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# The Fight against Drug Trafficking in East Asia

## A Comparison of Government Policies Designed to Combat Drug Trafficking in China, Japan and the Philippines

### Topic and Research Question

Drug trafficking in East Asia became an increasingly important topic in the agenda of policy makers and international organizations since the end of the Cold war, given the rise in use of synthetic stimulants and heroin. Bearing this in mind, this master's thesis focused on drug trafficking from a comparative viewpoint, analysing and contrasting the policies designed to combat it. Breaking down the anti-drug policies into its different components provided an opportunity to understand the rationale behind them and see the areas where countries could work together to make the fight on drugs more effective. The research focused on the People's Republic of China, the Republic of the Philippines and Japan, which are affected differently by the problem of drug trafficking. China is a main producer of methamphetamine and chemical precursors; the Philippines, a country implementing one of the toughest approaches to drug trafficking, is a major consumer of crystal meth; and Japan provided the opportunity to review the drug policy of a developed country with strong restrictions for drug use yet a persistent consumption of synthetic stimulants.

The research question was "What strategies do China, Japan, the Philippines have in common, and in which ones do they differ when it comes to combating illegal drug trafficking?"

### State of the Art

Given the multidisciplinary nature of the topic, which requires understanding aspects from the scientific, social, economic and political dimensions, scholars disagree on how to compare anti-drug policies, what constitutes as an anti-drug policy and which aspects to analyse in first place (Ritter et al 2016). Nonetheless, most research often focuses on: a) priorities of the policy, and b) the interaction and impact of anti-drug policy in relation to other government policies (Houborg et al 2018).

A general review of the literature evidenced a lack of cross-country policy comparisons of the most recent public policies on drug trafficking. Research extends to cover several dimensions of society, which results in the difficulty to define what counts as relevant when doing a comparative drug policy analysis (Houborg et al 2018). In particular, the majority of works focus on cases in South America and Central Asia (production), with considerably less up-to-date information on East Asia. Research on drug use and addiction mostly focuses on

the developed world, which provides fewer arguments to construct the right drug policy in countries more affected by drug production and traffic (Babor et al. 2010).

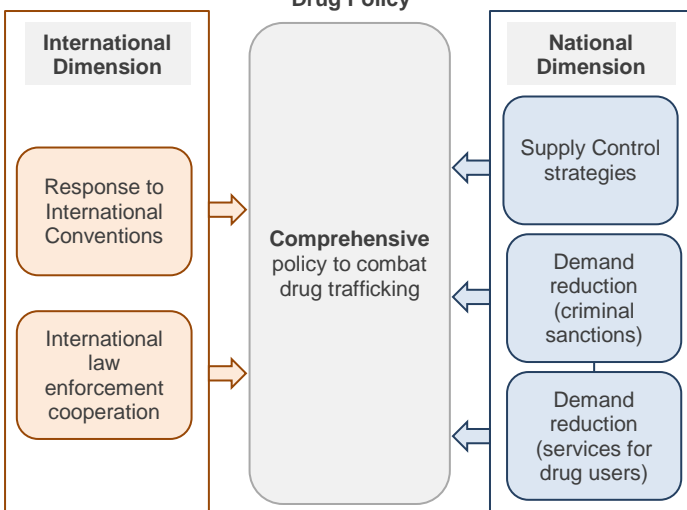
However, there are points of convergence among academic sources that see globalization as a catalyser for drug trafficking (Chawla and Pietschmann 2005; M. Jenner S. 2013, 2011). They have reviewed the challenges posed drug trafficking as a transnational crime (TC), with decentralized networks of traffickers and links to other TCs such as money laundering, corruption, insurgency and terrorism.

Literature on East Asia and drug trafficking mostly focuses on the Golden Triangle and the extension of the trade routes originating from this region, as well as their impact on neighbouring countries. Other work features single-country analysis of the anti-drug policy, as it is the case of China, but it does not establish parallels with other regional actors. Nevertheless, this particular juncture provided the opportunity to develop a separate policy analysis for each of the countries selected for this research, and draw a further comparison between them.

### Methodology and Approach

In order to answer the research question, the author made use of Babor et al (2010) and Jenner (2013) to develop an eclectic analytical framework (AF), which allowed reviewing both national and international levels of the anti-drug policy for each country, and classified drug trafficking as a transnational crime.

Figure 1. Dimensions of the AF – Assessment of National Illicit Drug Policy



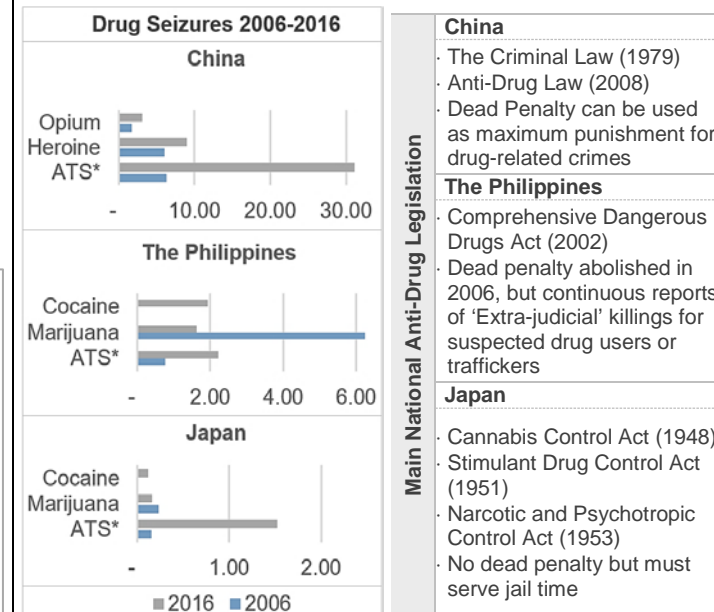
Source: (Babor et al. 2010; Jenner 2013)

Additionally, the AF made use of the definition of the anti-drug policies as "any targeted effort on the part of governments to minimize or prevent drug use and drug-related harm to both individuals and society" (Babor et al. 2010, 98).

The AF (Figure 1) narrowed-down the focus of the analysis to a few criteria correlating to the policy design to combat the traffic of illicit drugs, leaving aside other aspects of the anti-drug policy, including regulation of prescription medication. The selected criteria aimed to analyse the anti-drug policy of each country in two different dimensions: International (cooperation with other countries or International Organizations) and national (domestic policy resulting from the interpretation of provisions from international treaties).

### Main Facts

All the countries are signatories of the three main international conventions against illicit drugs (1961, 1972 and 1988); however, their interpretation of these provisions differs among them.



\*Does not include Ecstasy | Amount in Tonnes (1,000 Kg)  
 Source Chart: (UNODC 2017) | Source Legislations: (Gvmnt. of the PRC 1979, 2007; Gvmnt. of the Philippines 2002; Gvmnt. of Japan 1948, 1951, 1953)

In overall, the three countries have experience an increase in drug seizures, in particular for Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS), despite existing laws seeking to regulate trade of ATS and the Chemical Precursors used to manufacture them.

### Results

Evidence showed that the three countries have a similar prohibitionist approach to illicit drugs, focusing their efforts in supply-reduction strategies and imposing heavy sanctions to both traffickers and users. Moreover, existing options for treatments to reduce demand of illicit drugs (rehabilitation and detox) are coercive and fall under the responsibility of the criminal justice system.

Despite their prohibitionist approach, interpretation of international provisions varies among the countries. Research on China and the Philippines - the latter more prominently, showed discrepancies between existing law on drugs and law enforcement, with authorities overstepping boundaries and violating the due process of suspected law-offenders. In particular, the Philippines, with increasing number of extra-judicial killings reported by NGOs, shows a tendency towards punishing without proof of crime. Conversely, though following a restrictive approach to drug use and traffic, initial research on Japan's anti-drug policy shows that the cultural context plays a main role in discouraging the use of illicit drugs.

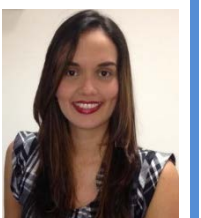
The three countries' last decade of fight against drug trafficking seems to have prioritized the number of causalities and convictions of law-offenders, while statistics of illicit drug use keep rising. There is also an increase in HIV and Hepatitis rates among Injected-Drug Users in China and the Philippines, as restrictive policies leave little access to safe needle-exchange programmes. More research on how to effectively combat drug trafficking could help change these paradigms.

### References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at>

### About the Author

Alejandra Cervantes Nieto holds a B.A. in International Relations from Universidad del Norte, Colombia. Her experience includes working for the public sector on foreign trade. Her interests comprise Transnational Crimes and their impact in security in East Asia, as well as international cooperation.



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