Coordination

The fragmented nature of law enforcement agencies is one of the largest constraints on effective response to TOC. In Pakistan and India, the national *and* provincial/state police forces overlap in jurisdiction, and in reality, have a tendency to duplicate or worse, case collisions by

conducting conflicting investigations. In Sri Lanka, limited resources and centralised decision-making mean that inter-agency cooperation is delayed, particularly given the complexities involved in TOC cases requiring international collaboration between agencies (Jayatilaka, 2020; HRCP, 2021).

II. Political Interference and Corruption

All three states suffer from political interference in police operations and corruption in customs, immigration, and law enforcement institutions. Transnational organised crime networks construct relationships with politicians and other security officials - enabling them to go to work in impunity. The most evident example is the economic regulations of urban gangs in Karachi, cocaine and synthetic moving networks in Colombo, and informal border crossings in Punjab and Balochistan (Felbab-Brown, 2017; Silva, 2019).

III. Legal Gaps and Weak Legal Processes

While each country in the region has enacted laws to combat TOC, most of these laws are old, poorly enforced or rendered ineffective because of weak courts. Delay is common in prosecutions, witness protection is either nonexistent or lacked usage, and it is unsafe for people to testify against a criminal syndicate (Sen & Nair, 2021).

IV. Lack of Regional Cooperation

Political tensions, particularly between India and Pakistan, have inhibited efforts to cooperate with intelligence sharing, joint operations, and harmonizing laws. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) mechanisms are inadequately used and there is no South Asian task force or database to support cross-border investigations into TOC (Emmers, 2021).

V. Technological Shortcomings and Frustrated Forensic Capacity

TOC actors use sophisticated digital tools, encrypted and anonymous communications, and use offshore banking. Law enforcement in the region is barely using basic surveillance, basic cyber forensics, and basic digital evidence collection. The first step of any investigation begins in rural police stations where chiefs still lack computers, a proper database, or trained personnel, especially in Sri Lanka and Pakistan (UNODC, 2021).

4.2. Policy Recommendations

To bolster both national and regional responses to TOC, the following evidence-based policy recommendations are advanced:

I. Strengthening National Task Forces and Inter-Agency Protocols

Each country needs to form and/or bolster multi-agency TOC task forces encompassing police, customs, immigration, military, FIUs, and the judiciary. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for data sharing, joint investigations, and flow of intelligence through inter-agency cooperation should be institutionalised (MHA, 2021).

II. Regional Cooperation Frameworks

India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan would benefit from the revitalization of SAARC legal instruments, including the Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters. More importantly, a South Asia Transnational Crime Information system (SATCIS) akin to Europol's SIENA should be developed to allow real-time data sharing, regional watchlists, and alerts for smuggling, trafficking and cyber-enabled crimes (Emmers, 2021).

III. Cybercrime and Enhanced Financial Intelligence Capability

Recognizing the digital transformation of organized crime, the three countries would do well in prioritizing investment into cybercrime units, forensic labs, and training opportunities. Opportunities for collaboration with agencies such as INTERPOL, the UNODC and the FATF can support the fight against online fraud, cryptocurrency-based

laundering and cross-border digital crimes (FATF, 2023; INTERPOL, 2023).

IV. Implement Judicial Reforms and Witness Protection Laws

A timely, just, and secure judicial process is vital for disabling TOC networks. This may include establishing fast-track courts for transnational crimes, providing access to legal aid, and introducing effective witness protection measures, particularly in investigations that involve trafficking in human beings, terrorism, or serious organized crime (Sen & Nair, 2021).

V. Community Engagement and Prevention Strategies

Prevention is just as valuable. Governments should undertake public awareness campaigns against trafficking, smuggling, and online fraud. Working with civil society, faith leaders, youth and media will also support the development of early alert systems in vulnerable communities, namely border and post-conflict regions (Jayatilaka, 2020).

VI. Transparency and Oversight Mechanisms

Independent anti-corruption commissions and oversight bodies must also be given the powers to investigate law enforcement agency misconduct. Transparency in police recruiting, case audits, and management of asset seizure are also mechanisms which may assist

with restoring public trust and legitimacy in TOC responses (HRCP, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Transnational organized crime (TOC) in South Asia, particularly in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan, poses a complex and evolving challenge that knows no boundaries between borders, jurisdictions, and traditional crime categories. As this review highlighted, TOC in South Asia captures a broad range of activities including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human smuggling, counterfeiting, cyber-crime and financial crime, all made easier by porous borders, political instability, economic inequalities, and institutional weaknesses.

In comparison, while the TOC in South Asia has elements of both convergence and divergence, India's size and complexity of its socio-political environment generate uniquely fragmented and small, insurgency-related, groups of criminals. In addition, Pakistan's organized crime is part of a militant network that underpins and engages in regional proxy wars. The residual of Sri Lanka's civil war includes continuing insurgency logistics networks, which in the recent transformations shifted to the maritime-based smuggling and urban crime syndicates that are present today. Though these differences are real, a fundamental similarity is the erosion of boundaries between crime and governance through corruption, political patronage, and weak judicial systems, all of which enable TOC actors to operate with impunity.

These three countries exhibit a variety of structural deficiencies, such as in legislation, investigative technologies, prosecutorial capacities, and basic cross-border cooperation (Jayatilaka, 2020; Emmers, 2021).

Although there has been some positive growth in creating national-level counter-TOC institutions, the predominant goal of enforcement is reactive and lacks any strategic oversight both domestically and regionally. Again, enforcement agencies often struggle to synchronize due to jurisdictional overlap, lack of adequate intelligence sharing, and poorly established cybercrime and forensic units (UNODC, 2021; MHA, 2021). In addition, transnational crime networks are becoming much more digitally integrated, with cryptocurrency, dark web markets, and encrypted communications expanding faster than the enforcement capacities of the three countries (Interpol, 2023).

Effective disruption of TOC in South Asia requires a multi-disciplined, forward thinking response: (i) specific to the domestic sphere, this involves strengthening law enforcement coordination, judicial reform, cyber capacity building, and separation of police and intelligence at the political level; (ii) specific to the regional sphere, this involves revitalizing 'SAARC-based' networks, implementing a South Asian transnational crime intelligence database, and confidence building measures; dialogue and interactions between India and Pakistan are required to build a cooperative enforcement environment (Emmers, 2021); and (iii) specific to the international sphere, deeper engagement with FATF, Interpol, and UNODC can encourage harmonization of

policies, provide technical assistance, and create accountability for non-compliance.

TOC in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan is not only a criminal justice issue. TOC should be viewed as a national and regional security matter; if the TOC is not addressed through coordinated, collective, and corruption-free strategies it will systematically undermine development and democratic governance, and human security in South Asia.

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