By Sagar Deva

The role played by transnational crime in sustaining assymetrical conflict and terrorist activity is often hidden through complex networks both the licit and illicit economy, and therefore its prominence as a security threat is often underrated. However, it plays a fundamental role in the propagation of assymetrical conflict and dangerous non-state organisations. Whilst fighting the root causes of rebellion and terrorism might reduce the number of individuals who are tempted to join these violent groups, a focus on transnational crime identifies their operational capacity to perpetrate their attacks upon forces which have superior conventional armaments.

Despite the fact that militants usually possess military capabilities inferior to the nation-states they threaten, their operations can tap into considerable resources, both in terms of finance and weaponry, explosives, and network connections. Such organisations can have membership in the hundreds of thousands. Both the Kurdish Peoples Party (PKK) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have access to money estimated in the billions of dollars. The Tamil Tigers possesed anti-aircraft weaponry, nightvision goggles, and high-optic sniper rifles, weaponry that was more advanced than the Sri Lankan Government.

As very few have their own weapons factory or production facilities, they must acquire their resources from outside sources. It is in this capacity that transnational crime becomes an important component in the security threat they pose.

As insurgent groups and global terrorists necessarily operate outside the structures of both domestic and international law, transnational crime naturally appeals to them as a source of funding. This has been particularly true since the end of the Cold War and the drastic reduction in 'state sponsored terrorism'. Resorting to criminal activity or alliance with international criminals has become more than a profitable sideline for transnational terrorists- it has become a necessity.

Al-Qaeda, which reputedly still mantains $113 million dollars in illicit accounts, is known to finance its operations largely through the use of international credit card fraud and in some instances drug trafficking. The FARC in Colombia fund their insurgency almost entirely from the profits of their narco-trafficking . Almost all major terrorist groups have significant network links to transnational criminal organisations, and many major attacks have been attributed to direct funding from international criminals. For example, the bombings of the Indian Parliament in 1993 were directly linked to the powerful global crime syndicate D-unit and its fugitive boss, Dawood Ibrahim.

Transnational crime plays a critical role in two main ways. Firstly, transnational criminal groups can 'ally' with terrorist groups and insurgent , providing them with vital resources or funds, usually in a mutually beneficial exchange. For example, in return for training in insurgency tactics from prominent members of the Irish Republican Army, FARC provided the IRA with cocaine to fund their activities.

Viktor Bout, known as the 'Merchant of Death', owned a fleet of 60 cargo jets via which he supplied insurgents, rogues, and dictators across the Middle East and Africa. Illegal armament traders have an interest in selling arms to anybody with the money – and perpetuating conflict maintains demand for arms. At the same time, narcotics traffickers have an interest in supplying insurgents and terrorists and weakening the state as this creates a lawless environment in which their operations can thrive.

Secondly, and even more dangerously, terrorist groups and insurgents begin to 'mutate their own structure' and take on the attributes of terrorist groups. In this capacity, violent groups begin to take on criminal assets themselves, moving into the illicit trade in arms or, more often, the illicit trade in drugs.

The pernicious effect can be seen in many regions. The conflict in Afghanistan is dominated by local warlords, Taliban militants, and other groups feuding with each other and with coalition forces. Large swathes of Burma are occupied by the WSA (Wa State Army) who frequently clash with the Burmese government and are reputed to have 20,000 armed militiamen. The FARC militia consistently commit terrorist attacks against the Colombian state and control a third of Colombian territory.

These dangerous militants share one common factor; their activities are almost entirely financed by the whole scale trade in narcotics. The wholesale trade in opium from the 'Golden Crescent' and 'Golden Triangle' respectively fund insurgent activity in Afghanistan and Burma, and FARC wholesales cocaine to the United States. The rise of Peru to the number one spot in the world cocaine supplies must raise fears that the Shining Path could return with bigger resources. Empirical evidence supports the link between transnational crime and regional instability. In the 9 major drug producing countries, only Thailand has not experienced sustained conflict.

Put simply it is likely that without the assistance of criminal profiteering, most major violent groups would not be able to continue their operations on anything like the present scale. The international community must broaden their attempts to address not only the root causes for recruitment but the criminal networks that allow terrorists and insurgents to arm themselves. Ultimately, it will require increased co-operation between international institutions tackling global crime like Interpol and national security forces. It will also require greater recognition from global leaders of the threat to international security posed by transnational criminals. Whilst large, powerful criminal networks still exist, the threat to peace and security will continue and perhaps grow.