



MODEL UNITED NATIONS KARACHI II

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Study Guide

AGENDA

**Addressing the Rise of Synthetic Drugs Production in
Myanmar's Golden Triangle**

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Letter from the Secretary-General

Esteemed Delegates,

On behalf of the entire MUNKR II team, it is my privilege to welcome you to this year's conference. Over the course of the next few days, you will be asked to do far more than defend a position. You will be asked to question assumptions, engage with perspectives different from your own, and work towards solutions to some of the most pressing issues of our time.

MUNKR II has been designed to place you at the centre of meaningful discussion. Across every committee, you will encounter issues that rarely have simple answers. Whether you are addressing questions of international security, economic development, human rights, environmental policy, or domestic governance, the challenge will not simply be to identify what is wrong, but to understand why it persists and determine what can realistically be done about it.

We have not created MUNKR II simply to recreate the debates that take place beyond these walls. We want you to challenge existing approaches, engage with opposing perspectives, and explore the political, economic, social, and legal realities that shape every decision. The strongest solutions will not necessarily be the most ambitious ones, but those that demonstrate a genuine understanding of the circumstances in which they must operate.

Throughout the conference, I encourage you to approach every discussion with curiosity, confidence, and an open mind. Research thoroughly, debate respectfully, and never hesitate to challenge an idea simply because it is conventional. Most importantly, remember that MUN is not only about representing a country or defending a position. It is about learning how to listen, negotiate, collaborate, and lead.

I hope MUNKR II gives you an experience that extends far beyond the committee room. I hope you leave with new perspectives, meaningful friendships, and a greater confidence in your ability to contribute to the world around you.

I look forward to seeing the ideas you challenge, the solutions you develop, and the memories you create throughout the conference.

With warm regards,

Zekiel Gulab

Secretary-General

MUNKR II

Introduction to UNODC

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, headquartered in Vienna, is the entity within the UN system mandated to assist Member States in their struggle against illicit drugs, crime, and terrorism. Established in 1997 through the merger of the UN Drug Control Programme and the Centre for International Crime Prevention, UNODC acts as guardian of the three core international drug control conventions and provides the secretariat for the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the primary intergovernmental policy-making body on drug-related matters.

In a simulated committee setting, delegates represent Member States negotiating policy recommendations in the same manner as the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, which meets annually in Vienna as a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council. Delegates should understand that UNODC itself, as a Secretariat entity, does not vote or pass resolutions; it is the Member States sitting on the Commission who negotiate, draft, and adopt them, with UNODC providing research, technical expertise, and field-level implementation support.

UNODC's operational footprint in Southeast Asia runs through its Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, based in Bangkok, which produces the annual *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia* report that forms much of the evidentiary basis for this guide, and which provides the secretariat and technical support to the Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control.

Mandate of UNODC

UNODC's mandate is drawn from the three international drug control conventions, together with the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and a series of Economic and Social Council and General Assembly resolutions that established and periodically renew its functions.

Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, as amended by the 1972 Protocol: Establishes the international framework for controlling the production, distribution, and possession of narcotic drugs, and creates the International Narcotics Control Board to monitor compliance.

Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971: Extends international control to synthetic psychotropic substances, including stimulants, sedatives, and hallucinogens, complementing the 1961 Convention's focus on plant-based narcotics.

United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988, Article 12: Establishes the international legal framework for controlling precursor chemicals, requiring parties to monitor the manufacture and distribution of Table I and Table II listed substances to prevent their diversion into illicit drug manufacture.

ECOSOC Resolution 9(I) (1946) and Successor Resolutions: Establish the Commission on Narcotic Drugs as the principal policy-making body within the UN system on drug control matters, with UNODC serving as its secretariat.

Because the Commission on Narcotic Drugs operates as a subsidiary body of ECOSOC rather than the General Assembly, its resolutions are, like DISEC's, recommendatory rather than legally binding on Member States. Their real force comes from the technical assistance, monitoring, and coordination that follow, most visibly through UNODC's regional programmes, and through binding obligations that individual states have separately accepted by ratifying the three conventions.

Voting Procedure

As with other functional commissions of ECOSOC, decisions in this committee are generally taken by simple majority of members present and voting, with each Member State holding one vote. Unlike the Security Council, there is no veto power. Where possible, and particularly for technical annexes such as scheduling decisions on new precursor chemicals, the Commission works by consensus, since technical control measures are far more likely to be implemented uniformly if no major producer or transit state formally objects to them.

Delegates should note that precursor scheduling decisions under the 1961 and 1971 Conventions are technically the responsibility of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs acting on the recommendation of the World Health Organization, while broader policy resolutions, such as those calling for enhanced Mekong MOU cooperation or new alternative development funding, are adopted through ordinary majority voting procedure.

Introduction to the Topic

The Golden Triangle, the mountainous border region where Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand converge along the Mekong River, has for decades been synonymous with the global opium and heroin trade. Over the past fifteen years, and especially since the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the region's illicit drug economy has undergone a fundamental structural shift, from plant-based opiates toward industrial-scale synthetic drug manufacture, chiefly methamphetamine and, increasingly, ketamine.

This shift matters for a technical reason as much as a criminal one. Opium cultivation requires land, weather, and a growing season, all of which are visible to satellite monitoring and vulnerable to eradication campaigns. Synthetic drug production requires none of these things. A methamphetamine laboratory can be built, operated, and dismantled within a shipping container or a small compound, hidden under forest canopy, and relocated within days of a law enforcement raid. This makes synthetic drug production dramatically harder to detect, measure, and interdict than traditional opium cultivation, and it is the central technical challenge facing this committee.

The scale of the resulting market is now measured in hundreds of tons per year. According to UNODC's most recent regional synthetic drugs report, methamphetamine seizures across East and Southeast Asia reached 349 tons in 2025, a 48 percent increase over the previous year's record and more than five times the amount seized a decade earlier, while ketamine seizures reached a record 52.5 tons, a 185 percent increase from 2024. The vast majority of this production is concentrated in Myanmar's Shan State, the northern part of the Golden Triangle.

“We are clearly seeing unprecedented levels of methamphetamine production and trafficking from the Golden Triangle, in particular Myanmar's Shan State.”

— Benedikt Hofmann, UNODC Acting Regional Representative for Southeast Asia and the Pacific

Key Terms to Remember (KTR)

The following technical terms will be essential for delegates navigating this committee's debate:

Amphetamine-Type Stimulant (ATS): A broad category of synthetic stimulant drugs that includes methamphetamine and amphetamine, distinguished from plant-derived narcotics such as opium and heroin.

Precursor Chemical: A chemical substance that is a necessary and identifiable component in the manufacture of a controlled drug, and which is itself subject to international monitoring under Table I or Table II of the 1988 Convention.

Pre-Precursor: A chemical that is not itself internationally scheduled but that can be readily converted into a controlled precursor chemical, often used by traffickers specifically to circumvent

existing chemical control regimes.

Designer Precursor: A chemical synthesised with no legitimate industrial use, created specifically to serve as an unscheduled substitute for a controlled precursor chemical, and one of the clearest signs of the sophistication now present in Golden Triangle supply chains.

P2P Method: A production pathway for methamphetamine that begins from phenylacetone, commonly known as P2P, rather than from ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, the two chemicals historically used and more tightly regulated internationally.

Yaba: A low-cost methamphetamine tablet, typically combined with caffeine, that is the most widely available and consumed form of the drug across mainland Southeast Asia.

Superlab: An industrial-scale clandestine drug manufacturing facility with the capacity to produce large quantities of a synthetic drug per production cycle, as distinct from small, low-output home-style laboratories.

International Special Surveillance List (ISSL): A UNODC-administered list of non-scheduled chemicals that have been identified as being used as substitutes for internationally controlled precursor chemicals, allowing early warning even before a formal scheduling decision is made.

Controlled Delivery: A law enforcement technique, recognised under Article 11 of the 1988 Convention, in which an illicit shipment of drugs or precursor chemicals is allowed to proceed under surveillance in order to identify the individuals involved further along the supply chain.

Transnational Criminal Organisation (TCO): A criminal network that operates across the borders of two or more states, coordinating the production, transport, and financial laundering of illicit goods, and which is the primary structural target of this committee's proposed responses.

History of the Golden Triangle Drug Trade

For much of the twentieth century, the Golden Triangle was the world's leading source of illicit opium and heroin, with Myanmar alone estimated to have produced over half the world's raw opium and as much as three-quarters of its refined heroin during the 1990s. Cultivation was concentrated in Shan State, a mountainous region occupying almost a quarter of Myanmar's land mass, where weak central government control allowed a patchwork of ethnic armed organisations and militia groups to tax, protect, or directly operate the opium trade.

The shift toward synthetic drugs began gradually in the 2000s, as methamphetamine tablets, known locally as yaba, offered producers a far more profitable and logistically simpler alternative to opium. Unlike heroin, methamphetamine does not require months of crop cultivation, seasonal harvesting, or vulnerability to poppy eradication campaigns, and it can be manufactured to a consistent, high-purity standard using chemical processes that are difficult for outside observers to detect from a distance.

This shift accelerated dramatically after the Myanmar military's seizure of power in February 2021. The ensuing civil war fractured central state authority across large parts of the country, while simultaneously increasing the financial desperation of a wide range of armed actors who found in the drug trade a stable and highly liquid source of revenue. UNODC's most recent reporting describes this combination directly, noting that the ongoing crisis in Myanmar has increased the need for proceeds from the drug trade, while pockets of relative stability in certain drug-producing areas have created conditions conducive to expanded production.

The result has been a near-uninterrupted rise in regional methamphetamine seizures, from approximately 151 tons in 2022, to a record 236 tons in 2024, to a further record of 349 tons in 2025, alongside a parallel and even steeper rise in ketamine seizures, which climbed from 27.4 tons in 2022 to 52.5 tons in 2025. Myanmar has simultaneously become the world's largest opium producer, overtaking Afghanistan in 2023 after the Taliban's poppy cultivation ban sharply reduced Afghan output, illustrating that the synthetic drug boom has occurred alongside, rather than as a replacement for, the region's traditional opiate economy.

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

The international legal architecture governing this crisis rests on the three UN drug control conventions described earlier, but the operational core relevant to synthetic drugs specifically is Article 12 of the 1988 Convention, which establishes the international precursor chemical control regime.

Article 12, Paragraph 8 of the 1988 Convention: Calls upon parties to take appropriate measures to monitor the manufacture and distribution of substances listed in Table I and Table II of the Convention, in order to prevent their diversion into the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.

Article 11 of the 1988 Convention: Provides the legal basis for the controlled delivery technique, allowing law enforcement agencies to permit the movement of illicit consignments under surveillance in order to identify higher levels of a trafficking network.

International Narcotics Control Board (INCB): The independent, quasi-judicial monitoring body established under the 1961 Convention, responsible for tracking the licit trade in precursor chemicals and identifying patterns of diversion at the global level.

A significant technical limitation of this framework, and one your resolution should directly grapple with, is that it can only control chemicals that have already been formally scheduled onto Table I or Table II. As the case studies in this guide will demonstrate, Golden Triangle producers have shown a persistent and well-documented ability to substitute newly regulated precursors with pre-precursors or wholly synthetic designer precursors that fall outside existing international control, a pattern regulators describe as a game of whack-a-mole, in which enforcement is permanently one step behind the chemistry.

Regionally, the primary cooperative framework is the 1993 Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control, commonly known as the Mekong MOU, which brings together Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, with UNODC providing secretariat and technical support as the seventh, non-state partner. The Mekong MOU coordinates Border Liaison Offices for cross-border intelligence sharing, joint interdiction operations such as the historical Operation Safe Mekong and Operation 1511, and, since 2024, a dedicated Working Group on Chemical Control focused specifically on precursor diversion.

Case Studies

The following case studies are drawn from UNODC reporting, US Treasury designations, and verified regional journalism. Delegates are encouraged to use these as the evidentiary basis for their negotiating positions and draft resolution clauses.

Case Study A: The Post-2021 Coup Surge in Shan State Methamphetamine Production

Following the February 2021 military coup, UNODC field data shows a marked and sustained increase in methamphetamine-related seizures and clandestine laboratory dismantlements concentrated in the conflict-affected areas of Myanmar's Shan State. Comparative UNODC data covering the periods 2017–2020 and 2021–2024 shows that the number of political violence events and the number of methamphetamine cases in Myanmar rose together, providing a striking illustration of how armed conflict and synthetic drug production have become mutually reinforcing rather than competing dynamics.

A striking illustration of the scale involved came in 2020, before the coup, when Myanmar police and military conducted what UNODC described as one of the largest and most successful counter-narcotics operations in the history of the country and region, seizing 200 million methamphetamine tablets, roughly 500 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine, 300 kilograms of heroin, and, notably, 3,750 litres of methyl fentanyl, a precursor chemical used in fentanyl production, near Kutkai in Shan State. UNODC's regional representative at the time described the fentanyl precursor volumes uncovered as unprecedented, pointing to synthetic opioid production on a scale nobody had anticipated.

For this committee, the post-coup surge illustrates a core policy dilemma, namely that conventional supply-side enforcement, seizures and laboratory raids, cannot resolve a drug economy that is being actively sustained by the broader political and security collapse in producing regions. Any resolution addressing Shan State production in isolation from Myanmar's wider governance crisis risks treating a symptom while leaving the underlying structural driver untouched.

Case Study B: Precursor Chemical Diversion and the Shift to the P2P Method

Golden Triangle methamphetamine producers have historically relied on ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, chemicals also used legitimately in cold and decongestant medicines, as their primary starting materials. Sustained regulatory pressure from China, which tightened domestic controls over these chemicals through the 2010s, forced a documented shift in production chemistry. Chemical profiling of seized methamphetamine samples from the Golden Triangle in 2022 found that syntheses based on P-2-P methyl glycidic acid, commonly abbreviated as P2P, accounted for 41 percent of tested samples that year, a method that does not require ephedrine or pseudoephedrine at all.

Investigators have separately documented a parallel and more troubling trend: the emergence of designer precursors and pre-precursors manufactured specifically to fall outside existing international scheduling. Analysts covering the region have noted that seizures of the traditionally tracked chemicals – ephedrine, pseudoephedrine, and P2P itself – have at times dropped sharply even as finished methamphetamine seizures reached record levels, a mismatch that points strongly toward the use of unregulated substitute chemicals and, in some cases, in-region synthesis of precursors that were previously imported. Investigations have also identified India, alongside China, as an increasingly significant source of diverted precursor and pre-precursor chemicals for the regional synthetic drug trade.

This case study is central to the committee’s technical mandate. It demonstrates concretely why a static, list-based approach to precursor control under the 1988 Convention will always lag behind a criminal chemistry industry capable of engineering new, temporarily unregulated substitute compounds faster than the international scheduling process can respond.

Case Study C: The Kings Romans Casino and the Zhao Wei Transnational Criminal Organisation

Located within the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Bokeo Province, Laos, on a 99-year land concession along the Mekong River, the Kings Romans Casino has become one of the most extensively documented case studies of narco-financial infrastructure operating openly within a nominally regulated special economic zone. In January 2018, the United States Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control designated the casino’s owner, Chinese national Zhao Wei, along with three associates and three companies across Laos, Thailand, and Hong Kong, as a Transnational Criminal Organisation under Executive Order 13581, citing drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, bribery, and wildlife trafficking.

According to the Treasury designation, the Zhao Wei network facilitated the storage and distribution of heroin, methamphetamine, and other narcotics for illicit networks operating in neighbouring Myanmar, including the United Wa State Army, which the United States separately designated a

significant foreign narcotics trafficker in 2003. Field investigations by the International Crisis Group in 2023 documented open, undocumented million-dollar cash transactions occurring on the casino floor, consistent with large-scale money laundering, while the zone's governance structure leaves Lao national authorities almost entirely unable to access or police the site without permission from casino-affiliated security.

Despite the 2018 sanctions, the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone has continued to expand, including a fifty-million-dollar Mekong River port development beginning construction in 2020, illustrating a further core policy problem for this committee. Unilateral national sanctions against a single individual or network have proven insufficient to dismantle infrastructure operating within a special economic zone that enjoys the tacit protection of the host state, since Laos itself retains a twenty percent equity stake in the zone.

Case Study D: The United Wa State Army as a Narco-Political Actor

The United Wa State Army, the armed wing of the Wa Self-Administered Division in northern Shan State, is the largest ethnic armed organisation in Myanmar and controls a de facto autonomous territory along the Chinese border. Designated a significant foreign narcotics trafficker by the United States in 2003, with eight of its leaders indicted on heroin and methamphetamine trafficking charges in 2005, the United Wa State Army illustrates a structural feature of the Golden Triangle drug economy that pure law enforcement responses struggle to address, namely that a heavily armed, quasi-governmental actor with an estimated force of tens of thousands of fighters can operate a narcotics economy under conditions that make conventional interdiction operations effectively impossible without risking a wider armed confrontation.

None of the indicted Wa leaders has ever been successfully extradited, underlining a further enforcement gap: the absence of any effective mechanism to bring accountability to armed non-state actors who exercise territorial control over major production areas but who fall outside the framework of conventional international criminal cooperation designed primarily for state-to-state extradition.

Case Study E: Record Regional Seizures and the Sam Gor Syndicate

The Sam Gor syndicate, also known as The Company, is described by UNODC as the largest and most sophisticated drug trafficking network operating in East and Southeast Asia, with an alliance structure linking five separate triad groups. UNODC has estimated the broader Asia-Pacific methamphetamine trade to have been worth as much as 61.4 billion dollars in 2018, up from approximately 15 billion dollars just five years earlier, with Sam Gor identified as a central node moving multi-ton shipments across borders from Japan to New Zealand while laundering proceeds through legitimate-looking businesses across the Mekong subregion.

The most recent UNODC regional report, covering 2025, documents both the persistence and the geographic diversification of this trafficking architecture. Cambodian authorities reported seizing

nearly 10 tons of methamphetamine in a single interdiction in 2024, described by UNODC as by far the largest methamphetamine seizure in history, while newer maritime routes connecting Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines are emerging as what UNODC analysts describe as an increasingly significant corridor, with Sabah in Malaysia identified as a major emerging maritime trafficking hub.

For this committee, the Sam Gor case demonstrates that the Golden Triangle synthetic drug crisis can no longer be addressed as a localised Mekong subregion problem. Its criminal financial architecture is genuinely transnational, its trafficking routes are actively diversifying by land, river, and sea to defeat enforcement gains in any single corridor, and its proceeds are large enough to fund continued production expansion regardless of individual seizure totals, however record-breaking those totals may be.

Perspectives of Key Stakeholders

Myanmar's State Administration Council

Myanmar's military-led State Administration Council maintains formal responsibility for national drug control policy and periodically conducts high-profile enforcement operations and public destruction of seized narcotics. However, its practical authority over Shan State and other producing regions is heavily contested amid ongoing civil conflict, and its own international standing is complicated by allegations, documented in UNODC and independent reporting, that certain militia forces aligned with or tolerated by the military have themselves been implicated in the drug trade.

China

As the country bordering the northern Golden Triangle and a major destination and transit market, China has invested heavily in bilateral and Mekong MOU precursor control cooperation, including hosting the 2024 Mekong MOU Working Group on Chemical Control. China's own tightening of domestic ephedrine and pseudoephedrine regulation is directly credited with forcing the regional shift toward the P2P method described in this guide, illustrating both the effectiveness and the limitations of unilateral precursor control by a single major supplier state.

Thailand and the Mekong MOU States

Thailand remains the principal transit and destination market for Golden Triangle methamphetamine and consistently records the region's largest single-country seizure totals, exceeding 100 tons in 2024 alone. Together with Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, Thailand has pushed for deeper Mekong MOU cooperation, including expanded Border Liaison Offices and joint interdiction operations, while also raising concerns that seizure success in one country simply displaces trafficking routes into neighbouring, less-resourced jurisdictions.

UNODC and the International Narcotics Control Board

UNODC and the INCB have consistently called for a rebalancing of the regional response away from a near-exclusive reliance on enforcement and seizures, which by definition capture only a fraction of total production, toward greater investment in demand reduction, precursor chemical monitoring, and addressing the conflict and governance conditions in Myanmar that are directly fuelling the expansion of the drug economy.

Ethnic Armed Organisations and Civil Society

Armed groups such as the United Wa State Army occupy an ambiguous position, functioning simultaneously as de facto governing authorities over producing territory and as alleged direct participants in the drug economy, complicating any purely state-centric enforcement strategy. Civil society and public health actors within the region, meanwhile, emphasise that falling street prices – a single methamphetamine tablet cost around sixty cents in Myanmar by 2024 – are driving rising domestic use and treatment demand across producing and transit countries alike, an outcome that a supply-focused resolution alone will not resolve.

Current Situation

UNODC's most recent regional report, *Synthetic Drugs in East and South East Asia, Latest Developments and Challenges 2026*, confirms that the upward trend documented throughout this guide has continued without interruption. Methamphetamine seizures reached 349 tons across the region in 2025, a 48 percent increase over 2024's previous record, while ketamine seizures reached 52.5 tons, a 185 percent increase, with UNODC officials describing the simultaneous record-breaking of both drug categories as evidence that the underlying drivers of the trade remain firmly in place rather than weakening.

The 2026 report also documents concerning geographic expansion beyond the traditional Mekong core, with Japan and the Republic of Korea both recording sharp increases in ketamine seizures in 2025, a marked departure from historically low levels in those markets, and with UNODC analysts explicitly noting that Europe and Southeast Asia are becoming increasingly connected drug markets requiring coordinated cross-regional intelligence and enforcement responses rather than purely localised Mekong subregion strategies.

In June 2025, senior officials from the six Mekong MOU states conducted a joint field mission along the China–Vietnam and China–Laos borders, during which Vietnamese officers reported increased precursor seizures and border liaison offices agreed to restart dormant communication hotlines, illustrating that operational cooperation, while active, continues to be built and rebuilt on a largely ad hoc basis rather than through a permanent, adequately resourced institutional structure. This is the central diplomatic and technical challenge your committee session must confront.

Key Questions a Resolution Must Answer (QARMA)

1. How should the international precursor control system under Article 12 of the 1988 Convention be reformed to respond more rapidly to newly engineered pre-precursor and designer precursor chemicals, given that the current scheduling process consistently lags behind criminal chemistry innovation?
2. What role should the Mekong MOU framework play relative to UNODC's global mandate, and how can its Border Liaison Office and chemical control mechanisms be adequately and sustainably resourced?
3. How should the international community address drug production occurring in territory outside the effective control of a recognised national government, such as Wa-controlled areas of Shan State, without legitimising the armed actors who govern it?
4. What accountability mechanisms could realistically be applied to special economic zones, such as the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Laos, that host documented narco-financial infrastructure under the nominal sovereignty of a host state?
5. How should a resolution balance continued investment in supply-side enforcement and seizures against demand reduction, treatment access, and alternative livelihood programming in producing communities?
6. Given documented route diversification into maritime Southeast Asia and rising seizures in East Asian markets previously considered peripheral, how should this committee's response be scaled beyond the traditional Mekong subregion?
7. What financial and anti-money-laundering measures could most effectively target the proceeds of syndicates such as Sam Gor, given that seizure of physical drug shipments alone has not reduced the overall scale of the market?

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