



## Special Issue

### *Asian Organised Crime*

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EROC Editorial Team Note

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Owing to various unforeseen circumstances, EROC has not been published since 2019 and we would like to apologise to everyone interested in the Journal. The ECPR SGOC is committed to EROC as an open access journal; free to publish and free to read, that is independent of all publishers and which is managed by academics in their free time. The main aim of ECPR SGOC remains to contribute to the conversation on organised crime from a multidisciplinary and transnational perspective, engaging both academics and practitioners.

We are very pleased to be able to publish this special issue dedicated to *Asian Organised Crime*, a topic that has been relatively neglected in academic research. We would like to thank all the editors, reviewers, authors, and readers for their continued engagement with the Journal. Special thanks to Prem Mahadevan and his colleagues from Global Initiative for their advice and support in the preparation of this issue. We hope it will be of considerable interest and will generate some interesting discussions and thoughts.

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# Preparing for the challenges of a post-Covid World

Mark Shaw<sup>†</sup>

There seems little doubt, as we reach midway through 2021, that events of the last year and a half will define international affairs for decades to come. Covid-19 has accelerated a power shift from West to East. Specifically, the locus of geopolitics has moved from the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. Countries like China and India are assuming greater significance than ever before. The two Asian giants have themselves skirmished militarily over a boundary dispute in the high Himalayas. Meanwhile, the United States has elected a new administration which unexpectedly seems willing to actively promote a quasi-alliance of democracies in the Indo-Pacific, which some have interpreted as an incipient containment of China.

In all this, it is too easy to forget that while the Asian continent is a cauldron of statist rivalries (which can be divided for analytical purposes into dyads such as China-Japan, China-India, India-Pakistan and Afghanistan-Pakistan), there remains an overarching threat of transnational organized crime. This threat is not homogenous nor unified. Indeed, even as we at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) were conceptualizing this special issue of the *European Review of Organized Crime (EROC)* we were aware that variations in criminal culture and political economy might preclude a common narrative.

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What emerged through the evaluation of various article proposals was that, while criminality and geopolitics are not strongly interlinked, there still exists a connection between them. China's four-decade long economic rise has created a middle class that is guesstimated to number around half a billion people, or a third of the global middle class. The country's overseas investment profile has opened up end-to-end supply chains for high-demand status symbols coveted by upwardly mobile sections of Chinese society. Such goods, including ivory and redwood, can be sourced through networks that blur the lines between licit and illicit. The blurring occurs because national laws, especially on environmental crime, apply to the jurisdictions of individual states even as commodities seamlessly traverse these jurisdictions. Oftentimes, these crossings take place without much interference from local law enforcement officials in borderlands. By itself, their passage is a reflection of disparity between perceptions of state power on the one hand, and physical reality on the other. Asian states, many of which are psychologically scarred by memories of foreign occupation, place considerable emphasis on the notion of national sovereignty. Yet, the same state structures that are responsible for safeguarding political boundaries often fail to preserve economic boundaries when subverting the latter serves the interests of political elites.

Due to the emergence of sizeable Asian diaspora communities across the world, some of which experience social marginalization in their countries of residence, law enforcement cooperation between sending and receiving states can be stymied by cultural, language and ethnicity barriers. These barriers in turn diminish information leakage about contraband movements, creating a closed loop which is difficult for outsiders to penetrate, whether they be journalists or academic researchers. Meanwhile, payments for illicitly-purchased commodities are made through a variety of methods, both legal and otherwise. Tracking illicit financial flows is a challenge even in advanced, industrialized economies, but when the task has to be done in contexts characterized by corrupt officialdom and poor record-keeping, it can easily exceed the limited means of non-governmental experts.

Studying organized crime actors in Asia is difficult due to close linkages which such actors have with government authorities. In some cases, such linkages take the

form of corruption. In others, complicated patronage relationships with state authorities make it difficult to ascertain who controls whom. A patron-client relationship might exist which is masked by operational codes of secrecy, handled by intelligence agents whose activities are inherently 'deniable'. To some extent, the exact nature of the connections between a criminal entity and government authorities is unimportant, since the damage caused to human lives and financial security is real nonetheless. Yet, knowing about the existence and scale of collusion is essential to explaining why certain criminal entities survive can persistent onslaughts from law enforcement agencies. The problem is further complicated when such onslaughts need to be coordinated across different national jurisdictions, encompassing both willing and reluctant states.

The four papers eventually chosen for this *EROC Special Issue* on 'Asian Organized Crime' were intended to shine a light on the dark side of Asia's economic dynamism. They are meant to redirect the attention of debates on organized crime from more 'established' regions, such as Europe and Latin America, and bring into focus particularities of the Asian context. The most salient particularity is the coexistence of economic dynamism and strong criminal networks.

Each of the papers deals with different topic: wildlife trafficking, money laundering, the 'crime-terror nexus' and regional security cooperation. What emerges is a snapshot of the vast and variegated nature of organized criminality spanning not just parts of the continent (for example, South and South East Asia) but extending to Africa and the Americas. Governments have increased spending on trade infrastructure, or accepted such spending from overseas, as with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, inadequate thought has been put into how public security ought to be upgraded to cope with the socio-economic transformations that better connectivity and infusions of capital will cause. This is especially relevant because many Asian countries have yet to develop the institutional strength necessary to contain elite 'cronyism' and the popular discontent it triggers.

The GI-TOC is currently examining such questions through research projects focused on the BRI and also on environmental crime in Asia. In a state-centric policy discourse, the latter is often neglected, being dismissively viewed as almost an unpleasant-

sounding synonym for ‘development’. Yet the disruption that illicit resource extraction (particularly logging and mining) causes to ecosystems and rural communities is one of the most pressing challenges that Asian policymakers will face, moving forward. With the economic aftershocks of Covid-19 worldwide, as well as a significant drop in sectors concerned with logistics, such as commercial shipping and aviation, it is likely that criminal takeovers of legitimate enterprises will increase. This will make it easier for established and influential crime groups to consolidate control over supply chains and set up cartel-like structures that, through money power discreetly exercised via political lobbies and ‘front businesses’, will block government counter-measures. Meanwhile, smaller and more opportunistic criminal organizations would feel a market squeeze from larger, more structured rivals. Out of desperation, they could turn to demonstrative violence, both to defend their turfs from encroachment and to extract rents from the civilian population.

We have already seen similar dynamics in Europe, with mafias in Italy exploiting the financial distress of small and medium enterprises to capture a greater share of the legitimate economy. Meanwhile in Latin America, drug trafficking organizations are looking to diversify their revenue sources to deal with the challenges that government-imposed movement controls have posed to their business models. Were such dynamics to be replicated on a large scale in Asia, as we expect them to, the consequences for international security would be grave. Again, here the GI-TOC’s emerging workstreams on the convergence of crime and conflict, particularly in South East Asia, will be relevant for upcoming policy debates. One of our advantages as a civil society organization with a strong research component, is that we have a truly transcontinental perspective and mission. With a highly-diverse talent pool of analysts, and extensive networks of consultants in the field, the GI-TOC is able to provide detailed and yet, rounded assessments on contemporary organized crime trends that none can match.

We would like to thank the editorial team of the *European Review of Organized Crime*, especially Dr. Felia Allum and Dr. Shahrzad Fouladvand, for their untiring efforts to bring this special issue of the journal to light. Thanks are also due to the many scholars who, for no other motive than rendering a service to the academic profession,

gave their valuable time to peer review manuscripts. Lastly, thanks to Dr. Prem Mahadevan, senior analyst at the GI-TOC secretariat, for coordinating the preparation of this *EROC Special Issue*. We hope the articles contained therein would only be an initial foray, bringing the study of organized crime in Asia out of the journalistic realm where it has thus far been largely confined, and onto a plane of continued scholarly debate and research. We wish you Happy Reading!