

China's Role and Contributions in Transnational Crime Governance: Focusing on Cooperation with Southeast Asian Countries

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ABSTRACT

This paper centers on China's cooperation with Southeast Asian countries to explore China's practices and role evolution in transnational crime governance. Through case studies such as the China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand Mekong River joint patrol law enforcement, the China-Myanmar-Thailand joint crackdown on telecom fraud and human trafficking, the China-Vietnam "Meilong" operation, and law enforcement training programs, it elaborates on China's specific governance measures. The analysis points out that China's role has undergone a transformation: from an emergency responder to a regular collaborator, from a single-field participant to a multi-field leader, and from a fund and project supporter to an idea exporter. Concepts such as "a community with a shared future for mankind" and "the Global Security Initiative" have played an important role in practice. Finally, it proposes strategies to optimize multilateral cooperation platforms and enhance international discourse power in the future, providing reference for global transnational crime governance.

KEYWORDS

Transnational crime governance; China-southeast asia cooperation; Joint law enforcement; Role evolution; Global security initiative

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

With the deepening of globalization, interactions between countries in economic, political, cultural, and other fields have intensified, and China has formed a close interdependent pattern with the global community. As the mobility of global resources increases and common interests continue to grow, the transnational, interactive, and diverse nature of non-traditional security threats has become prominent. Transnational crimes such as human trafficking, drug smuggling, telecom fraud, and online gambling occur frequently, posing severe challenges to regional and global security. Perpetrators use technologies such as network platforms, big data, and digital currencies to cross national borders, impacting judicial sanctions and social management. A report released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) shows that the global economic loss from online fraud reached billions of dollars in 2023, and criminal gangs colluded with transnational organizations in South America and Africa, forming complex interest networks. In response, the People's Republic of China adheres to integrating the two strategic layouts at home and abroad, innovates security concepts and strategies, improves the effectiveness of joint law enforcement against transnational crimes, and builds a law enforcement and security cooperation system with Chinese characteristics. As one of the world's major powers, China shoulders the important responsibility of promoting the improvement of the global security governance system, and its practice in transnational crime governance also has important reference significance for the international community.

1.2 Literature Review: International Framework for Transnational Crime Governance and China's Participation Status

1.2.1 International Framework

The United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), implemented in 2003, has established a cooperation framework covering prevention and law enforcement; meanwhile, the Convention Against Corruption has formed a transnational anti-corruption legal system. In addition, the Security Council and the Secretariat have advocated for countries to strengthen collaboration to respond to new trends in transnational crime.

In terms of other international organizations, the Ministry of Public Security document *Cooperating Hand in Hand for Mutual Benefit and Win-Win Results: Effectively Combating Transnational Crime – Chinese Police Deepening Law Enforcement Cooperation under the Framework of Interpol* points out that Interpol is a core platform for law enforcement collaboration and plays an important role in preventing and curbing various transnational criminal activities^[1]. At the regional mechanism level, Meng Shan and Ao Bo recorded in *International Governance Experience in Responding to Transnational Organized Crime* that transnational characteristics of cybercrime require global governance and the technical advantages of enterprises^[2]. Although the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ASEAN, and other organizations have established cross-border law enforcement and information exchange mechanisms, scholar Zhang Wei

believes that their exercises are overly formalistic, and long-term mechanisms still need to be improved ^[3].

1.2.2 China's Participation Status

China promulgated the *International Criminal Judicial Assistance Law* in 2018, which standardized judicial mutual assistance and laid the foundation for fulfilling international obligations ^[4]. Regarding the framework of "the overall national security concept", He Xiaowang proposed the need to increase participation in decision-making within Interpol ^[5].

In terms of cooperation platforms and projects, the "Belt and Road" security cooperation has incorporated transnational crime governance, promoting the construction of mechanisms such as legal support and joint training ^[6]. An analysis report released by the Center for Non-Traditional Security Studies of Tsinghua University shows that training programs conducted by China and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have improved law enforcement effectiveness in some regions, but localization and long-term evaluation still need to be improved ^[7].

For future research, Zhang Daojiong et al. believe that interdisciplinary integration is needed to establish a quantitative evaluation mechanism ^[8]; Liu Yan advocates optimizing the dissemination of the Chinese model through regular training and third-party evaluations ^[9].

Existing studies have shown China's practice in participating in transnational crime governance from the aspects of legal norms, joint law enforcement, platform construction, and idea export, but there are still deficiencies: First, empirical analyses of joint law enforcement operations such as "Sky Net" and "Fox Hunt" are mostly limited to case interpretations or data listing, lacking systematic quantitative research on law enforcement effectiveness in regional cooperation (such as China's cooperation with Southeast Asian countries). Second, there is no in-depth institutional explanation of the transformation logic from emergency response to regular operation and the formation process of governance leadership in multiple fields in the institutionalized cooperation between China and Southeast Asian countries, such as the Mekong River joint patrol and the "Meilong" operation. Third, regarding the specific practice paths of concepts such as "a community with a shared future for mankind" and "the Global Security Initiative" in regional crime governance, existing studies mostly focus on connotation interpretation, and the analysis of how these concepts integrate into cooperation details and transform into governance effectiveness is insufficient. These gaps provide space for this study to focus on China's cooperation with Southeast Asian countries and systematically analyze the evolution of China's role.

1.3 Research Ideas and Methods

1.3.1 Research Ideas

The research idea of this paper starts with elaborating China's transnational crime governance practices through cooperation with Southeast Asian countries through cases, then reveals China's role transformation and evolution in regular regional cooperation, and finally puts forward strategic suggestions for strengthening cooperation with various countries and international organizations and enhancing international discourse power in the future.

The first part discusses China's regional cooperation governance measures in the field of transnational crime through specific cases; the second part elaborates on the evolution of China's role in governance practices from three levels; the third part puts forward feasible suggestions for strengthening governance cooperation and enhancing international discourse power in response to the current international situation.

1.3.2 Research Methods

1.3.2.1 Literature Research Method

At the beginning of all research in this paper, it is based on the analysis and reading of relevant literature. The theoretical research involved has a wide range of sources, mainly from the official website of the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China, the official website of the Supreme People's Procuratorate of the People's Republic of China, Qishi Network, CNKI, relevant monographs, and cases of transnational crime governance on various websites. This paper analyzes and compares these, and sorts out, summarizes, and refines the research results of various disciplines.

1.3.2.2 Case Analysis Method

This paper focuses on China's cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, and expounds China's specific measures in transnational crime governance by combining cases such as the China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand Mekong River joint patrol law enforcement mechanism, the China-Myanmar-Thailand joint crackdown on telecom fraud and human trafficking, and the construction of China-Vietnam customs information collaboration mechanism; combined with the development of law enforcement training programs by Chinese public security organs, it analyzes China's experience, contributions, and international reference value in building transnational crime law enforcement capabilities.

2 China's Practice in Transnational Crime Governance

2.1 Joint Law Enforcement Actions Between China and Southeast Asian Countries

2.1.1 China-Laos-Myanmar-Thailand Mekong River Joint Patrol Law Enforcement Mechanism

To reverse the situation where the shipping safety of the Mekong River was seriously threatened and transnational crimes in the basin were rampant, China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand jointly established the Mekong River basin law enforcement and security cooperation mechanism. On December 9, 2011, the joint patrol law enforcement command was officially unveiled in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, and the first joint patrol law enforcement operation was launched the next day, allowing the interrupted international shipping of the Mekong River for more than two months to resume. The mechanism mainly adopts a multi-layered law enforcement model of "full-line joint patrol + segmented cruise + joint training". The four countries have built a real-time video command system and an emergency communication network, realizing "integrated" operation of intelligence sharing, joint command, and synchronized actions. Since 2019, the four countries have cracked 97 drug cases, seized 39.9 tons of drugs, cracked 206 smuggling cases, and arrested 600 smugglers. At the same time, the cargo throughput of coastal ports has increased by 4 times compared with that before the mechanism was established, and the number of tourists has increased by more than 20% annually, becoming a successful example of international river law enforcement and security cooperation ^[10].

2.1.2 Cases of China-Myanmar-Thailand Joint Crackdown on Telecom Fraud and Human

Trafficking In the joint operations against transnational crimes such as telecom network fraud and human trafficking, China, Myanmar, and Thailand have divided work and cooperated closely. Thailand implemented measures to cut off power, network, and oil supplies to weaken the operational capabilities of criminal groups from the source, and strengthened patrols and controls at the Thailand-Myanmar border to block the smuggling and transfer of fraud-related personnel; Myanmar actively carried out inspection operations in the cyber fraud parks in Myawaddy, arrested fraud-related suspects, and rescued trapped Chinese citizens; Chinese public security organs, relying on their advantages in intelligence analysis and investigation technology, coordinated actions of all parties and provided strong support for the joint crackdown. On February 20, 2025, the first batch of 200 Chinese fraud suspects were successfully escorted back to China via Thailand, and it is expected that more than 800 others will be repatriated successively. In addition, suspects in many cases involving trapped Chinese citizens have also been arrested ^[11].

2.1.3 Construction of Customs Intelligence Sharing Mechanism in the "Meilong" Operation

The "Meilong" series of operations are international law enforcement cooperation projects jointly carried out by China Customs and Vietnam Customs with the assistance of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Asia-Pacific Regional Intelligence Liaison Center of the World Customs Organization to crack down on smuggling of drugs, endangered wild animals and their products. They are also landmark achievements of customs law enforcement cooperation under the framework of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism. Driven by the "Meilong" operation sequence, the international law enforcement cooperation system in the Lancang-Mekong region targeting smuggling of drugs, endangered wild animals, and their derivatives has been significantly consolidated and optimized.

2.2 Law Enforcement Capacity Building Between China and Southeast Asian Countries – Widespread Development of Law Enforcement Training Programs

China, relying on the rich resources of public security organs, actively organizes various and rich law enforcement training programs for law enforcement departments of various countries. In the field of drug control, from 2013 to 2023, China has carried out 132 drug control law enforcement training courses for countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, training a total of 2,308 drug control law enforcement officials ^[12]. The training content covers multiple professional directions such as drug crime investigation skills, drug laboratory technology, and control of precursor chemicals. In terms of training on combating cybercrime, China has introduced independently developed cybercrime monitoring systems to other developing countries. This system can quickly identify early signs of criminal acts such as cyber attacks and fraud through artificial intelligence algorithms and issue warnings in a timely manner. These training programs have effectively improved the professional quality and business level of law enforcement personnel in participating countries, providing a more solid talent guarantee for countries to deal with transnational crimes.

3 Update and Evolution of China's Governance Role

In the process of China's cooperation with Southeast Asia in transnational crime governance, China's role has gradually transformed from an early emergency participant to a builder of long-term mechanisms and a leader of comprehensive cooperation, playing an increasingly important role in regional security governance.

3.1 From Emergency Responder to Regular Collaborator

In the early stage of transnational crime governance, China's role was characterized by crisis-driven. After the October 5, 2011 Mekong River tragedy, in which 13 Chinese crew members were killed, China completed emergency measures such as the establishment of a water law enforcement detachment and the construction of a four-country coordination mechanism within 50 days, and the first joint patrol law enforcement was urgently launched on December 10 of the same year. With the upgrading of governance needs, China has promoted the transformation of the cooperation model to normalization and systematization. As of July 2025, China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand have carried out 155 joint patrol law enforcement operations, with more than 800 various law enforcement actions in total, involving more than 20,000 law enforcement personnel and a total voyage exceeding 100,000 kilometers; patrols are conducted for no less than 25 days per month, the police visibility rate on the river has long remained above 85%, and key waters have achieved 100% coverage^[10].

3.2 From Single-Field Participant to Multi-Field Leader

When China first participated in transnational crime governance in Southeast Asia, it mainly focused on the traditional security field of drugs. After participating in the signing of the drug control cooperation memorandum in 1993, it has long carried out alternative planting projects in the "Golden Triangle" region. Only in northern Laos, it has promoted the transformation of 10,000 mu of opium poppy planting areas into tea gardens and rubber plantations. This single-point breakthrough model continued until the early 21st century^[12]. In recent years, China has developed into a leading force in multi-field governance, showing stronger agenda-setting capabilities in new types of crimes such as telecom fraud and online gambling. Taking the China-Myanmar-Thailand joint crackdown on telecom fraud as an example, China promoted strategies to paralyze infrastructure such as cutting off power and network supplies in crime gathering areas. In the first half of 2024, Cambodia alone repatriated more than 1,200 gambling and fraud-related personnel to China.

3.3 From Fund and Project Supporter to Idea Exporter

Before 2013, China mostly played the role of a resource provider in regional cooperation. In the drug control cooperation in the Greater Mekong Subregion, China donated 1 million US dollars to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime every year, and built more than 20 drug control training bases in countries such as Laos and Cambodia, training more than 5,000 law enforcement personnel in total. At this time, cooperation mainly adopted the model of "China providing funds + technical assistance". Nowadays, China has gradually placed idea export in a more prominent position. The concepts of a community with a shared future for mankind, the Global Security Initiative, and a community with a shared future in cyberspace have become the core contents of export and have penetrated into the texture of regional cooperation through specific practices.

3.3.1 The Concept of "A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind"

In 2012, China first proposed the concept of "a community with a shared future for mankind", aiming to respond to major issues related to the future of mankind such as "what kind of world to build and how to build this world", which has attracted widespread attention and discussion at home and abroad.

In transnational crime governance, China has also earnestly practiced the concept of "a community with a shared future for mankind". Taking China's role in promoting the United Nations' anti-corruption goals as an example, in the 20 years since signing the United Nations Convention Against Corruption, China has actively participated in the convention's implementation review mechanism and policy discussions at the Conference of the States Parties, gathered forces to implement the convention, and made important contributions to the formulation of international anti-corruption policies. At the same time, China has also actively participated in the construction of the United Nations Global Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Cooperation Network (GlobE) and officially became a member of the network when it was launched at the special session of the United Nations General Assembly on anti-corruption on June 3, 2021^[13].

3.3.2 Other Related Concepts: the Global Security Initiative and a Community with a Shared Future in Cyberspace

The United States, in order to strategically contain China, has actively built an exclusive alliance system in an attempt to reshape China's surrounding security environment. Against this background, in April 2022, the leader of China put forward the Global Security Initiative at the Boao Forum for Asia, responding to the questions of the times such as "what kind of security concept the world needs" and "how countries can achieve common security". Currently, non-traditional security threats still exist, and China has always taken ASEAN as a priority direction for neighboring diplomacy and law enforcement cooperation. Under the guidance of the Global Security Initiative, the two sides continue to deepen cooperation in combating transnational crimes and counter-terrorism. Premier Li Qiang proposed at the 26th China-ASEAN Summit to support the implementation of the *China-ASEAN Work Plan on Non-Traditional Security (2024-2028)* and carry out cooperation in combating new crimes such as telecom network fraud and online gambling.

Building a community with a shared future in cyberspace, which is in the same line as the Global Security Initiative, is a key concept for China to promote the innovation of the global internet governance system. In 2015, the leader of China elaborated on this concept at the Second World Internet Conference, emphasizing that countries should promote development, protect security, participate in governance, and share achievements together in cyberspace.

4 Strategic Recommendations for Strengthening Transnational Crime Governance Cooperation and Enhancing Discourse Power in the Future

4.1 Fully Utilize and Promote the Optimization of Multilateral Cooperation Platforms

China must commit to deepening existing frameworks for transnational crime law enforcement cooperation, such as multilateral or regional organizations including the United Nations, Interpol, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Lancang-Mekong Comprehensive Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Center. On the basis of respecting existing international norms and mechanisms, China should actively engage in innovating cooperation rules and development pathways. It is necessary to leverage multilateral cooperation mechanisms effectively to promote the conclusion of international treaties in counter-terrorism and cybercrime, and promptly establish legal bases for transnational crime law enforcement cooperation in these critical fields. As a founding member of the SCO, China has a decisive influence on the organization's development. It should actively assume more responsibilities as a major country, give full play to the SCO's role as a platform for regional law enforcement and security cooperation, and, drawing on the model of internal affairs and judicial cooperation within the European Union, establish additional substantive institutions (e.g., regional anti-drug agencies and regional agencies for combating transnational organized crime) through existing cooperation mechanisms within the organization to enhance the breadth of information exchange and cooperation efficiency.

4.2 Pathways to Enhance China's Discourse Power

In terms of agenda and issue-setting, it is crucial to ensure effective control of leadership. China needs to strengthen the construction of its discourse and cultural influence in transnational crime governance cooperation. To this end, it should cultivate a team of media professionals proficient in technology, communication, and guidance to set agendas aligned with China's current diplomatic strategies and law enforcement policies. This will enhance China's cultural influence and international reputation in the field of transnational crime governance cooperation, thereby transforming its cultural communication in this domain from passive acceptance to active leadership. Additionally, China can increase the dispatch of high-level experts and representatives to international organizations such as Interpol and the United Nations to enhance the visibility of Chinese solutions.

Secondly, China should proactively utilize various comprehensive discourse platforms to construct a national discourse system, speak out actively, lead trends, and contribute "Chinese voices" to national security cooperation. Against the backdrop of increasingly complex international security situations, comprehensive discourse platforms have emerged, integrating political, economic, cultural, and other dimensions to open up new areas for security cooperation. These platforms involve more countries and higher-level participation; compared with specialized discourse systems, their influence is more far-reaching and attracts broader attention. China should strive to release authoritative reports such as the *White Paper on China's Transnational Crime Governance* through such comprehensive multilateral forums and think tank cooperation, contributing Chinese wisdom and injecting new impetus into global peace, stability, and prosperity.

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