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Regional cooperation against transnational organized crime: challenges and opportunities in the Western Hemisphere

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Transnational Organized Crime represents a critical threat to the political, economic, and social stability of the Western Hemisphere. This article analyses the dynamics of the criminal organizations that constitute this phenomenon, including their illicit activities such as drug, human, and arms trafficking, as well as their relationship with migratory flows and advanced technologies. Using a qualitative methodology based on the multidimensional security model, it evaluates the consequences of Transnational Organized Crime and the challenges for States, highlighting the need for State policies on security and defense that transcend political interests. The main conclusion is the comprehensive articulation of regional cooperation, mechanisms for collective intelligence, and legal strengthening to confront this criminal phenomenon effectively. It emphasizes the importance of migration control as a key strategy and proposes concrete recommendations to strengthen regional cooperation, ensure institutional stability, and mitigate the impacts of Transnational organized crime.

KEYWORDS

international security, migration control, regional cooperation, security and defense, transnational organized crime

1 Introduction

Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) has surfaced as one of the pre-eminent threats to international peace, regional stability, and the legitimacy of state institutions in the early 21st century (Woodiwiss, 2024; Viano, 2018). The knotty, increasingly interlinked, networks of criminals—including drug trafficking, arms and human smuggling, cyber-enabled crimes, and financial flows—represent the challenge to conventional models of security while also generating completely new multidimensional threats across the Western Hemisphere (Heymann and Heymann, 2018; Atuesta and Pérez-Dávila, 2018; Beare, 2003).

Discussions in academia and public discourse have drawn attention to the shortcomings of traditional solutions, emphasizing the need for integrated solutions that extend beyond borders, legal jurisdictions, and bureaucratic silos (Woodiwiss, 2024; Viano, 2018; McCabe, 2025). National governments and international associations such as the Organization of American States struggle to coordinate law enforcement, immigration policy, and intelligence capacity in the context of rapidly changing criminal methods, institutional fragmentation, and the tension between the sovereign authority of states and cross-national cooperation (Hoffman, 2007; Kleemans, 2018; Buzan and Waever, 2003).

Past research has located the historical trajectory of transnational criminal economies in Latin America that illustrate the dynamic interrelationship of hybrid forms of organized violence, adaptive criminal behavior, and state responses (Atuesta and Pérez-Dávila, 2018; Beare, 2003; Farah and Babineau, 2019). However, there are notable gaps related to the intersection of hybrid threats, migration flows, and the increased use of technology, in addition to the regional capacity to work together to address the symptoms and underlying structural drivers of TOC (Durán, 2023; Barros et al., 2022).

TOC in the Western Hemisphere is particularly dire: illicit activities such as drug production and trafficking, arms and human trafficking, cybercrime, and money laundering cause extreme violence, degrade legal economies, drive corruption, and create conditions for mass displacement (Farah and Babineau, 2019; Simmons et al., 2018; Conte and Migali, 2019; Bele, 2021; Li and Liu, 2021). These actors exploit weaknesses in border control and migration management, but they also undermine rule of law through co-optation of officials and dwindling public faith in democratic institutions (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2018; Silva-García and Pérez-Salazar, 2024).

This article fills an important space in the research literature by asking: How does regional cooperation in the Western Hemisphere mitigate the multidimensional impacts of transnational organized crime, and what are the main obstacles and innovations in building resilient security architectures? The objective is to systematically evaluate the interrelation between TOC, regional cooperation mechanisms, and state/institutional adaptation, through a qualitative methodology based on the multidimensional security model. In so doing, the article provides new empirical and conceptual insights into the challenges and opportunities facing regional and national actors dealing with one of the most complex and persistent security challenges in the Americas today.

2 The TOC in the Western Hemisphere: diagnosis and current challenges

The interconnection between TOC and multiple impact dimensions, such as migration control, social cohesion, and economic stability, highlights the need for a comprehensive analysis that enables States to address this threat effectively (Korystin and Svyrydiuk, 2021, pp. 86–91). As previously indicated, criminal networks exploit systemic vulnerabilities in various areas, from migratory flows to cybercrime, underscoring the urgency of establishing coordinated regional strategies (Albanese, 2021, pp. 431–443). However, to develop these responses, it is essential to understand the nature and operational dynamics of TOC in the Western Hemisphere.

The magnitude of TOC in the region transcends traditional illicit activities and includes emerging phenomena. These activities are not independent but rather interconnected within what is known as hybrid threats or destabilizing actions in the grey zone. These elements capture the convergence of illicit activities with advanced technologies and sophisticated criminal structures (Korystin and Svyrydiuk, 2021, pp. 86–91). This diagnosis must focus on identifying the types of illicit activities and the strategies employed by these networks to expand their influence.

The analysis of criminal typologies provides a solid foundation for understanding the diversification of TOC. For instance, drug trafficking, although the most visible and lucrative activity, relies on logistical networks that facilitate arms and human trafficking (Albanese, 2021, pp. 431–443). Likewise, using technologies such as cryptocurrencies and artificial intelligence has enabled these networks to operate in the shadows, evading detection by authorities. Cybercrime is an integral component of these operations and amplifies TOC's capacity to influence political and economic systems (Wigell et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Samora and Lozano-Ramos, 2023, pp. 163–180).

On the other hand, the transnational structure of TOC complicates the ability of states to combat these threats individually. Criminal networks are organized as multinational entities that exploit legal differences, jurisdictional gaps, and corruption to maximize their operations (Silva-García and Pérez-Salazar, 2024, pp. 139–163; Cherniavskyi et al., 2019; Korystin and Svyrydiuk, 2021, pp. 86–91). Additionally, the constant flow of illicit capital strengthens these structures, enabling the bribery of officials, the acquisition of advanced weapons, and the expansion of their areas of influence.

This comprehensive diagnosis seeks to describe the problem and lay the groundwork for proposing solutions that respond to the complexity of TOC. Regional cooperation, the implementation of State policies instead of government policies, and the integration of advanced technologies into security strategies will be key axes in this discussion.

2.1 Characterization of TOC

TOC is not simply a collection of illegal acts, but rather an institution that engenders extensive ontological oppression throughout societies and states. The institutional aspect of TOC is evidenced by its capacity to normalize illegality, quasi-legitimacy, co-opt formal institutional and informal social structures, and establish counter-weight power structures that influence a collective understanding of legitimacy, authority, and security. TOC circulates within both public institutions and social spaces, reproducing a situation that places real material, discursive, and symbolic constraints to limit state capacity to respond and adapt. This type of ontological oppression reconstitutes perceptions and expectations throughout society, dismantling the capacity of state actors or grassroots communities to imagine effective resistance to the effects of organized crime or develop sustainable alternatives to organized crime.

The global agenda on TOC is shaped by a complex interplay of state and non-state actors, each driving and contesting priorities across national and international forums. State actors (governments, security agencies, and intergovernmental organizations) establish legal frameworks, negotiate treaties, and coordinate responses through mechanisms like the OAS or the United Nations, seeking to assert sovereignty and stability. Non-state actors, including criminal enterprises, insurgent groups, NGOs, and multinational corporations, often transcend borders, introducing new threats or solutions and influencing policy through advocacy, lobbying, or illicit collaboration. In regions marked by institutional weakness or contested governance, TOC groups may even substitute state provision of security or resources, seeking legitimacy and power. The interaction between these actors determines the effectiveness of both preventive and reactive measures, as well as the configuration of the regional agenda on issues such as migration, human rights, arms trafficking, and the use of technology in security. Recognizing and rigorously analyzing these diverse influences is essential to understanding, and ultimately countering, the evolving landscape of transnational threats.

The Western Hemisphere stands out, compared to other world regions, in the combination of transnational forces with more localized dynamics. While structured criminal economies typify aspects of Southeast Asia or Eastern European regions, the networks in Latin America are still heavily grounded in community ties and operating in some situations through the mediation of subnational politics. These hybrid arrangements allow TOC groups to simultaneously affect governance, contest authority and mediate exploitation of systemic instability in institutions—viewing regional instability as structural advantage. Identifying this specific hybridity is a necessary means of constructing responses that are fit for the hemispheric reality, and not simply an imitation of factors from regions with stronger governance (Naim, 2013; Grillo, 2016; Bagley, 2004; Bauman and Donskis, 2019; Lagos Flores, 2024).

2.1.1 Typology of TOC activities

The TOC in the Western Hemisphere encompasses a variety of illicit activities that interrelate and reinforce one another, constituting a comprehensive threat to the region. Among the main activities are the following (Albanese, 2021, pp. 431–443; Korystin and Svyrydiuk, 2021, pp. 86–91; Triandafyllidou and Palumbo, 2023, pp. 214–226; Wigell et al., 2021):

- *Drug trafficking:* Drug trafficking is the most lucrative activity for transnational criminal organizations, particularly in Latin America. Regions such as the Andes are the principal producers of cocaine. At the same time, Mexico has established itself as a key node in the production of methamphetamines and trafficking towards the United States. This business generates billions of dollars annually, finances violence in both producing and transit countries, and fosters corruption at all levels of government.
- *Human trafficking:* Criminal networks exploit the vulnerability of migrants, particularly women and girls, for trafficking and human exploitation purposes, including sexual and labor exploitation. According to international reports, more than 70% of trafficking victims are women, highlighting the disproportionate gendered impact of this activity.
- *Smuggling:* The smuggling of goods, including counterfeit products and high-value commodities such as tobacco and alcohol, represents a significant source of income for TOC. This illicit trade evades taxation, undermines local economies, and fosters unfair competition in legitimate markets.
- *Financial crimes:* Money laundering is a cornerstone for the functioning of TOC, allowing illicit revenues to enter the legitimate financial system. Banks, real estate, and cryptocurrencies facilitate these operations, while institutional corruption ensures impunity.

The classifications outlined above show that TOC in the Western Hemisphere functions through overlapping and mutually reinforcing economies of illegality rather than distinct crimes. This multimodal interconnectedness in the region transforms TOC into parallel governance, an authority that could provide social, economic, and coercive functions traditionally allocated to the State. Such hybridization transforms the Weberian notion of a monopoly of violence by shifting the boundaries between legality and illegality. The analytical implications for tasks against TOC are that only operational disruption is not sufficient, a restoration of State legitimacy and social trust at the community level is also required.

2.1.2 Analysis of criminal networks

The TOC have adopted sophisticated and decentralized structures like multinational enterprises. These networks are characterized by their adaptability and transnational focus, enabling them to exploit legal and jurisdictional loopholes to maximize their operations (Albanese, 2021, pp. 431–443; Barros et al., 2022; Farah and Babineau, 2019):

- *Transnationality:* These networks operate beyond borders, using migratory, commercial, and digital routes to move illicit resources. For example, drug trafficking routes connecting South America with the United States and Europe are constantly redesigned to avoid detection. Similarly, human trafficking operations exploit migratory corridors to access exploitation markets.
- *Structure:* Decentralization enables criminal networks to be resilient against blows delivered by security forces. When a leader is arrested or eliminated, the network rapidly redistributes responsibilities, ensuring operational continuity. Furthermore, these organizations frequently form temporary alliances with criminal groups or corrupt legal actors.
- *Modus operandi:* TOC employs bribery, intimidation, and extreme violence to protect its operations. They also use advanced technologies, such as encrypted communication systems and drone border monitoring, to avoid detection. Diversifying their activities allows these networks to minimize risks and maximize profits.

As highlighted, TOC does not solely rely on individual illicit activities but operates as an integral system designed to exploit State vulnerabilities (Du Perron De Revel, 2022). These characteristics underscore the need for equally sophisticated and coordinated responses at the regional level.

The endurance of distributed, modular networks indicates that the resilience of TOC is not only operational but systemic in scope. Their ability to combine logistical flexibility with adaptive violence mechanisms indicates that the transnationalization of crime has become a political actor that orders governance and security in local settings. This means that TOC cannot be regarded only as an economic challenge, but rather, as it is a structural challenge that is reformulating sovereignty and the very architecture of hemispheric security.

The background of TOC is associated with the historical inequalities between economic liberalization and institutional consolidation. The emergence of free markets, lax regulation, and divergent law enforcement jurisdiction have created cross-border corridors in which both illicit and lawful economies coexist. As such, TOC is not only a by-product of underdevelopment, but a by-product of the same forces that enable regional integration and open trade. This paradox is in part, what explains the resilience of criminal networks even during times of economic boom: crime and capital accumulation advance together, erasing the borders between legality and legitimacy in the region (Cancelado Franco and Rodríguez Ardila, 2023; Caparini, 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2012; Peña-Chivatá et al., 2019).

2.2 Hybrid threats, the grey zone and their connection with TOC

The concept of hybrid threats is directly related to hybrid warfare and the grey zone. Hybrid warfare can be defined as a conflict environment that combines conventional and unconventional methods, kinetic and non-kinetic tactics, and disruptive techniques used by state and non-state actors to achieve the strategic objectives (in physical, visual, and psychological spaces) of the actor driving such conflict (Hoffman, 2007; Montero Moncada et al., 2023, 205–235). In other words, according to Kilcullen (2005, pp. 597–617), insurgencies employ complex tactics, ranging from military to non-military, to achieve political, social, economic, and security objectives.

The concept of hybrid threats refers to the convergence of physical, cyber, military, and non-military threats used by state and non-state actors to destabilize a political or economic system (NATO, 2019). Furthermore, these threats are designed through harmful and malicious activities to undermine a target, whether a State or one of its institutions, using combined means (Hybrid CoE, n.d.). According to Splidsboel Hansen (2017), these threats exploit vulnerabilities in the opponent's security systems, demonstrating the opponent's weakness and inability to protect its integrity. These threats combine traditional criminal tactics with advanced technologies and asymmetric strategies, allowing criminal networks to maximize their impact while minimizing exposure to security forces (Silva-García and Pérez-Salazar, 2025, 1–24).

From the perspective of hybrid warfare and the conceptual vision of hybrid threats, we find the concept of the "Grey Zone," which establishes the operational space of TOC in relation to state control. The grey zone is: "[…] a conceptual space between peace and war [where] actors [use] multiple elements of power to achieve political security objectives through ambiguous activities or activities of confusing attribution that surpass the threshold of ordinary competition but remain below the level of direct conflict" (Popp and Canna, 2016, p.2, cited in Morris et al., 2019, p. 8).

In other words, the grey zone is a space where both state operations and irregular (criminal or delinquent) activities by non-state actors occur, situated between peace and war, aiming to modify the status quo below the threshold that would provoke a conventional military response (Morris et al., 2019, p. 8).

The grey zone has a series of characteristics that determine which actions and actors participate within this space, ensuring that these activities do not surpass the threshold of reaction by the targeted actor (Wirtz, 2017, 106–114). According to Morris et al. (2019, p. 8), the characteristics of the grey zone are:

1. *Not surpassing the threshold:* Aggressing actors avoid severe confrontations. Besides preventing a forceful response, this also avoids legal actions, such as international sanctions or declaring open conflict (McCabe, 2025, pp. 1–32).
2. *Activities carried out progressively:* Actions are not isolated but correspond to a constant plan and procedure designed to suffocate the target. This results in the depletion of resources and reactive capacities.
3. *Uncertainty regarding the aggressor:* The targeted actor may infer or suspect the attack's origin but lacks the certainty to respond directly. This characteristic is closely linked to the previous one.
4. *Political and legal justification, including historical claims:* Aggressors may use political discourse to justify criminal or delinquent actions that remain within an acceptable threshold.
5. Vital interests are not threatened: Aggressors avoid attacking vital interests to prevent decisive or forceful responses that could jeopardize their objectives.
6. *Use escalation risk as coercive influence:* Although actions are intended to remain below the threshold, each success increases the deterrent capacity by threatening escalation (Takahashi, 2019).
7. *Avoidance of military tactics:* Aggressors refrain from using overt military means to avoid giving the targeted actor grounds for a military response.
8. *Targeting specific vulnerabilities:* These vulnerabilities are usually internal to the target State, aiming to create a strong deterrence logic, making retaliation costlier than inaction (Meredith and Walton, 2017, pp. 36–50).

It is possible to establish that the main element characterizing the grey zone is the permanent avoidance of triggering a direct military response from the targeted actor. Indeed, this operational space is also recognized in Kilcullen's (2019, pp. 61–71) concept of Liminal Warfare. This concept, aligned with the natural characteristics of hybrid threats (remaining below the thresholds of detection, attribution, and retaliation), is energized across different thresholds that define the threat. The following figure compares Kilcullen's (2019, pp. 61–71) proposal of liminal warfare with Morris et al.'s (2019, p. 8) strategic global response concept to grey zone threats. This comparison shows that these two frameworks are related and that irregular actions that avoid triggering the targeted actor's military response represent the preferred contemporary scenario for state and non-state actors seeking to gain advantage over rivals (see Figure 1 for comparative framework).

The theoretical association between Liminal Warfare and the Grey Zone offers a conceptual lens through which we can understand TOC to operate beneath the threshold of open conflict, while targeting a challenge to sovereign state authority in a strategic manner. As illustrated in Figure 1, Liminal Warfare encapsulates the fluidity and temporality of criminal acts, which use legal and political ambiguity to their advantage, while the Grey Zone depicts the wider systemic environment where such acts may occur.

As shown in Figure 1, both ideas should be thought of as complementary concepts, rather than opposing themes. Liminal Warfare accounts for the tactical element of transnational organized crime within short-lived contexts of uncertainty, and the Grey Zone explains the larger strategic continuum that enables these groups to survive, recalibrate, and normalize their influence within international relations. Together these sets of theoretical constructs serve to enrich the multidimensional heuristic we will introduce as part of this study, as well as provide clarification to the relationship between irregular conflict, state resilience, and transnational criminality.

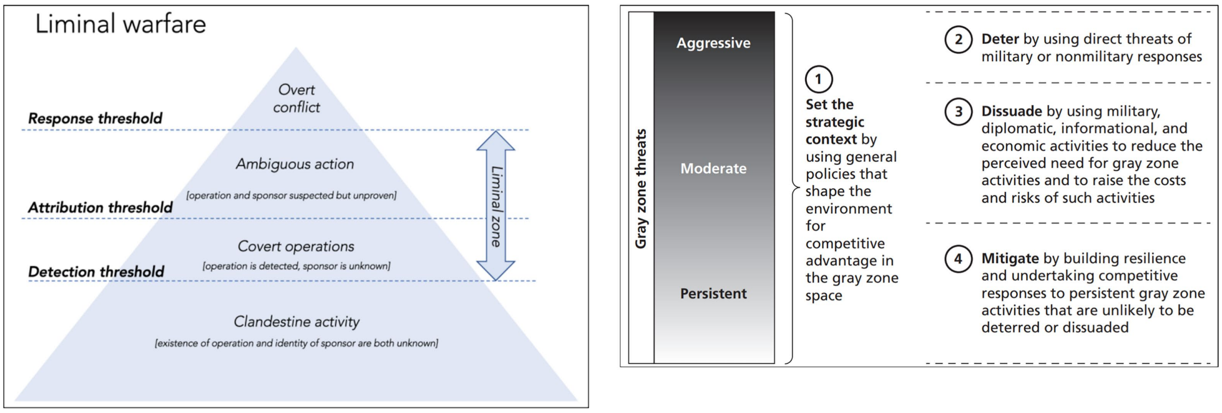

FIGURE 1
Comparison between liminal warfare (Kilcullen, 2019, pp. 61–71) and the overarching strategic concept for responding to grey zone threats (Morris et al., 2019, p. 8). Left: liminal warfare: layers between clandestine and overt action. Right: overarching strategic concept for responding to grey zone threats. Source: Kilcullen (2019, pp. 61–71) and Morris et al. (2019, p. 8).

The incorporation of technological tools has revolutionized TOC operations, enabled greater sophistication and reach in their illicit activities (Anderson, 2013; Jones, 2021; Korystin and Svyrydiuk, 2021, 86–91):

- *Cryptocurrencies and anonymous financial transactions:* Platforms such as Bitcoin and Monero have been adopted by TOC for money laundering and financing illicit activities. The decentralized and difficult-to-trace nature of these digital currencies complicates the work of financial authorities. According to Europol, many transactions linked to illegal activities in the cyber domain involve cryptocurrencies.
- *Artificial Intelligence (AI):* Criminal networks use AI systems to analyses large volumes of data and predict the movements of security forces, optimize trafficking routes, and improve precision in activities such as drug trafficking and smuggling. For example, advanced algorithms are used to identify routes with lower surveillance across border corridors.
- *Cybercrime:* From ransomware to advanced phishing, cyber tools have enabled TOC to access confidential information, extort companies and governments, and attack critical infrastructures such as electricity grids and financial systems. These tactics not only generate revenue but also destabilize State institutions.
- *Drones and technological surveillance:* Drones have been adopted to monitor border movements, transport drugs, and perform surveillance tasks. These devices allow for discreet and efficient operations, reducing the risk of detection.
- The use of hybrid threats by TOC has profound repercussions on the region's migration, economic, and political systems (Conte and Migali, 2019, pp. 393–424; Du Perron De Revel, 2022; Pries, 2019, pp. 27–55):
- *Migration systems:* TOC networks exploit migratory routes for human trafficking and the smuggling of illicit goods. The absence of adequate controls facilitates the movement of resources and exploited labor, reinforcing criminal activities. This also exacerbates humanitarian crises by undermining migrants' rights and weakening State capacities to manage migration flows.
- *Local and regional economies:* Money laundering and corruption derived from TOC distort markets, discourage foreign investment, and perpetuate social inequalities. Furthermore, infiltrating criminal networks into strategic sectors such as illegal mining and counterfeit goods trade undermines the competitiveness and legality of formal economies.
- *Political institutions:* Corruption and intimidation by TOC erode the legitimacy of governments and democratic institutions. The ability of these organizations to infiltrate justice and security systems reduces public trust and hampers the implementation of effective policies.

Thus, the combination of technological tools and hybrid strategies has enabled TOC to consolidate its influence and rapidly adapt to State repression efforts. This underscores the need for a regional and multidimensional approach that addresses the visible manifestations of TOC and the underlying dynamics that sustain it.

The dynamic between hybrid threats and TOC highlights the merging of criminal thinking with political strategy. Operating in the grey zone, criminal organizations work the bounds of awareness and responsiveness, leveraging the legal and diplomatic inertia of States. The analytical lens reframes TOC as involvement in hybrid warfare in the modern context, rather that apart from the rubric of crime, and a symmetric with actors who seek both political and economic outcomes using irregular approaches.

2.3 Assessment of state and regional responses

The fight against TOC in the Western Hemisphere has evolved over time and has led to state and regional responses. However, these strategies face significant challenges due to the complexity and adaptability of these criminal networks (Gnanguênon and Hofmann, 2024, pp. 164–181). A thorough evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches and the inherent limitations of bilateral strategies is essential to identify areas for improvement and build more effective cooperation.

2.3.1 Strengths of current approaches

- *Increased regional cooperation* (Johnson, 2019): In recent years, multilateral organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Pacific Alliance have promoted cooperation agreements in security and justice. These agreements include intelligence sharing, joint training, and implementing policies to combat money laundering and illicit arms trafficking.
- *Advances in technology and surveillance* (Andress and Winterfeld, 2014; Coeckelbergh, 2013, pp. 87–98): Some States have adopted advanced technologies, such as border monitoring systems, data analytics, and artificial intelligence, to enhance their detection and response capabilities. The integration of digital platforms has enabled real-time surveillance and the interception of suspicious activities in critical zones.
- *Alternative development programmed* (Bergman, 2018a; Bergman, 2018b; Canton, 2021, pp. 240–244): In regions affected by drug trafficking, programmed promoted by the United Nations have offered economic alternatives to vulnerable communities, reducing their dependence on illicit activities. These preventive approaches complement enforcement efforts by tackling the structural causes of TOC.

2.3.2 Weaknesses of current approaches

- *Lack of effective coordination* (Bouchard, 2020, 425–469): Although regional agreements exist, coordination among States remains limited due to political, economic, and cultural differences. These discrepancies hinder the implementation of unified and sustainable strategies.
- *Corruption and institutional weakness* (Barone, 2022): The infiltration of TOC into security and justice institutions is a significant obstacle to the effectiveness of state responses. Corruption undermines public trust and limits governments' decisiveness (Silva-García and Pérez-Salazar, 2024, pp. 139–163).
- *Predominance of repressive approaches* [Aguilar Villamariona, 2006, pp. 81–94; Comité Internacional de la Cruz Roja (CICR), 2015; Robbins, 2022]: Many States continue to priorities strategies based on militarization and repression, without addressing the root causes of TOC, such as poverty, inequality, and the lack of economic opportunities. While sometimes necessary, this approach has proven insufficient for generating long-term solutions.

2.3.3 Limitations of bilateral strategies in the face of the problem's transnational dimension

Initiatives, such as the agreements between the United States and Mexico in the fight against drug trafficking, have produced mixed results. While they have succeeded in reducing specific illicit flows, they face intrinsic limitations that reduce their overall impact (Fairlie and Collantes, 2022, pp. 217–237; Gnanguênon and Hofmann, 2024, pp. 164–181; Johnson, 2019):

- *The transnational nature of TOC:* Criminal networks operate simultaneously in multiple countries, making isolated bilateral efforts less effective. The lack of integration with other affected States weakens the ability of these initiatives to dismantle criminal structures.
- *Impact of political changes:* Bilateral strategies often depend on the stability and continuity of intergovernmental relations. Changes in administration can disrupt previously established agreements, weaken cooperation, and allow TOC to exploit political gaps.
- *Fragmented focus on specific objectives:* Many bilateral strategies tend to concentrate on specific activities, such as drug trafficking, without addressing the interconnections with other illicit activities, such as money laundering or arms trafficking. This limits their capacity to address the systemic nature of TOC.

In other words, although state and regional responses have made important advances, significant challenges remain that require a restructuring of current strategies. Multilateral cooperation, strengthening institutional capacities, and a comprehensive approach that combines enforcement and prevention measures are essential elements for effectively confronting TOC in the Western Hemisphere (Jiménez-Reina et al., 2023, 635–666).

The political dynamics within the Western Hemisphere have significant implications for both regional security and the ability to respond to TOC. The current crisis in Venezuela has initiated substantial movement of people that has taxed neighboring states and introduced vulnerabilities that criminal organizations take advantage of. Within CARICOM, divergent interests and external pressures from actors such as the United States and Venezuela make it difficult for the bloc to achieve unity, therefore undermining collective efforts to develop security strategies. The Organization of American States has been effective in providing normative frameworks for cooperation, e.g., the Inter-American Democratic Charter, but these efforts are constrained by political fragmentation and limited resources. These examples illustrate the need for more independent, resilient regional structures capable of withstanding political change and locking in long-term stability. Real progress on security ultimately does not rely solely on formal agreements or technical capacity, but very much on the political will and continuity of the institutions and member states of these regional organizations.

The ongoing debate between regional and transnational approaches to tackling TOC must be situated within the broader global geopolitical stream. While regional mechanisms such as the OAS, CARICOM, and the Pacific Alliance provide critical frameworks for collaborative action, their effectiveness is frequently shaped by global shifts, the policies of external powers, and the adaptive strategies of transnational criminal networks. Integrating regional efforts within the context of global bodies, including UNODC and INTERPOL, is essential for harmonized legal standards, strategic intelligence sharing, and resilient security architectures. This geopolitical perspective underscores that neither regional nor transnational strategies alone can adequately counter the multifaceted threats posed by TOC—only multidimensional, globally embedded approaches can secure long-term stability in the Western Hemisphere.

3 Multidimensional impact of TOC in the Western Hemisphere

3.1 Political consequences of TOC

TOC exerts considerable pressure on democratic institutions and governance in the Western Hemisphere. Through activities such as corruption, bribery, and infiltration into public institutions, these criminal organizations weaken the rule of law, undermining the legitimacy of governments and state structures (Barone, 2022; Solar, 2022). Public officials, from local police officers to high-ranking government officials, often become targets for co-optation, resulting in the manipulation of public policies and the protection of illicit activities.

One of the most visible impacts is the institutional paralysis generated by TOC, which makes it challenging to implement effective policies on security, justice, and social development (Cano Cuevas, 2024, pp. 41–68; Ávila Hernández et al., 2023, 193–221; Cubides Cárdenas and Cita Triana, 2014, pp. 5–15). In several Latin American countries, this dynamic has contributed to public distrust in their governments, fostering political disaffection and social polarization (Marchena Ticlio and Cárdenas García, 2023, pp. 277–285). Moreover, elections and other democratic processes are vulnerable to interference from these organizations, whether through campaign financing or voter and candidate intimidation.

The result is a vicious cycle in which weakened institutions offer less resistance to the advance of TOC, amplifying political destabilization and the loss of governability (Barros et al., 2022; Bergman, 2018b). This phenomenon affects the most vulnerable countries and puts the entire region's stability at risk, highlighting the need for coordinated and sustained action to reinforce democracy and institutional resilience against this threat.

The economic impact of TOC in the Western Hemisphere is profound and multifaceted. TOC activities, such as money laundering, smuggling, and extortion, generate significant costs affecting local and national economies (Alesina et al., 2019, pp. 457–499; Bergman, 2018b). According to recent estimates, money laundering associated with TOC represents a considerable percentage of GDP in several Latin American countries, diverting resources that could be used for economic and social development (Barone, 2022; Beare, 2003).

One of the main economic effects of TOC is the loss of competitiveness in key sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism. For example, the presence of criminal networks in rural areas hinders foreign direct investment, while the violence associated with these activities discourages tourism in affected areas (Slutzky and Zeume, 2024, pp. 6569–6,596). Additionally, smuggling and illegal trade create parallel markets that erode the tax base of governments, limiting their ability to fund essential public services.

TOC also generates a cascading effect in terms of security costs for both businesses and governments. Companies must increasingly invest in protection, cybersecurity, and compliance to avoid becoming targets of these networks (Slutzky and Zeume, 2024, pp. 6569–6,596). For their part, States face higher costs in law enforcement, justice systems, and prevention programmed, often at the expense of other priority areas such as education and healthcare (Cano Cuevas, 2024, pp. 41–68; Ávila Hernández et al., 2023, 193–221; Cubides Cárdenas and Cita Triana, 2014, pp. 5–15).

In terms of sustainable development, TOC perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty and inequality. Communities affected by these activities often become trapped in informal economies, limiting formal employment opportunities and exacerbating social gaps. This economic impact undermines the internal stability of countries and affects regional integration and cooperation, highlighting the urgency of combating TOC to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth (Slutzky and Zeume, 2024, pp. 6569–6,596).

One of TOC's most complicated set of political consequences involves recreation of anticipation dynamics in both institutions and communities on the ground. Institutions, too often vulnerable to coercive or infiltrative actions, adapt to these ongoing dynamics by creating a range of preventive actions (such as policies), reconfiguring protocols, or establishing new information exchanges and protection networks. At the same time, communities suffering from chronic violence and uncertainty engage in anticipatory practices at various levels (self-defense and migration—either individually or collectively—as well as informal governance arrangements) to protect against risk. These anticipatory practices—founded on ontological states of oppression and suffering—are implicated in more than simply reaction; they actively engage in forming local governance, decision-making, and trust in institutions, even when these cycles of adaptation lead to adaptive states and behaviors that criminal enterprises take advantage of. A more delicate reflection on these processes is essential for the purpose of re-imagining and designing policies to go beyond simple containment. Rather, the goal of policies would be to empower institutions and the affected communities, as full partners in actively resisting TOC, not just awaiting and/or responding based on prediction.

The social impact of TOC in the Western Hemisphere is devastating and multifaceted. One of the most notable consequences is the increase in insecurity in vulnerable communities, where the presence of criminal networks translates into high rates of violence, extortion, and homicide. In countries like Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico, TOC activities have turned entire regions into conflict zones, forcing thousands of people to leave their homes in search of safety (Silva-García et al., 2025, 393–418; Bueno, 2022, pp. 12–27; Makarenko, 2021, pp. 253–269).

The violence generated by TOC not only physically affects communities but also deteriorates the social fabric. The fear and coercion exerted by these organizations foster a culture of silence, where victims are afraid to report crimes due to the risk of retaliation (Bergman, 2018a). This weakens judicial systems and perpetuates a cycle of impunity, further aggravating the social crisis (Cano Cuevas, 2024, pp. 41–68; Ávila Hernández et al., 2023, 193–221; Cubides Cárdenas and Cita Triana, 2014, pp. 5–15).

Another crucial aspect of the social impact of TOC is the loss of trust in public institutions. Corruption, facilitated by these criminal networks, undermines the credibility of governments, law enforcement, and judicial systems. The perception that authorities are either incapable or colluding with TOC demoralizes citizens and weakens state legitimacy (Cano Cuevas, 2024, pp. 41–68; Ávila Hernández et al., 2023, 193–221; Cubides Cárdenas and Cita Triana, 2014, pp. 5–15). In many cases, affected communities turn to extrajudicial solutions, such as self-defense groups, creating parallel justice systems and perpetuating social fragmentation (Alvarado, 2020, 67–107).

TOC also exacerbates social inequalities by exploiting the most vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and migrants. Human trafficking and the forced recruitment of minors for illicit activities are examples of how these organizations perpetuate cycles of exploitation and marginalization (Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el Delito (UNODC), n.d.; Triandafyllidou and Palumbo, 2023, pp. 214–226). These dynamics affect the direct victims, erode community values, and obstruct long-term social development.

In the face of these challenges, it is essential that public policies address the social roots of the problem, such as poverty, lack of opportunities, and social exclusion. Only through a comprehensive approach that combines security measures with social development strategies will it be possible to mitigate the social effects of TOC and restore cohesion and trust in the affected communities.

In the future, changes in the Western Hemisphere due to the hurried pace of digitalization in economies and the militarization of borders will reshape the dynamics of TOC. Artificial intelligence, cryptocurrencies, and autonomous surveillance systems will likely enhance both State power and criminal ingenuity, escalating the contest for control over data, capital, and population mobility. Anticipating these changes will be central to designing adaptive regional strategies that move beyond repression to resilience, integrity of institutions, and cooperative intelligence. Only through this mode of anticipatory governance can States avert a future where either TOC defines the limits of security and sovereignty (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (BID), 2024; Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el Delito (UNODC), 2023).

4 Regional cooperation in security and defense: progress and challenges

4.1 Current tools of cooperation

Addressing TOC in the Western Hemisphere invariably finds itself at odds with a central conflict between sovereignty—for other nation-states—versus effectiveness. Effectiveness relies upon strong regional mechanisms that require information-sharing and political commitment, which can be complicated, if not impossible, within domestic agendas or national pride. For some States, accepting outside coordination is tantamount to admitting failure internally, and therefore exposing security vulnerabilities. Steps taken to unravel these tensions may clarify why while cooperation frameworks are initiated through formal institutions like the OAS and CARICOM, such cooperation often gets stalled or stuck at the political negotiate stage rather than the operational implementation stage (Carta Democrática Interamericana, n.d.; Gnanguênon and Hofmann, 2024; Cuervo Ceballos, 2018).

Regional cooperation in the Western Hemisphere to combat TOC has been strengthened through multilateral agreements and bilateral efforts. Organizations such as the OAS, CARICOM, and the Pacific Alliance have been key in promoting collective security and implementing shared strategies (Johnson, 2019). However, these mechanisms face significant reach, funding, and sustainability challenges.

The OAS, through its Inter-American Democratic Charter, has established a normative framework that allows member States to address threats to regional stability, including those related to TOC (Carta Democrática Interamericana, n.d.; Gnanguênon and Hofmann, 2024, pp. 164–181; Johnson, 2019). Through the Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism (CICTE) and the Inter-American Commission for the Control of Drug Abuse (CICAD), the OAS fosters technical cooperation, intelligence sharing, and the strengthening of national capacities (Woloszyn, 2016, pp. 149–164). In the case of CARICOM, the Regional Security System (RSS) has been a key vehicle for executing joint operations against drug and arms trafficking, as well as supporting crisis management, such as natural disasters or humanitarian emergencies (Gnanguênon and Hofmann, 2024, pp. 164–181). Although its resources are limited, the RSS represents a successful cooperation model in small island economies.

The Pacific Alliance, composed of Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Chile, has promoted economic integration as an indirect strategy to mitigate the impact of TOC (Fairlie and Collantes, 2022, pp. 217–237). By fostering commercial transparency and creating joint regulatory mechanisms, the Alliance has aimed to close the gaps exploited by criminal networks. However, the lack of an explicit security focus limits its direct impact on the fight against TOC (Woloszyn, 2016, pp. 149–164).

In bilateral terms, notable cooperation exists between the United States and Mexico through the Mérida Initiative, which has channeled financial and technological resources to combat drug trafficking and strengthen judicial and police institutions in Mexico (Gnanguênon and Hofmann, 2024, pp. 164–181; Johnson, 2019). This initiative has led to the capture of key criminal leaders and the seizure of large drug shipments. Additionally, Colombia and Peru have led joint efforts to eradicate illicit crops, dismantle drug trafficking networks, and share strategic information in real time (Woloszyn, 2016, pp. 149–164).

Despite these advances, the scope of both multilateral and bilateral agreements is limited by factors such as the lack of continuity in national policies, dependence on external financing, and political tensions between countries (Johnson, 2019). Overcoming these challenges will require greater institutionalization of agreements and an integrated approach combining security, economic development, and institutional strengthening.

4.2 Collective intelligence as a key tool

The exchange of intelligence has become one of the most effective strategies for confronting TOC in the Western Hemisphere. Through mechanisms such as the Inter-American Police Information System (SIPOL) and the Americas Drug Information Network (RIDA), countries in the region have improved their ability to track illicit financial flows, identify trafficking routes, and coordinate actions to dismantle criminal networks (Johnson, 2019). These platforms enable real-time data exchange and provide joint training for security forces to address emerging threats.

However, the implementation of regional intelligence systems faces significant obstacles. Differences in technological levels and infrastructure between countries in the region create vulnerabilities that criminal organizations can exploit (Manwaring et al., 2022). Moreover, distrust among States, fueled by political tensions and historical conflicts, hinders the flow of sensitive information and reduces the effectiveness of joint efforts. In some cases, the lack of harmonization in national legal frameworks has limited security forces' capacity to act in a coordinated manner.

To overcome these challenges, investing in advanced technology allows for more effective monitoring of TOC activities is essential. Additionally, creating standardized protocols to protect shared data and ensure confidentiality could help strengthen trust between nations. The ongoing training of intelligence agents and the active participation of international organizations such as INTERPOL and OAS are also crucial to maximizing the impact of collective intelligence in the region (Johnson, 2019).

Thus, strengthening regional cooperation requires practical tools and systems and a shared commitment to establish long-term policies that ensure stability and effectiveness in confronting TOC (Gnanguênon and Hofmann, 2024, pp. 164–181; Johnson, 2019).

These policies must be inclusive, ensuring all involved nations have a voice in formulating strategies that reflect the region's needs and priorities.

4.3 The relationship between migration control and TOC

Migration control is critical in preventing the instrumentalization of migratory flows by TOC networks. These organizations exploit unregulated migration routes and the vulnerabilities of migrants to strengthen their illicit activities, including human trafficking, sexual and labor exploitation, and the transport of drugs and weapons (Latham-Sprinkle, 2019; Triandafyllidou and Palumbo, 2023, pp. 214–226). For example, in various migration routes from Central and South America to the United States, criminal groups impose tolls, extort migrants, and force them to participate in criminal activities, creating a cycle of economic and social exploitation.

A particularly revealing case is the exploitation of migratory corridors such as the Darien Gap on the border between Colombia and Panama. This region has been used as a key route by criminal organizations for smuggling drugs and humans, taking advantage of the absence of effective state control (Álvarez et al., 2022; Hanson et al., 2023, pp. 199–222). Moreover, criminal organizations such as the Mexican cartels have consolidated their influence over northern routes, charging migrants fees and expanding their human trafficking networks.

To prevent the instrumentalization of migratory flows, States must implement comprehensive strategies that combine border security with policies that protect the human rights of migrants (Coral Díaz and de Luna Aliaga, 2022, pp. 145–165; Du Perron De Revel, 2022). Among the most effective measures are strengthening border identification and monitoring systems, using technologies such as biometric databases and artificial intelligence systems to track suspicious patterns. Additionally, regional cooperation is essential. Multilateral agreements that promote intelligence sharing and the development of joint operations can limit the capacity of criminal networks to operate across multiple jurisdictions.

Finally, it is crucial to address the structural causes of migration, such as poverty and violence, through sustainable development programmed in the communities of origin. In this way, the dependence of migrants on informal or illegal networks is reduced, while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion and security in the region.

4.4 Benefits of migration control for the region

An effective migration control system brings significant benefits in terms of security and social cohesion in the Western Hemisphere. By regulating migratory flows and combating the exploitation of routes by criminal networks, the risks of human trafficking, drug smuggling, and arms trafficking are reduced, thereby strengthening social stability and trust in government institutions (Olmedo Anguita, 2019, pp. 175–197).

From a security perspective, migration control facilitates the detection and prevention of illicit activities (Cano Cuevas, 2024, pp. 41–68; Ávila Hernández et al., 2023, 193–221; Cubides Cárdenas and Cita Triana, 2014, pp. 5–15). For instance, programmed like the Second Migration Governance Profile in Costa Rica have improved border monitoring through integrated databases and biometric technology, enabling better identification of individuals linked to criminal networks (Feldmann et al., 2019; Portal de Datos sobre Migración, n.d.). These tools not only prevent crimes but also strengthen States' capacity to manage migration flows in an orderly manner.

In terms of social cohesion, effective migration control protects migrants from exploitation and promotes their integration into their host communities (Cano Cuevas, 2024, pp. 41–68; Ávila Hernández et al., 2023, 193–221; Cubides Cárdenas and Cita Triana, 2014, pp. 5–15). Programmed such as the Southern Border Programmed in Mexico have aimed to balance security with the protection of migrants' human rights, providing humanitarian assistance while reinforcing border controls (Feldmann et al., 2019; Secretaría de Gobierno de México, n.d.).

Moreover, regional cooperation in migration, as promoted by the Regional Conference on Migration (CRM), has facilitated the exchange of best practices among countries in the hemisphere, strengthening a collective approach to shared challenges (Regional Conference on Migration, n.d.; Feldmann et al., 2019). These initiatives have shown that well-designed migration control policies not only improve security but also contribute to greater social cohesion, fostering an environment in which both migrants and local citizens can thrive (Cano Cuevas, 2024, pp. 41–68; Ávila Hernández et al., 2023, 193–221; Cubides Cárdenas and Cita Triana, 2014, pp. 5–15).

4.5 Consequences of the absence of migration control

The lack of migration control in the Western Hemisphere creates a favorable environment for the growth of TOC and seriously affects social cohesion and government institutions. Without solid monitoring and regulatory systems, criminal networks exploit migratory routes to expand their illicit operations, such as human trafficking, drug smuggling, and arms trafficking (Conte and Migali, 2019, pp. 393–424).

The increase in criminal activities under these circumstances directly affects social cohesion. Local communities face rising insecurity and growing distrust towards authorities as TOC networks infiltrate and operate freely in vulnerable areas (Latham-Sprinkle, 2019). Additionally, migrants, in the absence of protective regulations, become easy targets for exploitation, facing inhumane conditions, violence, and extortion from these organizations.

In institutional terms, the absence of migration control significantly weakens the ability of States to ensure security and justice. Corruption, fueled by the lack of effective monitoring, undermines the legitimacy of public institutions, such as judicial systems and law enforcement, creating a vicious circle that reinforces the influence of TOC (Conte and Migali, 2019, pp. 393–424; Triandafyllidou and Palumbo, 2023, pp. 214–226; Yousaf, 2018, 209–225). An example of this is the use of unregulated border routes in Central America, where the lack of surveillance facilitates the entry of illicit resources that finance criminal activities (Álvarez et al., 2022; Hanson et al., 2023, pp. 199–222).

Therefore, the absence of migration control amplifies security challenges, deepens social fractures, and weakens state structures, highlighting the urgent need to implement robust migration policies to mitigate these negative impacts.

5 Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) in the Western Hemisphere represents neither a collection of separate criminal pursuits nor a result of weak institutions. Rather, it is a sameness, hybrid, and multidimensional occurrence, conducting governance, security, and legitimacy across the region. Utilizing a qualitative framework situated on a multidimensional security model, the study shows that TOC operates as a complex system, weaving together illegal markets, migration flows, and technological innovation into competing networks with the legitimate authority of the State (Woodiwiss, 2024; Viano, 2018; Silva-García and Pérez-Salazar, 2024).

In its analysis, the article expands the theoretical discussion by contributing to our understanding of the concept of TOC beyond a strictly criminological perspective. It considers TOC in the context of hybrid warfare and grey zone strategies to illustrate how criminal networks take advantage of organizational vacuums and asymmetric power relations in the gray area between legal and illegal frameworks. This rethinking of TOC emphasizes not just the political character of TOC but also encourages us to rethink the literatures around the boundaries between crime, conflict, and governance within contemporary security studies (Kilcullen, 2019; Buzan and Waever, 2003).

The research indicates that individual or bilateral State responses are still insufficient, since TOC disaggregates enforcement efforts through regional integration of its own operations. In contrast, a coordinated regional cooperation approach, which draws off common understandings of intelligence systems, aligned legal frameworks, and sustained political buy-in, offers the best way to mitigate the adaptability of TOC and its transnational characteristics. This approach would include problem anticipation: enhancing early-warning systems of action, enhancing legitimacy for institutions, and enhancing human security rather than relying on militarized responses (Johnson, 2019; Gnanguênon and Hofmann, 2024).

In conclusion, this research offers both a conceptual and practical contribution. Conceptually, it reframes TOC as an evolving security architecture that questions the Westphalian orthodoxy of sovereignty. Practically, it advocates the design of pragmatic cooperation mechanisms that find a common balance between sovereignty and shared responsibility. In this way, the Western Hemisphere can build a collective security ecosystem capable of responding to the hybrid and transnational nature of organized crime.

Future research should explore the influence of new technologies, public–private partnerships, and community-based resilience strategies on the changing security architecture of the Western Hemisphere. The lessons from the Western Hemisphere could contribute to broader, global debates of transnational governance, hybrid threats, and rethinking sovereignty in the 21st century.

Author contributions

JC-C: Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Resources, Project administration. CH-A: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. JJ-R: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. AR-B: Resources, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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