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Crooks and Spooks: Organized Crime as a Covert Instrument of Statecraft

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# MAIS Master Thesis:

*Crooks and Spooks: Organized Crime as a Covert Instrument of Statecraft*

**Supervisor:** Priv.Doz. Robert Schuett, Ph.D.

On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I, Vladimir Petchkovsky, submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.

Vladimir Petchkovsky

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# Abstract (English):

This thesis explores the concept of *geocriminality*, defined as the state-led instrumentalization of organized crime in pursuit of foreign policy objectives. Drawing on historical tracing, comparative case study analysis and international relations theory, the thesis investigates why *geocriminality* is increasingly becoming a threat to international security and whether international cooperation can effectively mitigate its risks. The study situates *geocriminality* within a structural realist framework and argues that states may turn to criminal actors as instruments of influence when conventional means of exerting influence are limited or constrained. Historical analysis traces the evolution of state-crime collaboration from early modern piracy to twentieth-century intelligence operations and contemporary forms of *geocriminality*. Comparative case studies of Russia, China and Iran illustrate how geocriminal practices have adapted to the geopolitical realities of the twenty-first century. The study briefly evaluates the adequacy of existing international legal and institutional frameworks in addressing state-sponsored criminality and argues that existing mechanisms are poorly equipped to confront the phenomenon. Finally, it contends that *geocriminality* creates shared long-term vulnerabilities, which offer incentives for pragmatic interest-based international cooperation and collective efforts to contain the observed proliferation of such practices.

# Abstract (Deutsch):

Diese Masterarbeit erforscht das Konzept der *Geokriminalität*, definiert als staatliche Instrumentalisierung organisierten Verbrechens zur Erreichung außenpolitischer Ziele. Basierend auf historischer Analyse, komparativen Fallstudien und Theorien der Internationalen Beziehungen [international relations theories] untersucht diese Arbeit, weshalb *Geokriminalität* zunehmend eine Bedrohung für die internationale Sicherheit darstellt und ob die entstehenden Risiken durch internationale Kooperation gemindert werden können. Diese Arbeit platziert *Geokriminalität* im Rahmen der Theorie des strukturellen Realismus und argumentiert, dass Staaten sich unter Umständen an kriminelle Akteure wenden, wenn konventionelle Mittel zur Ausübung geopolitischen Einflusses beschränkt oder unzureichend sind. Die historische Analyse rekonstruiert die Entwicklung der Kooperation zwischen staatlichen und kriminellen Akteuren, beginnend mit frühmoderner Piraterie über nachrichtendienstliche Operationen des 21. Jahrhunderts bis hin zu zeitgenössischen Formen der *Geokriminalität*. Russland, China und der Iran werden als vergleichende Fallstudien herangezogen, um darzustellen, wie geokriminelle Praktiken sich den Realitäten des 21. Jahrhunderts angepasst haben. Diese Arbeit evaluiert ebenfalls kurz die Angemessenheit internationaler rechtlicher sowie institutioneller Ordnungsrahmen zur Bekämpfung staatlich unterstützter Kriminalität und argumentiert, dass die derzeit existierenden Mechanismen zur Beseitigung des Phänomens als unzureichend betrachtet werden müssen. Abschließend argumentiert diese Arbeit, dass *Geokriminalität* langfristige gemeinsame Schwachstellen generiert, die Anreize für pragmatische, interessenbasierte internationale Kooperation sowie kollektive Anstrengungen zur Vermeidung der Proliferation geokrimineller Aktivitäten bieten.

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*Crooks and Spooks: Organized Crime as a Covert Instrument of Statecraft*

# 1. Introduction:

On January 3, 2026, US armed forces conducted a military operation against Venezuela that resulted in the capture of president Nicolás Maduro and his transfer to the United States to face criminal charges. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio explicitly framed the action as a "law enforcement operation," while the US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York formally indicted Maduro on drug trafficking and narco-terrorism charges (Fortinsky, 2026; Davis, 2026). This case, along with the 1989 US invasion of Panama, serves as a rare example of interstate military intervention justified in part by alleged direct links between a government and organized crime. Narco-terrorism connects the criminal enterprise of drug trafficking with terrorism as a form of politically motivated violence. However, this specific pairing represents only one manifestation of broader linkages between crime and politics. International security and organized crime analysts are becoming increasingly aware of a wider and increasingly worrying trend of states intensifying cooperation with organized crime groups to achieve foreign policy objectives. Researchers at the Vienna-based Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) recently coined the term *geocriminality* to describe such "state-led instrumentalization of organized crime and criminal actors abroad to achieve foreign and domestic policy priorities" (Thorley, 2025).

This study explores the origins and contemporary development of *geocriminality* in the context of international relations, with the aim of answering the following related research questions:

***Why does geocriminality increasingly threaten international security? Why and how can international cooperation effectively mitigate this threat?***

This thesis conceptually reinforces and operationalizes *geocriminality* as a distinct phenomenon in international politics. It traces the history of state-crime cooperation and analyses contemporary trends in this sphere to situate *geocriminality* within patterns of state-actor behavior under varied structural constraints. *Geocriminality* is positioned within the framework of structural realist international relations theory as a rational response to systemic anarchy, capability distribution and persistence of interstate competition. By grounding the analysis in realist assumptions about state interests, this study seeks to explain the persistence of the phenomenon and the limitations of existing international responses to it. It assesses the extent to which prevailing international legal and institutional frameworks remain ill-equipped to address geocriminal practices. Existing international mechanisms designed to combat organized crime and transnational illicit networks are primarily structured around non-state criminality and struggle to address cases of state sponsorship, direction, or protection of criminal actors.

At the same time, this thesis argues that realist logic also provides grounds for cooperation against it. While states may employ geocriminal practices for short-term strategic gain, such practices generate systemic risks that no state can fully contain unilaterally. As with counter-piracy, states may find it in their rational self-interest to support cooperative arrangements that mutually constrain destabilizing practices without necessarily relinquishing broader strategic competition. This study suggests, perhaps counter-intuitively, that *geocriminality* should be understood not only as a symptom of a fragmenting international order, but also as a potential catalyst for pragmatic, interest-based interstate cooperation and international legal reform.

## 2. Definitions and Scope:

As *geocriminality* remains an emerging concept in international security scholarship, conceptual clarification is required before proceeding to theoretical and empirical analyses. This study operationalizes the definition advanced by GI-TOC analysts, which describes *geocriminality* as the "*state-led instrumentalization of organized crime and criminal actors abroad to achieve foreign and domestic policy priorities*" (Thorley, 2025). While this formulation provides a useful anchor, the concept requires further operational refinement to delimit its analytical scope and distinguish it from adjacent phenomena.

First, *geocriminality* is distinguished from broader variations of state-crime links. There are various forms of interaction between political authority and criminal actors, including corruption, collusion, money laundering and criminal state capture. While *geocriminality* certainly constitutes one form of state-crime relationship, not all such relationships fall within the scope of the above definition. *Geocriminality* is narrower, implying purposeful strategic instrumentalization of criminality by a state rather than passive corruption or presence of embedded criminal actors within state institutions. The key distinction is between organized crime being directed by states to achieve political goals and criminal actors embedding themselves within states to extract profit.

Second, *geocriminality* is distinct from the concept of a mafia-state. Naim (2012) notes that in a mafia-state, government officials act as integral players in criminal enterprises, and the promotion of their interests become official priorities (p. 1). A mafia-state is a state that is effectively captured by criminal actors and subjugated to their interests. *Geocriminality*, on the other hand, presumes primacy of state agency, where the state is not merely compromised by criminal actors, but actively employs them as instruments of policy. While mafia-states may engage in *geocriminality*, instrumentalization of criminal actors by a state does not imply or require its capture by them.

Third, *geocriminality* overlaps with but remains distinct from hybrid warfare or gray-zone

conflict. Hybrid threats "combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces" (NATO, 2026). Hybrid warfare is a broad overarching term that includes a wide range of activities that may or may not include instrumentalization of criminal actors. *Geocriminality* therefore constitutes an instrument of hybrid warfare when employed within broader hybrid strategies, but it can also occur independently of them. Distinguishing *geocriminality* from hybrid warfare helps prevent conceptual overstretch and allows for a more focused analysis of the unique logic, purpose and security implications associated with state-led collaboration with criminal actors.

Fourth, the criminal actors themselves must be defined as well. The UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (2004) defines an organized criminal group (OCG) as "*a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offenses […] in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit*" (p. 5). It further delineates the nature of transnational crime, specifying it as offenses committed in more than one state or committed in one state with substantial planning or effects in another state (p. 6). These definitions provide a useful baseline for conceptualizing the types of actors relevant to *geocriminality*. For the purposes of this thesis, organized crime, criminal actors and illicit networks are understood as non-state entities engaged in sustained illegal activity for profit, possessing sufficient organizational capacity, operational autonomy and durability, to function as strategic intermediaries for states. Such actors may include trafficking syndicates, smuggling organizations, money-laundering networks, cybercriminal enterprises, mafia-type groups, and other illicit organizations capable of operating across borders or within transnational illicit markets. Terrorist organizations, insurgents, ideologically motivated groups and paramilitary proxies are excluded unless they simultaneously function as organized criminal enterprises and are instrumentalized in that criminal capacity.

Fifth, *geocriminality* is understood as an institutionalized form of covert state activity, that lies within the scope of responsibility of specialized intelligence and security organizations rather than overt and public-facing branches of government. While the concept refers broadly to "state-led" instrumentalization, in practice such activities are rarely handled through diplomatic or military channels. This reflects both the political sensitivity and legal ambiguity inherent in interactions with criminal actors. The reliance on intelligence agencies situates *geocriminality* within the broader framework of intelligence activity and covert action as methods of statecraft. Intelligence and security agencies often operate under distinct legal authorities, limited oversight mechanisms and cultures of secrecy that allow for greater operational latitude compared to

conventional state institutions. This helps explain how *geocriminality* can potentially persist even in highly developed and legally constrained states.

Finally, to further narrow down the study's research goals, it will exclude domestic instrumentalization of organized crime from its scope. Evidence of domestic crime-state interactions is harder to trace and verify. Furthermore, this thesis is specifically focused on international relations theory and international security issues. Domestic instrumentalization of organized crime is important and will be examined when it also has a foreign policy dimension but will not be included as a specific focus.

In sum, these definitions and conceptual distinctions serve to narrow the scope of this study to *geocriminality* as a distinct phenomenon in international politics, situated at the intersection of state power, organized crime and geopolitical competition. For the purposes of this thesis, *geocriminality* refers specifically to the *intentional strategic instrumentalization and facilitation of organized criminal activities by states and their security services to advance foreign policy objectives,* while excluding broader forms of criminalized governance, corruption and non-criminal proxy warfare. By clearly distinguishing *geocriminality* from adjacent phenomena, this study treats it as a delineated concept suitable for rigorous analysis within international relations scholarship. These scope conditions guide subsequent case selection and ensure that historical and contemporary examples examined in this thesis satisfy consistent analytical criteria.

## 3. Literature Review:

Scholarship relevant to this thesis spans several overlapping bodies of work: historical studies of crime and security services, contemporary research on transnational organized crime, security studies on hybrid warfare, and international relations theory. Collectively they show that states and criminal actors have long interacted in politically consequential ways, but the literature remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries. As a result, and despite historical precedents, *geocriminality* remains a relatively novel concept that is only beginning to be theorized as a distinct phenomenon with systemic implications for international security.

Historical scholarship strongly suggests that collaboration between political authority and illicit actors is a recurring feature of statecraft. Tilly's (1985) account of *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime* places state violence, protection rackets, banditry and warfare on a common continuum of coercive organization that challenges rigid distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate coercion in the historical development of state power. Hanna's (2015) *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740* and McCarthy's (2013) *Privateering, Piracy and British Policy in Spanish America 1810-1830* reinforce such historical framing as they examine emergence of privateering in the early modern period. Studies of pirates, privateers and

corsairs show that they occupied legally ambiguous spaces in which states selectively authorized or criminalized organized predatory violence according to their strategic needs. Cattelan (2023) and Kempe (2021) also provide concise accounts of maritime history that show how cooperative relationships between state and crime were intertwined with the process of imperial rivalry, state formation and development of international legal regimes.

Histories of intelligence services serve as a chronological bridge into the development of state-crime cooperation in the modern era. Andrew's (2018) *The Secret World: A History of Intelligence* and Walton's (2023) *Spies: The Epic Intelligence War Between East and West* provide valuable scholarship on the development of modern state security institutions, their practices and the role they played in the rivalry states during the twentieth century. Such works reveal patterns of intelligence organizations collaborating with criminal intermediaries for the purposes of operational convenience, deniability and strategic gain. Histories of covert warfare and drug trafficking such as McCoy's (2003) *Politics of Heroin*, Webb's (1998) *Dark Alliance* and Weiner's (2007) *Legacy of Ashes* argue that US intelligence agencies repeatedly tolerated, protected or empowered illicit networks when it served Washington's wider strategic objectives during the Cold War. Similarly, Andrew and Mitrokhin's (1999) *The Sword and the Shield* shines light on how Soviet and Russian intelligence services instrumentalized criminal actors, bribery, blackmail and compromised officials to achieve domestic and foreign policy goals. While these works provide extensive empirical evidence of state-crime collaboration, they typically treat such relationships as operation-specific practices, institutional overreach or region-specific anomalies, rather than theorizing them as a broader structural phenomenon of international politics. This limitation makes emerging literature on contemporary *geocriminality* increasingly relevant.

Current security studies and organized crime research suggest that state-crime relationships have evolved beyond episodic and exceptional collaboration into increasingly systematic and embedded practices. Works on hybrid warfare and gray-zone conflicts highlight the expanding state-led use of non-military instruments for coercion in the international arena. In his *Weaponisation of Everything*, Galeotti (2022) argues that contemporary interstate competition increasingly relies on non-kinetic tools, including finance, law, information, migration and organized crime, to achieve coercive effects while avoiding overt military escalation. Within this framework, criminal actors can function as deniable instruments capable of facilitating sanctions evasion, illicit finance, intimidation, sabotage and political violence. The most direct attempt to conceptualize and investigate current trends of *geocriminality's* development is presented in the works of Thorley (2024; 2025; 2026), Galeotti (2018; 2024) and other analysts at GI-TOC. Their analyses suggest that strategic use of criminal actors by states has expanded in scale, depth, and strategic importance to such a degree that it warrants treatment as a distinct category of analysis

rather than a subset of clandestine operations or hybrid warfare.

Although foundational, contemporary research on *geocriminality* remains at an early conceptual stage and has yet to be fully integrated into broader international relations theory or systematically linked to the question of implications of *geocriminality* for global stability and the international order. International relations theory offers vital analytical tools for addressing this gap. Structural realism and its foundational works such as Waltz's (1959) *Man, the State, and War* (1959) and Waltz's (1979) *Theory of International Politics* provide a useful and adaptable framework for understanding *geocriminality* not as deviant behavior specific to particular regime types, but as a rational adaptation to systemic pressures generated by anarchy, uneven capability distribution and systemic constraints. Despite realism's explanatory potential, mainstream realist scholarship has not directly examined strategic instrumentalization of criminal networks as a method of statecraft, leaving a significant analytical gap.

On the other hand, realist-informed theories on international cooperation provide a basis for assessing the second half of this study's central argument that *geocriminality* may simultaneously create incentives for collective restraint. Axelrod's (1984) *The Evolution of Cooperation* and Kemp's (2022) *Security Through Cooperation* demonstrate that self-interested actors operating under anarchy may nevertheless cooperate when repeated interaction, reciprocity and credible retaliation increase the long-term costs of continued destructive practices. Applied to *geocriminality*, their theoretical perspectives suggest that transnational spillovers and mutual vulnerabilities generated by state-sponsored criminal activity may create conditions under which states choose to support cooperative mechanisms to constrain practices they otherwise individually exploit.

Taken together, the reviewed literature establishes three central findings relevant to this study. First, there is evidence to suggest that collaboration between states and criminal actors has historical precedent and is not anomalous within the broader history of international relations. Second, contemporary geopolitical tensions appear to be increasing the utility and prevalence of state-crime links. Third, despite growing recognition of these developments, existing scholarship remains conceptually fragmented and insufficiently theorized. Historical studies document such links without systematically integrating them into broader international relations theory. Contemporary analyses frequently subsume instrumentalization of criminal networks under broader categories of hybrid warfare, gray-zone conflict or covert action without isolating its distinct logic and appeal. The present study addresses this gap by treating *geocriminality* as a distinct and analytically coherent phenomenon of international politics. In doing so, it seeks to move *geocriminality* beyond its current status as an emerging descriptive term and toward a more academically rigorous analytical concept.

## 4. Theoretical Framework:

This thesis adopts a structural realist theoretical framework, complemented by rationalist theories of interstate cooperation, to explain both the proliferation of *geocriminality* and the conditions under which it can be constrained. Combining these complementary analytical lenses makes it possible to account for a) why states resort to cooperation with crime groups under conditions of interstate competition and systemic constraints; b) why such practices are proliferating and increasingly threaten international security; and c) why international cooperation remains possible despite the anarchic nature of the system.

Structural realist thought argues that the international system is defined by anarchy and self-help, meaning that the absence of an overarching authority above states spurs them to rely on "the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves" (Waltz 1979, p. 111). In this view, states are treated as functionally similar units, while the key structural variable is the distribution of capabilities across the system rather than domestic regime type, ideology or leadership personality. Waltz (1979) explicitly states that structural analysis abstracts from "every attribute of states except their capabilities" and asks what expectations arise from the prevailing order and the placement of units within it (p. 99). Waltz (1959) identifies the causes of international conflict to operate at three levels: the nature of man, the internal structure of states and the anarchic state system (p. 12). He also distinguishes between efficient causes (the specific motives and acts that trigger conflict) and the permissive cause (the anarchic environment that allows those motives to translate into action) (p. 234). This thesis treats *geocriminality* as a phenomenon that emerges from the interaction of all three levels, with the anarchic environment providing the essential permissive condition. Structural realist logic dictates that *geocriminality* would not exist without the permissive condition of anarchy, but its specific forms and targets are determined by efficient causes at the level of state interests and calculations of the decision makers. This thesis therefore examines *geocriminality* not as a purely systemic phenomenon but as the product of structural incentives filtered through particular state characteristics.

These perspectives can be operationalized to argue that states may resort to *geocriminality* when their conventional political, economic or military capabilities are limited or constrained. In an international environment characterized by intensifying geopolitical rivalry among near-peer adversaries, deterrence, trade barriers and normative restrictions on overt use of force, states face growing incentives to pursue asymmetric and deniable strategies. *Geocriminality* can thus be conceptualized as a structural adaptation through which states seek to augment national power, impose costs on adversaries and project influence while minimizing risks of direct attribution or escalation. As Waltz (1979) puts it: "the possibility that conflict will be conducted by force leads to competition in the arts and the instruments of force" (p. 132). Furthermore, a structural realist

lens can help explain proliferation of geocriminal practices across the international system. Waltz (1979) argues that the structure of relations produces broad expectations of international-political life and helps explain important and enduring behavioral patterns (p. 70). As structural realism abstracts from the internal attributes of states and focuses on their capabilities within the system, it suggests that state behavior can become widely replicated when states face similar structural pressures (p. 99). This dynamic is exemplified by contending states imitating the most capable and effective innovations of their competitors, producing widespread emulation of statecraft toolkits across states (p. 74, 127). Consequently, *geocriminality* can be viewed as a practice that may spread when multiple states discover that criminal proxies offer a low-risk means of advancing national interests while avoiding the costs of conventional confrontation.

While structural realism can help explain the emergence and spread of *geocriminality*, it offers a less developed account of why states may cooperate to contain destructive practices while operating in an anarchic system. Waltz (1979) emphasizes recurrent structural pressures and patterns of state behavior but does not specify mechanisms through which states establish behavioral restraint. He does acknowledge that states are socialized into the international system but focuses more on how socialization reduces variety and promotes likeness of behavior (pp. 52, 76). To explain why interstate cooperation could effectively mitigate the proliferation of geocriminal practices while remaining within a realist theoretical framework, this study relies on insights about international cooperation offered by Axelrod (1984) and Kemp (2022).

Their works rely on a rationalist approach, arguing that even in a self-help system, actors can cooperate to contain mutually harmful practices out of self-interest. Axelrod (1984) specifically develops his theory of cooperation for application in situations where actors "pursue their own self-interest without the aid of a central authority to force them to cooperate with each other," specifying that "cooperation can emerge among self-interested actors when interaction is repeated and future consequences matter" (p. 6). From his perspective, stable cooperation is possible not because actors abandon their egoism, but because iteration of interaction and prospects of future exchanges make restraint strategically advantageous over time (pp. 137, 176, 189). Kemp (2022) develops a closely related view specifically in the international security domain, arguing that states in an anarchic system may cooperate not out of altruism, but out of self-interest (p. 1). He points to the value of agreed-upon international organizations and confidence building measures (CBMs) in reducing uncertainty, lowering transaction costs and creating information exchange necessary to sustain restraint among states facing shared threats (pp. 76, 81, 89).

The mechanism of interstate cooperation that both authors propose is rooted in rational choice theory, in which states are treated as self-interested actors that compare expected payoffs

over time and choose restraint when cooperation is more beneficial than defection. Axelrod (1984) applies the dynamics of an iterated Prisoner's Dilemma game to international relations, pointing out the efficacy of a "*tit-for-tat*" strategy, whereby players start with cooperation, and thereafter do what the other player did on the previous move (p. 19, 20). He also stresses that stable mutual cooperation depends on actors having a continuous relationship, so that the future casts a shadow back on the present and defection becomes less attractive than restraint (pp. 129, 174). Kemp (2022) extends this logic by arguing that reciprocity is key to confidence building that is incremental and conditional, where repeated positive interactions can make states "hostages to and beneficiaries of each other's fortunes" (p. 67). Viewed through a structural realist lens, cooperation is not seen as the negation of anarchy but one of its possible effects. The implication for this thesis is that cooperation to mitigate the proliferation of *geocriminality* is plausible precisely because states remain both self-interested and iterative in their relations. They may adopt reciprocal restraints, not out of altruism or shared normative values, but because ongoing interaction within a self-help system makes unregulated geocriminal practices too costly over time. Importantly, cooperative logic does not assume liberal preferences, normative convergence or supranational authority. Instead, it treats cooperation as an instrumentally rational strategy pursued by self-interested states under anarchy.

Waltz (1979) helps this study explain *geocriminality* as a consequence of systemic anarchy, while Axelrod (1984) and Kemp (2022) show that anarchy can also generate incentives for cooperation and restraint. Read together, these approaches allow this thesis to identify both the problem and potential avenues for its mitigation within a coherent realist-informed framework. From this perspective, this study advances three theoretical propositions. First, states are more likely to resort to *geocriminality* when they confront high levels of external threat, relative weakness, diplomatic isolation or constraints on overt coercion. Second, *geocriminality* increases international insecurity because it diffuses through deniable networks, complicates attribution and generates transnational spillovers that no state can contain alone. Third, states may then cooperate against *geocriminality* if they perceive that the costs of tolerating such practices exceed their short-term gains or generate threats of reciprocal retaliation.

Operationally, this theoretical framework directs empirical analysis toward observable signs of structural incentives. On the one side, the thesis will examine whether heightened rivalry, capability distribution and threat perception correlate with the use of criminal intermediaries as instruments of statecraft. On the other, it will assess whether geocriminal spillovers create incentives for cooperation, reciprocal restraint and legal adaptation. The result is a theoretically integrated analysis that offers a coherent explanation of why *geocriminality* emerges, spreads, and how it may be constrained.

## 5. Methodology:

This thesis employs a qualitative interdisciplinary research design that combines historical analysis, comparative case study research and legal-institutional assessment. This methodological approach aligns with the project's central goal of explaining why *geocriminality* increasingly threatens international security and why international cooperation can be an effective means of mitigating this threat. The chosen methodology structures the analysis to explain *geocriminality* as a form of state behavior spurred by structural incentives of international competition, rather than to measure its prevalence quantitatively or test causal hypotheses through statistical methods. The study seeks to identify said incentives, mechanisms and recurring patterns by which states instrumentalize organized crime and illicit networks in pursuit of foreign policy goals. The structural realist and rationalist theoretical frameworks serve as an analytical lens for interpreting empirical evidence. Theory is not treated as a rigid predictive framework, but rather as a heuristic device for identifying systemic factors that allow *geocriminality* to emerge, proliferate and be mitigated. Empirical material will therefore be interpreted in light of structural constraints, relative power dynamics, interstate rivalry and rational calculations regarding state policy priorities.

To address the main research question, the following sub-questions will be answered:

- *Is geocriminality a new or a historically recurring phenomenon?*
- *What key factors enable proliferation of geocriminal practices today?*
- *Why are existing international institutions and legal regimes failing to contain them?*

Determination of whether *geocriminality* constitutes a novel phenomenon or a historically recurring pattern of statecraft, this study incorporates historical tracing across multiple periods. This historical analysis examines precedent practices including early modern piracy and privateering, state-crime collaboration during the Second World War and the Cold War and post-Cold War developments. Historical analogies are not treated as direct equivalents of contemporary *geocriminality* but used to identify enduring patterns of state reliance on illicit intermediaries.

A core empirical component of the thesis consists of a comparative case study analysis of contemporary manifestations of state-crime collaboration. Cases will be selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in the strategic use of criminal actors across different geopolitical and institutional contexts. Selection criteria will prioritize cases that satisfy the definitional and scope conditions established earlier while illustrating similarities and differences across modes of state-enabled criminality. Indicative contemporary cases include Russia, China and Iran, each of which operates under a different set of structural pressures and constraints.

Comparative analysis across these cases will be used to identify common drivers, strategic logics and contextual variations of geocriminal practice.

To address the question of mitigation, the present study incorporates a brief doctrinal analysis of relevant legal instruments and institutional mandates that govern international responses to organized crime. The analysis will evaluate the adequacy of prevailing legal and institutional frameworks in addressing state-sponsored criminality. Rather than proposing idealized legal solutions divorced from political realities, the thesis evaluates international legal mechanisms through a realist-informed lens, assessing how power politics, strategic interests and sovereignty concerns shape institutional effectiveness. Specific attention will be devoted to the constitutional frameworks, mandates, and operational constraints of organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and its Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The analysis will examine the extent to which these institutions are equipped and politically authorized to address state-enabled criminality.

The study relies primarily on qualitative secondary and documentary sources, including peer-reviewed academic scholarship in international relations, history, security studies, policy reports and analytical publications by specialized organizations, as well as reputable investigative journalism.

## 6. Limitations:

This thesis acknowledges several methodological and empirical limitations. First, *geocriminality* involves covert, clandestine and deniable state behavior, meaning that available evidence is often indirect, contested, incomplete or intentionally obscured. This creates persistent challenges of attribution and evidentiary verification, particularly when assessing the degree of state intent, direction, or knowledge in relation to criminal actors.

Second, the study relies primarily on qualitative secondary and documentary sources, including policy reports, investigative journalism and expert analyses, each of which may reflect varying degrees of institutional, political or interpretive bias. This is particularly relevant in a field where state narratives, intelligence assessments and investigative reporting may be shaped by strategic, political or reputational considerations.

To mitigate these limitations, the study relies on source triangulation across multiple independent sources and applies cautious analytical standards when assessing claims of state–criminal collaboration. Particular care is taken to distinguish between documented findings, credible allegations, contested claims and analytical inference. Where evidence remains incomplete or disputed, this thesis explicitly acknowledges uncertainty rather than presenting

contested interpretations as settled facts.

More broadly, the present study recognizes that open-source analysis of covert state behavior can rarely produce absolute certainty. Accordingly, its aim is not to provide definitive legal attribution or accusatory judgments directed at specific states, but rather to identify structural incentives, recurring patterns and institutional dynamics associated with the instrumentalization of criminal actors in international politics. The objective is analytical explanation rather than normative condemnation, with explicit recognition of evidentiary and interpretive limitations inherent to the subject matter.

## 7. History of Geocriminality:

Thieving and spying are arguably among the oldest professions. Profits, power and politics have been deeply intertwined throughout the course of human history since the dawn of civilization. Rather than being clearly distinct, the lines between legitimate authority and criminal activity have historically been fluid, contested and often deliberately obscured. In his *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*, Tilly (1985) famously argued that the very processes that shaped warfighting and state formation in early modern Europe bore a striking resemblance to organized crime. From his perspective, rulers produced both the danger and, at a price, the shield against it, effectively operating as large-scale protection rackets (pp. 169, 171). Consolidation of political authority can then be seen as a competitive and coercive process in which emerging states eliminated rivals, extracted resources and monopolized violence within defined territories (pp. 172). Crucially, these processes relied not only on systemic constraints and formal institutions, but also on alliances with a wide array of actors operating along the spectrum between legality and criminality, including mercenaries, bandits, financiers and power brokers. The following historical analysis will trace how monopolization of violence and the codification of lawful conduct reduced the overt reliance on actors operating outside the law in the nineteenth century. Yet, as the twentieth century would demonstrate, the practice of legitimate authority harnessing illicit was not forgotten. Instead, it was adjusted to new structural conditions and re-emerged in more covert, yet institutionally delineated forms.

### 7.1 Pirates, Privateers and Corsairs in Early Modern Maritime Rivalries

The early modern era, spanning from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, was a period of accelerating imperial competition and maritime expansion. European states increasingly projected power beyond their continental frontiers, seeking control over oceanic trade routes, strategic ports, colonial possessions, precious metals and slave labour. The Atlantic, Mediterranean and Indian Oceans became increasingly central arenas in which commercial

expansion and military rivalry became deeply intertwined. Initially, Spain and Portugal settled their differences with the treaties of Tordesillas (1494) and Saragossa (1529), focusing on excluding other European states from access to the Americas, West Africa and Asia (Cattelan, 2023, p. 125). Unsatisfied with expansive Iberian maritime claims, their English, French and Dutch competitors quickly sought to undermine them in the Atlantic, while the Ottoman Empire contested Iberian and Habsburg influence in the Mediterranean (Cattelan, 2023). In this context, sea power became central not only to matters of economy and trade, but to state formation and the structuring of the international system.

The rise of long-distance navigation transformed the strategic importance of maritime space. Maritime routes connected European markets to American silver, Caribbean sugar, African slave-trading networks and Asian spices. Yet early modern states often lacked the naval capacity, administrative reach and financial resources necessary to police their expanding maritime domains directly. The sea therefore became a contested political and legal frontier. Benton (2005) notes that early modern states governed oceanic expansion through fragmented and uneven legal authority rather than consolidated territorial control (pp. 700-701). Consequently, piracy became widespread because expansion of maritime trade combined with legal ambiguity and weak enforcement to produce lucrative opportunities for anyone willing to take risks in exploiting them. Cattelan (2023) notes that partition of the oceans between Spain and Portugal in line with their legal *ius excludendi alios* (right to exclude others) concept created the background to the proliferation of piracy (p. 135). Since formal state control was thin, commercial ships became attractive targets, and distant ports and colonial peripheries offered refuge and markets (Hanna, 2015, p. 13). Piracy certainly existed prior to the sixteenth century, but the geopolitical and economic realities of the early modern era transformed it into a widespread phenomenon with far-reaching political consequences.

Cattelan (2023) describes the response of European powers to the Iberian expansion as quick, but largely “informal” (p. 135). Spain and Portugal were formidable economic and military powers, while their rivals initially lacked the naval capacity, financial resources and political unity necessary to contest the Iberians through conventional military means (pp. 136, 141, 145). Instead, they found an effective weapon in systematically violating Iberian maritime laws and “unleashing piracy against the lords of the ocean” (p. 135). Thus came the age of corsairs and privateers. The term *corsair* largely applied to state-sanctioned pirates in the Mediterranean Sea, where the Ottoman Empire wrestled for maritime dominance with Christian European states (Britannica, 2025). The term *privateer* referred to private individuals legally commissioned by a state’s political authority to conduct pirate-like activities against rival states on the high seas (Britannica, 2025).

The substantive distinction between the two laid in the nature of their legal status, political jurisdiction and the forum in which their results were judged. Cattelan (2023) designates privateers as private captains holding official government licenses (*letters of marque*) that authorized them to "attack and capture vessels of the nations at war with the issuer of the document" (p. 128). Their prizes were then brought before the issuing state's admiralty or maritime courts, meaning that privateering combined "a limited degree of patriotism with private profit" (p. 128). Corsairs, by contrast, were a broader and more historically unstable category. Hanna (2015) notes that by the mid-sixteenth century, corsairs were "sailors performing acts of maritime warfare with some legitimating cover," although medieval laws often equated them to pirates (p. 46). Kempe (2021) makes an important clarification, stating that a privateer or corsair could "only be conditionally described as a maritime mercenary," since they "lived solely off their booty" without any guaranteed basic pay commonly provided mercenaries on land (pp. 51-52).

In practice, the boundary between pirates, corsairs and privateers was often unclear. Benton (2005) shows that mariners routinely relied on "legal posturing" to make their raids appear legitimate, while the legality of their actions depended on "open and conflicting interpretations" of timing, location and targets of their attacks (p. 707). He suggests that demand for privateers increased in times of inter-imperial conflict, but in periods of peace, these experienced raiders often continued to engage in raids even without formal state sponsorship (p. 707). Cattelan (2023) likewise stresses that the line between legitimately sanctioned maritime violence and piracy was blurred, since piracy for purely private gain was "often encouraged by belligerents as an effective way to disrupt enemy trade and communication lines" (p. 128). Research by McCarthy (2013) further highlights how privateers could be seen either as "legal commerce-raiders" or "outlaws exploiting political turmoil," while pirates were condemned by some or defended by others depending on which sovereign was perceived to benefit from their actions (p. 158).

Such legally and politically ambiguous state-sponsored piracy offered competing empires two important advantages. First, since privateers and corsairs operated in the gray-zone between state-sanctioned and criminal violence, empires gained the option to selectively conduct predatory maritime activities whilst preserving the ability to deny direct responsibility for excesses or unauthorized actions. Piracy was used to weaken rivals, disrupt their logistics, gather intelligence and impose military costs without necessitating full-scale confrontation or permanent naval expansion. Second, privateering allowed governments to externalize the costs of maritime warfare onto private actors motivated by profit. It decreased the need for states to develop and maintain large standing navies, while prize-taking created a self-financing mechanism by which states gained strategic benefits yet shifted the operational risk onto private captains and investors.

The utility of state-led instrumentalization of piracy for foreign policy purposes proved apparent and durable across the international system. As maritime competition intensified, privateering and corsairing evolved into institutionalized components of imperial strategy employed by both rising and established powers. England, France and the Dutch Republic all relied extensively on licensed raiders during periods of conflict, while Mediterranean powers incorporated corsairing into long-standing traditions of frontier warfare at sea. States simultaneously condemned piracy in principle while selectively legitimizing it in practice when it aligned with their interests. Over time, privateering became a normalized and even expected feature of interstate rivalry, particularly during the Anglo-Spanish War, the Dutch Revolt, and later eighteenth-century imperial wars. Its persistence across time and space suggests that it was not only a response to Iberian assertiveness, but a broadly applicable tool of statecraft suited to the structural conditions of early modern international politics. It reflected both the absence of a consolidated international legal order governing maritime conduct, as well as the strategic value of flexible and deniable instruments of coercion.

However, despite its advantages, the features that made privateering effective also generated mounting political, economic and legal tensions. The blurred distinction between licit and illicit maritime violence complicated diplomatic relations, as privateers frequently exceeded their commissions, attacked neutral shipping or continued predatory activities beyond periods of declared conflict (Benton, 2005; Cattelan, 2023). As Kempe (2021) highlights, the privateer evolved into a "virtually independent entrepreneur" that could hire other privateers from various countries and was always able to secure support of one nation or another without becoming an enemy of all nations at once (pp. 52-53). Privateering imposed significant costs not only on adversaries but also on third parties, particularly neutral trading states whose commercial interests were disrupted by indiscriminate maritime predation (McCarthy, 2013, pp. 29, 35). International commerce also suffered indirect costs, as underwriters raised the costs of insurance premiums for individual merchants (p. 61). With the growing interconnectedness of global trade, the unpredictability and lack of control associated with privateering and piracy began to undermine the stability of international commerce upon which all major powers depended.

At the same time, gradual consolidation of state authority and expansion of naval capabilities reduced the relative utility of delegating maritime violence to private actors. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, leading powers such as Britain had developed increasingly professionalized and centralized naval institutions capable of performing the functions previously outsourced to privateers. As state capacity grew, the strategic advantages of privateering diminished, while its risks became more pronounced. Benton (2005) shows that by the eighteenth century the high seas also began to emerge as a "separate legal space," while

European legal regimes were increasingly narrowing maritime jurisdiction to regulate illicit raiding (p. 716). The result was not an immediate end to maritime predation, but a more disciplined and state-centered framework for controlling it. Benton (2005) also argues that the British 1720s anti-piracy campaign produced "a new era of British naval hegemony," and that the crackdown "changed but did not resolve the anomalous legal status of pirates" (p. 719). Kempe (2021) captures the international cooperation aspect of maritime regulation. He suggests that the privateering system "that had run out of control" and whose "excesses affected virtually all the nations of Europe," generated a legal consensus across the international system (p. 55). Unilateral enactments and bilateral treaties increasingly framed pirates as "the common enemy of all nations," creating normative compatibility across otherwise divided maritime legal systems (p. 55). This transformation culminated in coordinated efforts among major powers to restrict and ultimately abolish privateering, most notably through the Declaration of Paris (1856) after the Crimean War.

Taken together, the evolution of piracy, corsairing and privateering in the early modern era demonstrates that strategic instrumentalization of organized illicit or semi-licit non-state actors has significant historical precedence in international relations. Under conditions of limited state capacity, fragmented legal authority and intense geopolitical rivalry, states not only tolerated but actively relied on maritime predation as a flexible and deniable instrument of power projection. The eventual restriction and abolition of privateering in the nineteenth century reflected broader transformations in the international system. Consolidation of state authority and military institutions, as well as cooperative formalization of international legal norms served to mitigate systemic risks of state-enabled piracy and reinforce the principle of state monopoly over legitimate force. However, while the institutional form of state-sponsored piracy declined, the underlying strategic logic that sustained it did not disappear. Instead, it adapted to new political, technological, and economic conditions. In the twentieth century, expansion of global illicit markets, institutionalization of intelligence services and renewal of geopolitical competition spurred new forms of state-crime collaboration.

### 7.2 Geocriminality in the 20th Century

The twentieth century was characterized by unprecedented technological progress, industrialized warfare, collapse of empires, profound reshaping of the international system and the emergence of global ideological conflicts. Advances in communication, transportation and military technology expanded the reach of state power, while the scale and destructiveness of modern warfare imposed new constraints on direct confrontation between major powers. The two World Wars demonstrated both the capacity of states to mobilize entire societies for conflict and

the catastrophic consequences of total war, while the advent of nuclear weapons severely inhibited major powers from engaging in direct conventional conflicts (Britannica, 2026). Such mobilizational and technological capacity was largely the result of the dramatic expansion and institutionalization of state functions. The rise of centralized administrative structures enhanced the capacity of governments to collect information, regulate societies, manage economies, and project power domestically as well as abroad. This was evident in the growth of professionalized intelligence and security services that became permanent and integral components of state machinery rather than ad hoc wartime instruments (Andrew, 2018, p. 7). Such institutions took on information gathering tasks along with responsibility for covert operations, psychological warfare and clandestine influence campaigns.

At the same time, the growing complexity of global economic linkages, transnational logistics and migration flows transformed the nature of organized crime. Criminal actors adapted to modernity by becoming more networked, transnational and diversified in their activities. Rather than operating solely outside of legal bounds, many criminal networks began to pursue strategies aimed at embedding themselves within formal economic and political structures to secure patronage, protection or a veil of legitimacy. The *modus operandi* of organized crime increasingly overlapped with that of foreign or domestic intelligence services, giving impetus to *geocriminality* to gain relevance as a form of state-crime interaction. Available research indicates that the United States became one of the first states to effectively and systematically instrumentalize it throughout the Second World War and the Cold War.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the United States was mostly an isolationist state avoidant of global entanglements and reluctant to assume the burdens of permanent geopolitical management beyond the Western Hemisphere. Although Washington played a major role in helping the Entente win in the First World War, emerging from it as a major economic and political force, its domestic political culture remained skeptical of extensive overseas commitments. American isolationist posture began a dramatic shift toward a bid for global hegemony during the Second World War. The conflict transformed The United States into a central pillar of the Allied war effort and ultimately into a leading power within the post-war international system. This transition from relative isolationism to global leadership fundamentally altered the operational requirements of America's statecraft toolkit. The Second World War and the consequent emergence of the Cold War spurred the formalization and rapid expansion of American intelligence and security institutions (Walton, 2023, p. 56). Wartime experience demonstrated the strategic importance of intelligence collection, covert operations, sabotage and political warfare (p. 75).

The first half of the twentieth century also had a significant impact on American society

and its underworld. Rapid industrialization, mass migration from Europe and urban expansion of the interwar period transformed major American cities into densely populated commercial centers characterized by weak regulation, political corruption, socioeconomic inequality and ethnic segregation. These conditions proved highly conducive to the proliferation of organized crime. Criminal syndicates expanded within Italian, Irish and Jewish communities, gradually consolidating influence over gambling, prostitution, racketeering and extortion in key urban centers. The Prohibition period dramatically accelerated this process. Criminalization of alcohol production and distribution created an enormous illicit market that generated unprecedented profits for organized crime. By the late 1930s, American organized crime evolved from fragmented urban gangs into institutionalized syndicates in possession of extensive logistical infrastructure, access to ports and shipping networks, sophisticated financial channels, and significant coercive capacity (Williams, 2015, p. 34). This led to their smuggling operations extending across the globe, turning local syndicates into transnational networks.

The new character and capabilities of American organized crime became strategically relevant to Washington's foreign policy goals and war aims in the 1940s, paving the way for the inception of Operation Underworld. The details of this operation serve as a highly valuable illustration of American geocriminal practice, since it is a rare case of such practice having been officially acknowledged via the 1954 Herlands Report that was made public in 1977 (Kihss, 1977; Whitehouse, 2025). Operation Underworld was a wartime alliance between the US Office of Navy Intelligence (ONI) and New York organized crime figures that sought to prevent Axis sabotage and espionage activities against US shipping and port infrastructure. Such collaboration was triggered by the burning of SS *Normandie* in the New York Harbor, which raised concerns over security of the docks (Black, 2023, pp. 1-2). The operation began in 1942, when the head of the regional ONI unit reported to Washington about his contacts with Italian organized crime affiliates on the New York waterfront (p. 40). The Luciano crime family was consequently approached as a key intermediary due to its influence over dockworkers' unions and its capacity to exert informal control over much of the economic activity on the waterfront. Central to this arrangement was the then incarcerated Charles 'Lucky' Luciano, a crime boss who agreed to assist US authorities in exchange for a sentence reduction and, ultimately, commutation of his thirty-to-fifty-year sentence (pp. 215, 217). What began as a waterfront security arrangement quickly became a broader intelligence collaboration. The ONI used Luciano's network to gain access to the wider harbor system and citywide criminal networks, as well as to later gather strategic information for the Allied invasion of Sicily, including interrogations of Sicilian immigrants, coastal mapping, and local knowledge about ports, harbors and infrastructure (Black, 2023, pp. 130, 153, 163-176).

Operation Underworld outlived its purpose once Allied victory in Europe was achieved in 1945. Charles 'Lucky' Luciano did receive a commutation of his sentence and was deported from the US, whilst all classified information pertaining to the operation was quickly disposed of (Black, 2023, pp. 213, 217). However, that did not mean the end of all ties between the US intelligence services and organized crime. In fact, Williams (2015) alleges that Luciano, having been deported to Italy, neither ended his criminal activity nor his cooperative relationship with American intelligence (pp. 40, 48, 49). He argues that the newly created CIA actively instrumentalized Italian organized crime as part of Operation Gladio and its covert efforts to prevent a communist takeover of Italy after World War II. Complete details of Operation Gladio remain shrouded in mystery and fierce debate, but drawing on declassified Italian intelligence documents, Cacciatore (2021) does confirm its existence as part of a broader system of "stay-behind" networks created across Western Europe. He also places Gladio inside the broader US covert anti-Communist efforts in Italy, without referencing any direct links between the CIA and the Mafia (p. 2). Williams (2015) does reference a wide array of sources to argue that the CIA financed anti-communist campaigns and political violence through organized crime networks and mob-linked bankers, which makes Operation Gladio noteworthy for the purposes of this study. However, the secondary and journalistic nature of those sources suggests that his assertions should be treated with caution.

On the other hand, Walton (2023) and Weiner (2007) rely on declassified CIA records, archival material and documentary evidence to confirm the use of Italian organized crime actors in the CIA's attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro in Cuba in the 1960s. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 transformed the island from a longstanding American-aligned sphere of influence into a Soviet-aligned state situated right off the Florida coast. Following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, and especially after the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Washington faced severe strategic constraints in confronting Havana through direct military means without risking escalation with the Soviets. Walton (2023) states that as early as 1960, President Eisenhower pressured CIA Director Allen Dulles to "take drastic action against Castro," resulting in CIA Deputy Director Richard Bissell drawing up a number of assassination plans (p. 287). Due to a lack of professional assassins at the CIA at the time, Bissell decided to rely on the Mafia, particularly since Castro had already shut off their revenue stream from casinos across Havana (p. 287). Weiner (2007) quotes the FBI calling this plan CIA's "Intentions to Send Hoodlums to Cuba" in a report to President Johnson in 1967 (p. 273). The proposed operation involved collaboration with prominent Mafia figures, who were approached by CIA operatives to facilitate contact with criminal networks capable of operating in Cuba. The arrangement reportedly centered on provision of poison pills for use against Castro, illustrating the reliance on deniable, non-state

actors to carry out politically sensitive objectives with low risk of direct attribution (Weiner, 2007, p. 187). While the assassination plans ultimately failed to achieve their intended outcome, their existence demonstrates a clear willingness on the part of US leadership and intelligence services to instrumentalize organized crime as a covert tool of foreign policy.

Moreover, the CIA's relationship with Italian criminal networks was likely not exclusive. Over the course of the Cold War, the United States engaged in an intense security competition against the Soviet Union and its communist ideology on multiple fronts. Of particular importance were Southeast Asia, Latin America and Central Asia. In all three cases, researchers and journalists uncovered a significant amount of evidence pointing to the CIA's collaboration with transnational drug trafficking networks. McCoy's (2003) account of such activity in Southeast Asia suggests that the CIA's relationship with criminal intermediaries was a recurring feature of America's extensive covert wars across the region. He claims that in Burma, CIA-backed nationalist Chinese irregulars turned the country into the world's largest opium producer, while the agency's Laotian partners became central to heroin logistics and processing (pp. 128, 289, 525). It is important to clarify, that the CIA did not enter the region in order to traffic in drugs, but its covert approach to fighting communist influence through local proxies made criminal intermediaries strategically and politically useful.

Since 1950, the CIA helped airlift remnants of the defeated nationalist Kuomintang forces from southern China into northeastern Burma, arming them as a tripwire force against a potential Chinese communist invasion (p. 162). Over the next decade, these forces monopolized regional opium trade, expanding local production by almost five hundred percent by 1962 (p. 162). When the Kuomintang were driven out of Burma into Thailand and Laos in 1961, they took with them control of roughly one-third of the world's total illicit opium supply. Consequently, McCoy (2003) argues, CIA's ongoing covert activity in the region produced an even more direct entanglement of the agency with the heroin trade in Laos (p. 289). When political infighting forced Corsican charter airlines out of the opium business in 1965, the CIA's own airline, Air America, began flying opium from Laotian hills to processing laboratories at the Long Tieng military base of the anti-communist Hmong Army (p. 288). In McCoy's (2003) view, the opium economy of the so-called Golden Triangle was instrumental in supplying local allies with finance, logistics and the necessary political distance from the CIA, while the agency took on the supply of arms, transport and protection from arrests and prosecutions (pp. 384, 385). He cites a 1972 US Senate investigation where CIA's own inspector general exonerated CIA leadership of direct policy approval but confirmed that the CIA had tolerated or ignored the drug trafficking of its proxies for years because "the war has clearly been [the CIA's] overriding priority in Southeast Asia" (p. 385-386).

Without citing any of McCoy's (2003) work that was originally published in 1972, Webb's (1998) investigative journalism independently uncovered a very similar logic and mechanisms of CIA complicity with drug trafficking in Latin America in the 1980s. He argues that elements of the Nicaraguan US-backed Contra forces were involved in cocaine trafficking operations that supplied the American domestic market, while proceeds from these activities were used to finance insurgent efforts against the socialist Nicaraguan government (pp. 17, 118, 200). These trafficking networks operated with varying degrees of awareness, tolerance and facilitation on the side of the CIA and the DEA, who prioritized American foreign policy priority of countering communist influence in the region. Webb's (1998) larger point is that the drug connection was not incidental to the Contra War but grew out of the same covert infrastructure that sustained the insurgency. The result was a permissive operational environment in which anti-communist priorities repeatedly outweighed the need for narcotics enforcement. He emphasizes that later declassified material and inspector general findings largely confirmed that the CIA had working relationships with a substantial number of people later implicated in drug trafficking (pp. 564).

The 2003 revised edition of McCoy's 1972 exposé largely supports Webb's (1998) findings and extends them with additional detail drawn from the CIA's own internal investigations. The Inspector General's report, completed by CIA Inspector Frederick Hitz in 1998, confirmed that the agency had maintained working relationships with 58 individuals connected to the Contra program who were implicated in cocaine trafficking, and had concealed this involvement from Congress (p. 495). The institutional mechanism enabling this complicity was a formal "Memorandum of Understanding" concluded between the CIA and Attorney General William French Smith in 1982. It exempted the agency from any requirement to report drug trafficking by its non-employees – defined to include Contra assets, pilots, officials, and allied operatives (p. 495). The deniability requirement of covert operations once again resulted in complicity with drug trafficking being instrumentalized as a self-sustaining source of revenue for local political allies.

The pattern of CIA complicity with drug trafficking re-emerged in Central Asia during the US secret struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Following the Soviet invasion in 1979, the agency launched its largest covert operation since Vietnam. Billions of dollars in arms and aid were directed to the Afghan mujahideen forces through Pakistan's intelligence service. From the outset of the operation, the CIA accepted Pakistan's choice of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar as the primary recipient of covert aid, a man whom US officials later acknowledged was both a leading heroin trafficker and a radical fundamentalist (McCoy, 2003, pp. 475-478). The CIA's logistics soon became entangled with the region's expanding narcotics

economy. Within two years, Pakistan's opium production grew tenfold, while heroin processing plants opened up along the Afghan-Pakistan border to supply Western drug markets (p. 472). As the mujahideen captured agriculturally suitable areas inside Afghanistan, local peasants would cultivate poppies for sale into Pakistan, resulting in majority of American and European illicit demand for heroin being satisfied by Afghan supply (p. 479). The CIA's role in this matter was not of direct involvement in trafficking, but of the agency's calculated indifference. It protected its warlord assets from investigation, knowing that Hekmatyar and other mujahideen commanders were using opium profits to sustain their armies (p. 480, 526). As in Southeast Asia, the CIA's covert approach to fighting communist influence through local proxies made criminal intermediaries immune from scrutiny and enforcement the same way it worked in Southeast Asia and Latin America.

This mode of American *geocriminality* likely continued well into the twenty-first century when US forces took over Afghanistan in 2001 as part of the Global War on Terror. Although the Taliban government significantly reduced opium cultivation shortly before the US invasion, Afghanistan rapidly re-emerged as the world's dominant heroin producer until the American withdrawal in 2024 (Farrell & Thorne, 2005; UNODC, 2018). In pursuit of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency objectives, American and allied forces relied on local warlords and regional power brokers whose authority was intertwined with narcotics trafficking networks. Many anti-Taliban figures incorporated into the new Afghan political order had longstanding links to smuggling and opium production that had originally developed during the war against the Soviets in the 1980s. In 2009, Time magazine reported that Ahmed Wali Karzai, the brother of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, has been on the "payroll of the CIA" for years, whilst simultaneously being "deeply involved" in the country's annual $4 billion drug industry (Baker, 2009). Another article by Time (2009) alleged that "NATO has been bribing drug smugglers to let fuel pass through the Khyber Pass from Pakistan into Afghanistan." Furthermore, in a recent interview, former CIA officer and whistleblower, John Kiriakou, claimed that the CIA and the DEA tolerated opium production in Afghanistan because the flow of heroin into Russia and Iran "weakened their societies" and was of benefit to American security interests (Chris Hedges, 2026, 22:00-24:00).

Although available evidence remains fragmentary and is often derived from investigative journalism rather than comprehensive archival disclosure, the twenty-first century Afghan case nevertheless suggests important continuities between Cold War-era patterns of American covert statecraft and certain operational practices employed during the Global War on Terror. At minimum, the persistence of relationships between US-backed security structures, regional power brokers and explosive growth of heroin production suggests that geocriminal dynamics did not disappear with the end of the Cold War. Instead, they are likely to have adapted to new strategic

environments and security priorities. Given the limited availability of official documentation and the political sensitivity surrounding US covert operations in the contemporary era, the extent and nature of these relationships remain insufficiently studied and require further academic scrutiny.

That being said, broader historical literature supports McCoy's (2003) and Webb's (1998) general findings regarding US geocriminal practices during the Cold War and the structural incentives for them. Walton (2023) describes World War II and the early Cold War as the moment when political warfare, including bribery, subversion, paramilitary action and assassinations became institutionalized inside intelligence bureaucracies, stressing the shift towards pursuit of foreign policy via proxies (pp. 75, 482). Weiner (2007) similarly shows that covert action became central to the CIA's identity, with the agency expanding into a shadow arm of US foreign policy that increasingly depended on recruited local assets for influence and success of clandestine operations (p. 29). The bi-polar international system, where the threat of mutually assured destruction, constraints of international law and reputational considerations limited the superpowers in their ability to directly confront each other. Clandestine action through third parties then emerged as a critical instrument of statecraft. As Walton (2023) argues, both superpowers used their intelligence services to "conduct non-avowed foreign policy in pursuit of their national interests," launching coups, bribing governments, and supporting proxy armies across the developing world (p. 473). The covert battlegrounds of the Cold War functioned, in the words of former US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, as "back-alley struggles" where the normal constraints of international law and diplomatic accountability were systematically suspended (p. 141). Organized crime networks became a proxy capable of discreetly providing the necessary cash flow, logistics and capacity for violence. Its instrumentalization emerged not as a failure of policy oversight or lack of moral virtue. It was a rational feature of superpower competition – a low-cost strategy for projecting power in a world where the costs of direct confrontation were prohibitively high. As the international system shifts towards competitive multipolarity yet retains many of the systemic restraints of the Cold War period, *geocriminality* remains an adaptable instrument of statecraft that continues to play a role in international politics.

## 8. Contemporary Geocriminality:

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War in the early 1990s, the world entered a relatively brief moment of unipolarity and hegemonic dominance of the United States within the international system. This period, often associated with expectations of a liberal international order grounded in economic globalization, institutional cooperation and normative convergence, appeared to reduce the immediate incentives for indirect and covert forms of competition among great powers. Globalization deepened cross-border flows of capital, goods,

information and people. Advances in digital technology, financial tools and global logistics created an increasingly complex and interdependent international system. In the thirty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, global economic and technological progress contributed to a relative diffusion of power within the system. American dominance and perceived inequality of the distribution of globalization's economic benefits led to resurgence of strategic competition among major powers. As a result, the international system gradually began to transition from unipolarity to fragmentation, characterized by erosion of consensus on global governance and increasing weaponization of global interdependencies. As Galeotti (2022) puts it, the world of "wars without warfare, non-military conflicts fought with all kinds of other means, from subversion to sanctions, memes to murder, may be becoming the new normal" (p. 4).

At the same time, processes that underpinned globalization also transformed the structure and capabilities of transnational organized crime (UNODC, 2010). Criminal networks became more sophisticated, decentralized and technologically advanced, capable of leveraging financial, legal, logistical and digital systems to dramatically expand their reach (UNODC, 2025; GI-TOC, 2025). Organized crime networks now maintain access to complex and obscure webs of illicit finance, smuggling routes, cyber capabilities and coercive enforcement mechanisms. Illicit economies of the twenty-first century grew not only in scale but also in their strategic utility for states. International security analysts are becoming alert to how criminal networks are increasingly offering states capacity to conduct sabotage, sanctions evasion, intelligence gathering, political interference and targeted violence (Thorley, 2025; Schuett & Schramm, 2025; Schuett & Trenta, 2025).

This chapter showcases three case studies of contemporary *geocriminality* that focus on how and why Russia, China and Iran leverage connections with illicit networks to achieve their foreign policy objectives. These case studies are meant to compare and contrast the forms and incentives for geocriminal practices across different geopolitical contexts. Rather than treating *geocriminality* as a uniform phenomenon, the analysis examines how variety in states' structural constraints, threat perceptions and institutional capacities shape the ways in which they instrumentalize criminal actors. Russia, China and Iran were specifically chosen because they represent a set of varied regime types, power projection capabilities and strategic priorities. They are also major powers within the international system and have significant capacity to affect its stability. This comparative approach allows this study to move beyond descriptive accounts of individual cases and instead identify broader patterns, incentives and mechanisms that increasingly make *geocriminality* a significant threat to international security. It also serves to contribute to a holistic understanding of how and why states turn to criminal intermediaries as tools of statecraft in an increasingly competitive international context.

### 8.1 Russian Federation

The Russian Federation provides one of the most developed contemporary examples of systematic *geocriminality* in practice. As this case study will demonstrate, Russia's engagement with criminal networks appears to be increasingly institutionalized and deeply integrated within its broader approaches to geopolitical competition. This reflects both the specific historical trajectory of Russian statehood following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the structural constraints that shape its position within the international system.

It must be noted that despite being America's main Cold War rival, the Soviet Union is absent from this study's history section not because it abstained from covert action or proxy wars. On the contrary, at the onset of the Cold War, the Soviets had already mastered the "darker arts of intelligence," while the Americans had used them only piecemeal up to that point (Walton, 2023, p. 75). However, available historical research does not indicate that the Soviets instrumentalized organized crime specifically, to the same degree as US intelligence. Walton (2023) and Andrew (2018) suggest that the Soviet KGB routinely relied on bribery, blackmail, compromised officials and other criminalized methods to recruit and control assets. Andrew (2018) references a few instances of the KGB recruiting criminal elements for assassinations and relying on criminally compromised sources (pp. 368, 429). McLaren et al. (2025) also notes that criminal actors contributed to the Soviet Union's 'active measures' abroad, whilst domestic criminals supplied "black cash for operational funds" (p. 7). However, the evidence of Soviet *geocriminality* is too sporadic and generalized to meaningfully trace its operational history. It should be noted that communist ideology gave Soviet intelligence wider and easier access to numerous left-wing politically motivated proxies through which it could conduct its clandestine activities. Soviet interaction with crime networks appears to have been largely individualized, whilst the Americans have evidently systematically instrumentalized widely established organized crime groups, making their Cold War experience much more analytically valuable to the study of *geocriminality*. This picture changes dramatically with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent formation of the Russian Federation. Twenty-first century Russia serves as one of the best examples of contemporary systematic geocriminal practice.

Disintegration of the USSR in 1991 produced a profound weakening of Russia's state institutions, accompanied by economic collapse, anarchic privatization of state assets and a rapid expansion of organized crime. Soviet law, economic system and social structure became obsolete at such a rapid pace that the newly established Russian Federation simply could not effectively adjust. It would be inaccurate to say that modern Russia evolved out of the Soviet Union. It is more appropriate to claim that the Russian Federation was hastily constructed on the ruins of its socialist predecessor. The Yeltsin-era privatization and market reform were experienced not as a

gradual transition to capitalism, but as an era of social decay in which violence, bribery, protection rackets and asset stripping became normal tools of capital accumulation (Galeotti, 2018, pp. 111-115). During the 1990s, criminal groups effectively penetrated all key sectors of an emerging Russian capitalist economy, including its energy, natural resources and banking sectors. As Galeotti (2018) notes, criminal networks did not become a mere part of the new system, but "a stakeholder able to help shape its evolution" (p. 113). This period became a formative decade in which organized crime became an integral element of state formation.

This process had significant implications for the Russian state and security apparatus. Chaos of the 1990s meant the country's intelligence services were reformed "on the fly," with many of the half-million former KGB officials having lost their jobs (Walton, 2023, p. 424). Russian police were underpaid, under-resourced and outgunned (Galeotti, 2018, p. 111). Disgruntled officers often either supplemented their income through corruption or simply switched to the crime-infested private sector, leveraging their knowledge, skills and connections to further enrich the emerging oligarch class (McLaren et al., 2025, pp. 15-17). Notably, Vladimir Putin's hometown of St. Petersburg became "'ground zero' for the alliance between former KGB officers and organized crime that came to dominate Russia" (p. 16). A former intelligence officer himself, Putin became the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg and is often cited as having been the key liaison between municipal authorities and the city's powerful organized crime groups (Galeotti, 2018, p. 211; McLaren et al., 2025, p. 16; Walton, 2012, p. 447). A systemic fusion between the Russian intelligence community and organized crime became a defining feature of the country's post-Soviet domestic governance but also had considerable spillover effects abroad.

From the early stages, Russian criminal networks sought to take advantage of Russia's newly gained access to international markets. By the mid-1990s, Russian and post-Soviet organized crime, alongside their ex-KGB and corrupt bureaucrat partners, had begun founding legal commercial banks abroad, investing in strategic sectors of the global economy and using foreign jurisdictions to launder money (Galeotti, 2024, p. 9; McLaren et al., 2025, p. 18). In Galeotti's (2018) account, Russian-based networks increasingly operated as service providers for foreign cross-border criminal markets, using banks, shell companies and permissive legal environments to move capital and obscure its origins (p. 197). At the same time, these transnational networks gave Moscow political leverage abroad. Groups that retained assets, family ties or operations in Russia could be pressured or cultivated by the state, turning transnational criminal organizations into channels of political influence (Galeotti, 2024, p. 9).

In the 1990s, transnational activity of Russian organized crime was relatively diffuse and often profit-driven. Galeotti (2018) notes that the most notable characteristic of Russian criminal networks was the speed and efficiency with which they became a truly global phenomenon,

spreading into post-Soviet states, Eastern Europe, Spain, Cyprus, Austria, Germany, Israel and the US (p. 182). He also notes that they were not interested in "undermining the West," but rather focused on "enjoying the opportunities it provides" (p. 182). Their interests were primarily commercial, seeking profit, mobility and protection, rather than acting as instruments of Moscow's foreign policy.

In the early 2000s, these networks became more entrenched and sophisticated, leaving a broader international footprint. The state's relationship with them also became more ordered and politically useful. After Putin assumed power in 2000, the Kremlin did not eliminate organized crime but consolidated it on conditions of political loyalty, allowing criminal actors to expand globally as long as they contributed to the state's interests (McLaren et al., 2025, p. 14). Political implications of this trend raised some concern in the West. Spain became alarmed in the mid-2000s, launching a series of high-profile prosecutions as part of Operation Troika (Galeotti, 2024, p. 15). In Latvia, Russian intelligence was discovered attempting to finance sympathetic politicians as well as seeking support from local ethnically Russian crime networks (Galeotti, 2018, p. 242).

Transnational criminal activities of Viktor Bout and Semion Mogilevich became particularly emblematic of the increasingly blurred boundary between Russian organized crime and Moscow's state interests. Bout, a former Soviet military officer, built a vast international arms trafficking network that supplied weapons to conflict zones across Africa, the Middle East and Asia throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Farah & Braun, 2007, pp. 4-5). Operating a complex web of shell companies and cargo planes registered in multiple jurisdictions, Bout exploited regulatory gaps to become one of the world's most prolific illicit arms dealers earning the nickname "Merchant of Death". Although his direct links to the Kremlin were never officially established, multiple investigations and intelligence assessments suggested that Bout benefited from a degree of protection from the Russian state and maintained ties to former military and intelligence circles (pp. 32, 34, 256).

Similarly, Semion Mogilevich emerged as one of the most influential figures in transnational Russian organized crime, overseeing fraud, money laundering, arms trafficking and energy-sector corruption across Europe, particularly in Hungary (Galeotti, 2024, p. 33). In fact, there were press reports alleging that Mogilevich facilitated Russian government access to compromising material on Viktor Orbán (Kirilenko, 2018). He was arrested in Moscow in 2008, but controversially released the following year, raising suspicions of his political protection within Russia (Galeotti, 2024, p. 33). The apparent tolerance and protection enjoyed by criminal actors like Bout and Mogilevich reflect a growing pattern of patronage and informal state influence over illicit networks in the early 2000s. By 2013, Director of US National Intelligence,

James Clapper concluded that Russia's "nexus among organized crime, some state officials, the intelligence services, and business blurs the distinction between state policy and private gain" (Clapper, 2013, p. 6). Scope and scale of this nexus profoundly widened after the beginning of the Ukraine crisis.

Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the breakout of war in eastern Ukraine and especially the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow's positioning within the international system changed dramatically. Russia increasingly found itself politically isolated from the West, subjected to sweeping economic sanctions, financial restrictions and diplomatic pressure. Since 2014 and 2022, Russia must contend with superior Western economic power, military potential and sanctions regimes, yet remain constrained in its conventional military options due to escalatory risks vis-à-vis NATO and its American nuclear umbrella. These developments significantly increased the utility of deniable and informal instruments of statecraft for Moscow.

Galeotti (2018) suggests that Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 may have been "the first conquest in history conducted by gangsters working for a state" (p. 243). He argues that the operation relied equally on troops without insignia as well as an alliance with local criminal networks. He cites a conversation with a Russian police officer to assert that representatives of a major crime syndicate visited Crimea at the height of the Maidan protests in Kyiv for talks with local crime groups to gauge the mood of the local underworld on behalf of Moscow (p. 246). By the time Russian special forces moved in, these groups had already organized local "self-defense forces" that actively took part in securing territory as well as "expropriating properties owned by the Ukrainian government and its allies" (p. 246). Galeotti (2018) further argues that the first governor of the newly annexed Crimea, Sergei Aksyonov, had a significant criminal past dating back to the 1990s (p. 244). McLaren et al. (2025) corroborates Galeotti's (2018) findings and also suggests that Moscow's links to organized crime played an important role in ensuring a swift seizure of the peninsula (p. 22).

Crimea was also a debut moment for the Russian Night Wolves motorcycle club. McLaren et al. (2025) describes the club as a fairly typical biker gang, many of whose members are convicted felons that regularly engage in criminal activities like tax evasion, armed robberies and fuel smuggling (p. 23). Galeotti (2018) and McLaren et al. (2025) both highlight their role in the Crimean operation, as well as their subsequent expansion into Europe. The Night Wolves have since established chapters in Germany, Romania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Their function in these countries is explicitly political. They reportedly promote Russian narratives, provide security at pro-Moscow events and support pro-Kremlin politicians and act as a form of "sharp power" that pierces the information and political environments of target states (McLaren et al., 2025, p. 24). The Night Wolves' trajectory from

Crimea to the Balkans is therefore not merely a story of one gang's expansion but a demonstration of how *geocriminality* functions as an exportable statecraft model. The Kremlin weaponized a motorcycle club into simultaneously a paramilitary organization, cultural propaganda and a political interference asset that could operate across borders and recruit locally, hiding behind the legal status of a civilian organization.

Hybrid warfare strategies have since become a key component of Russian doctrine. Galeotti (2022) notes that Russia, "believing itself locked in conflict with a stronger West," became an "especially eager adopter of new forms of conflict" (p. 165). These forms include, but are not limited to subversion, disinformation, cyberattacks, proxy wars, sabotage and economic coercion. Given the already existing links to transnational organized crime, *geocriminality* became a natural fit within the broader Russian hybrid strategy. Galeotti (2024) and McLaren et al. (2025) both highlight that Russia turned to criminal networks to circumvent sanctions, conduct cyber operations, as well as plug manpower and capability gaps, using them for intelligence gathering, sabotage, arson and attempted assassinations across Europe. McLaren et al. (2025) argues that "since 2014, it has become increasingly evident that the line between Russian organized crime and the state is indistinct" (p. 21).

Evasion of economic restrictions through criminal networks using front companies and smuggling schemes has become essential to sustaining the Russian war economy (Galeotti, 2024, p. 20; McLaren et al., 2025 p. 4). The shadow fleet of 400-1,200 aging oil tankers, assembled at an estimated cost of $10 billion since early 2022, operates by disabling vessel tracking systems, conducting ship-to-ship transfers in the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and re-flagging under jurisdictions that do not enforce G7 price caps (McLaren et al., 2025, p. 35). The Coral Energy case illustrates how a Rosneft-linked trading firm continued laundering shipments of Russian oil products through offshore shell companies, with French bank Societe Generale reportedly financing its trading activity to the tune of at least €51.9 million (p. 34). Russia-linked illicit networks also reportedly participated in procurement schemes involving advanced electronics, dual-use technologies and military-grade components necessary for the production and maintenance of weapons systems affected by Western export controls (McLaren et al., 2025, p. 12). These activities frequently rely on criminal tactics, opaque corporate structures and permissive third-country jurisdictions to obscure the origin, ownership and destination of restricted goods. This allows Moscow to preserve critical revenue streams while complicating international enforcement efforts.

Furthermore, cybercrime emerged as a valuable sphere for Russia to exploit. Russian-speaking cybercriminal networks became some of the most capable and disruptive actors, engaging in ransomware attacks, financial theft, cyber espionage and distributed denial-of-service

(DDoS) campaigns (Galeotti, 2024, p. 26). The pro-Russian hacktivist group Killnet, for example, claimed responsibility for DDoS attacks on the European Parliament, Latvian government ministries, and US airports, while the NotPetya malware unleashed on Ukraine's power systems in 2017 demonstrated how criminal hacker tools could be weaponized for strategic disruption (Galeotti, 2024, p. 26; McLaren et al., 2025, p. 39). In 2021, an estimated 74 percent of all global ransomware earnings flowed to Russia-linked hackers (Galeotti, 2024, p.28). Following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, several cybercriminal organizations openly declared support for the Russian state and directed attacks against countries assisting Kyiv. According to McLaren et al. (2025), Russia has since adopted a "crime-as-a-service" model in which cybercriminal groups conduct disruptive operations in exchange for cryptocurrency payments, operational freedom and protection from domestic prosecution (p. 38). Such arrangements offer Moscow access to highly skilled non-state cyber capabilities while preserving plausible deniability.

Criminal networks also allow Russian intelligence to compensate for the loss of a significant number of its assets in Europe. After the expulsions of over 600 Russian diplomats from the West and the manpower strain created by the war in Ukraine, the Russian state and intelligence community turned to criminal networks and other low-level proxies to fill the gap in intelligence-gathering capacity (McLaren et al., 2025, p. 41). The Telegram channel "Grey Zone," with 550,000 subscribers and links to the Wagner Group, is alleged to serve as a recruitment platform that directs prospective operatives to a recruiter account, which collects personal information, location data, and work experience from potential agents across Europe (p. 42). This substitution includes agents recruited for simple surveillance, exchanging encrypted messages, monitoring military drills and tracking flows of military aid (p. 42). The advantage of using criminals for these purposes is that they provide deniability while freeing more skilled officers for higher value tasks.

Arguably the most worrying trend is Russia's use of criminal intermediaries to conduct covert action and sabotage operations across Europe. Galeotti (2024) argues that Russian intelligence services increasingly rely on "disposable" low-level criminals to conduct deniable operations abroad (p. 41). European authorities linked Russian-connected actors to a series of arson attacks and sabotage plots that targeted logistical infrastructure, warehouses and facilities associated with supply of military aid to Ukraine. Incidents in Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Germany and Spain raised growing concerns among European security services that Moscow is systematically integrating criminal actors into broader hybrid warfare campaigns intended to intimidate adversaries, disrupt support for Ukraine and generate political instability within NATO member states.

In March 2024, British nationals Dylan Earl and Jake Reeves were charged with helping

Russian intelligence following an arson attack on a London warehouse, while two other Britons were accused of knowingly accepting money from a foreign intelligence service (McLaren et al., 2025, p. 42). The Kremlin also targeted Western arms manufacturers directly, with foiled attempts to assassinate Armin Papperger, the CEO of German defence manufacturer Rheinmetall, and operations to sever communications cables at Evenes Air Base in Norway (p. 44). Multiple other suspected assassination attempts have also been reported, suggesting Russia's willingness to escalate its use of criminal proxies towards targeted political violence. McLaren et al. (2025) interprets this as Russia's return to its Soviet tradition of "active measures," although now integrated into its broader hybrid warfare strategy and facilitated by criminal networks (p. 42).

The historical development of Russia's geocriminal practice highlights the importance of broader structural limitations and constraints that Russia faces within the international system. Russia's growing reliance on criminal intermediaries appears as a rational adaptation of available means to conditions of its asymmetric rivalry with the West. The scale of Russia's disadvantage is well established. Galeotti (2018) observes that Russia's military is smaller than the combined forces NATO, while its economy is smaller than that of New York state, yet its authoritarian structure allows it to concentrate resources and exploit whatever advantages it can find, including the mobilization of organized crime as a tool of foreign policy (p. 252). This case study demonstrates that Moscow's use of *geocriminality* rapidly expanded in scale and substance after 2014, when its foreign policy objectives became increasingly constrained by economic and diplomatic isolation. As Russia's conventional options narrowed, pre-existing links with organized crime offer the Kremlin a flexible set of deniable instruments capable of compensating for its systemic weaknesses without crossing the threshold of war with a stronger NATO alliance. McLaren et al. (2025) captures this logic by noting that the Kremlin is "aware of its material limitations compared to the West, and still wary of triggering Article 5," and has then "reverted to hybrid warfare tactics" to punish the West for supporting Ukraine and deter future support (p. 10). Russia's *geocriminality* is not only a symptom of relative state weakness, but a functional alternative to conventional power projection that the Kremlin shows no sign of abandoning.

### 8.2 People's Republic of China

The People's Republic of China (PRC) presents another distinctive case of contemporary *geocriminality*. In the Russian case, instrumentalization of organized crime emerged from the post-Soviet institutional and economic collapse, during which illicit actors were structurally integrated into Russia's new governance model. It was subsequently operationalized as a covert tool within an intensifying confrontation with a conventionally stronger West, in which Russia seeks to revise the outcomes of the Cold War and its weakened position within the international

system. Meanwhile, China's geocriminal practices reflect the aspirations of a rising great power seeking to project global influence while preserving its domestic one-party model, its advantages within the existing international system, and the country's access to global markets essential to its economic success.

The symbiotic relationship between China's political authorities and organized crime syndicates has deep historical roots. The origins of Chinese triad societies lie in the seventeenth century, during the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasties (Purbrick, 2019, p. 305). According to legend, five Shaolin monks, whose monastery was destroyed by the Qing emperor, founded the Tiandihui (Heaven and Earth Society) with the goal of overthrowing the Manchu rulers and restoring the Han Chinese Ming dynasty (p. 306). Over the following century, secret societies became deeply embedded in the social and economic fabric of Chinese society both on the mainland and abroad. Their motivational drivers were as political as they were economic in practical terms. Secret societies functioned as mutual aid fraternities among poor peasants and marginalized communities who lacked access to formal legal and economic institutions (pp. 305-306). The political ideology of Ming restoration fused with the function of mutual support among the disadvantaged to blur the line between patriotic resistance, solidarity and criminal activity.

By the nineteenth century, many secret society branches became deeply involved in banditry, extortion, smuggling and opium trafficking (p. 306). Expansion of European opium trade via Chinese ports after the Opium Wars dramatically accelerated this criminalization. Secret societies became key intermediaries in the distribution of opium, operation of illegal gambling networks and provision of protection rackets, embedding organized crime deeply within the commercial infrastructure of coastal China. By the late nineteenth century, secret societies, now increasingly referred to as triads or "Black Societies," evolved into "shadow governments" that controlled underground financial channels and enforced contracts through informal relationships and violence (Purbrick, 2019, p. 305; Cooper, 2024, p. 47). Throughout the twentieth century, domestic and foreign forces all sought to instrumentalize them for political purposes.

Japanese authorities actively used triads to maintain order, organizing them into the Asia Flourishing Society and employing triad leader Wong Wo as a detective in the Wanchai Gendarmerie (p. 311). British authorities in Hong Kong, for their part, relied on nationalist intelligence networks that included northern Chinese triad members to counter Japanese subversive activity (pp. 309-311). During the Chinese Civil War, the Kuomintang formally integrated organized crime into its security apparatus. The head of nationalist military intelligence tasked Lieutenant General Kot Siu Wong, a long-standing triad member, with reorganizing, integrating and expanding the various triad societies into a unified anti-communist force (p. 312). When the eventual communist victory in 1949 forced the nationalists to retreat to Taiwan, the

triad landscape was transformed and consolidated.

In 1950, Mao Zedong and the CCP launched a campaign targeting both Kuomintang remnants and secret societies, successfully destroying the influence of the triads. An estimated 80 million members of secret societies and over two million criminals were "re-educated" and reintroduced into society, effectively eradicating the criminal underworld in mainland China (Wang, 2013, p. 8). Yet the CCP also recognized the potential utility of those triads that could be brought under its control. In July 1936, Mao Zedong himself wrote an appeal to the Ko Lao Hui secret society, praising their history of "overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming", their patriotic participation in the 1911 Revolution, and avowing that "the Ko Lao Hui can exist legally under the Chinese Soviet Government" (p. 316). The stage was therefore set for the CCP's post-1949 approach that combined a ruthless suppression of hostile or independent criminal organizations with a selective offer of cooperation to those willing to serve the state's objectives. This template would be dramatically expanded after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and the challenge of Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty.

When Deng Xiaoping came to power in the late 1970s, he introduced economic reforms that sought to modernize China’s economy through market liberalization, foreign investment and integration into the global trading system while preserving the CCP’s monopoly on political power. China's decades of isolationism, however, had left its leadership ill-equipped to navigate international markets. Deng then turned to the wealthiest Chinese business figures of Hong Kong, alongside the triad networks with which they were often affiliated (Cooper, 2021, pp. 409, 421). On 23 May 1982, a pivotal meeting took place in Beijing. Hong Kong tycoons Li Ka-Shing and Henry Fok Ying-Tung met with Deng Xiaoping and Premier Zhao Ziyang to negotiate the future of the peninsula (p. 63). The tycoons' task was to advise and educate Chinese authorities on the basic rules of capitalism and international trade. In return, Beijing granted them privileged access to PRC's vast domestic markets and designated them as key intermediaries for the transition of Hong Kong (p. 63). The 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration formalized the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. This impending transfer compelled Beijing to prepare the ground for its arrival not only among Hong Kong’s financial community but also among the triad societies that controlled much of the peninsula’s underground economy.

From the late 1980s onward, Western intelligence services detected increasingly active operations in Hong Kong by the United Front Work Department (UFWD), the CCP's foreign intelligence arm responsible for cultivating overseas Chinese communities (p. 63). The UFWD was tasked specifically with building alliances with triad groups already affiliated with many Hong Kong business figures. Both Purbrick (2019) and Cooper (2021) allege that by 1992, the head of the New China News Agency in Hong Kong, Wong Man Fong, was instructed to inform

triad bosses that if they agreed to not jeopardize the transition process and normal business in Hong Kong, Beijing would allow them to pursue their illegal activities without interference (pp. 316-317; pp. 63-64). Beijing authorities created a front company in Hong Kong for Wong Man Fong to facilitate his contacts with the triads and to help triad groups establish legitimate businesses in mainland China. Following these negotiations, Deng Xiaoping himself began referring to the Hong Kong triads as "patriotic groups," while Interior Minister Tao Siju publicly stated that there were patriotic members among the triads who were welcome to do business in China (Purbrick, 2019, p. 316; Cooper, 2021, p. 63). The Hong Kong press subsequently published a photograph of Charles Heung, a senior member of the Sun Yee On triad, conversing with Deng's daughter - a visual confirmation of the newly formalized alliance (Cooper, 2021, p. 64). This collaboration between the CCP and Chinese organized crime networks would expand its global reach as China increased its influence within the international system.

In the late 1990s, American and Canadian intelligence and law enforcement agencies became increasingly concerned with economic and political infiltration driven by a suspected alliance between the CCP, Hong Kong triads and Chinese business tycoons, all operating in coordination with PRC's intelligence services. The United States and Canada host the largest Chinese diaspora communities among Western democracies and serve as particularly suitable examples of how contemporary Chinese *geocriminality* operates abroad. Canada, in particular, became a primary theater for such activity, as Hong Kong's impending handover triggered a mass migration of people, capital and business connections to Vancouver, Toronto and other Canadian cities. Among the nearly 200,000 Hong Kong residents that immigrated to Canada during the 1990s, authorities detected a significant presence of Chinese organized crime elements (Cooper, 2021, p. 403). The scale of the threat was captured by the 1997 Sidewinder report, produced by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS).

The inquiry concluded that Chinese intelligence services, Hong Kong triads and business tycoons worked together to systematically infiltrate Canada's economy and political system. The report documented that more than 200 major Canadian firms were influenced or owned by triads, tycoons or Chinese state-linked companies, creating what it called "an effective domino effect" of economic penetration (Cooper, 2021, p. 404). Chinese intelligence services allegedly established front companies across Canada specifically for espionage and maintained regular contacts with triad networks. Sidewinder further claimed that the CCP-triad alliance sought to gain influence with Canadian politicians and gain control of Canadian companies in real estate, media and other strategic sectors (p. 401). The draft of the report was considered so politically sensitive that it was rewritten and watered down before a sanitized version was circulated to other

government agencies (McGregor & Mitchell, 2023, p. 14). McGregor & Mitchell (2023) claim that in 1998, the US Department of Justice and multiple American intelligence organizations launched Operation Dragon Lord, which corroborated Sidewinder's findings and concluded that the cooperative relationship between Chinese intelligence, private companies and organized crime posed a threat to US, Canadian and Australian national security interests. The task force found that triad-controlled financial institutions had engineered control over media and financial institutions in all three countries, and that PRC-controlled businesses and triads had worked together to penetrate military-related industries (pp. 395-397). As relations of the US and Canada with the PRC grew increasingly tense in the mid-2010s, its links with transnational organized crime came under closer scrutiny.

Available research reveals the most sustained vector of Chinese *geocriminality* to be the systematic penetration of Western economies through triad-linked investment, front companies and money-laundering networks. By the 2010s, this had evolved into a mature infrastructure. In British Columbia, Canada, the case of underground banking operations of Silver International revealed how mainland Chinese capital flight flowed through Vancouver's casinos into the Western financial system, facilitated by triad-linked underground bankers who were simultaneously laundering proceeds from transnational fentanyl trafficking (Cooper, 2021, pp. 16-27; McGregor & Mitchell, 2023, pp. 80-82). This particular case fits squarely within what has become widely known as the "Vancouver Model" – an illegal internationalized enterprise that links the Chinese Big Circle Boys organized crime syndicate, Canadian real estate and casino industries and CCP-linked businesses with connections to China, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand. This illicit financial ecosystem continues to operate and is highly symbiotic in nature. Corrupt CCP officials receive channels to move capital out of China, triad networks provide the laundering infrastructure, and Western economies absorb the illicit funds, becoming unwitting hosts to state-linked criminal wealth. As GI-TOC's (2025) Organized Crime Index notes, while the Chinese state may not overtly participate in criminal activity, "state structures often enable and shield criminal actors," with anti-corruption campaigns perceived as selective, allowing the state to manage which criminal entities are permitted to operate (p. 5).

Subversion and political warfare serve another key domain of China's geocriminal practices. The CCP's instrumentalization of organized crime for political objectives is most explicitly documented in Taiwan. As Cole (2021) demonstrates in his study of organized crime in Chinese political warfare against Taiwan, the CCP systematically used triads and their substate affiliates to penetrate, erode and bypass Taiwan's democratic firewall (p. 55). The Bamboo Union triad, working in conjunction with the China Unification Promotion Party, was deployed to intimidate pro-democracy figures and support pro-CCP political activity, with the relationship

providing deniability to political actors while offering enrichment opportunities to criminal syndicates (pp. 64-67). The same pattern extends to Hong Kong, where "patriotic triads" were mobilized during the 2019 protests to attack pro-democracy protesters, journalists and media figures critical of Beijing (p. 59). These incidents exposed the working relationship between the central government, pro-CCP legislators, the Hong Kong Police Force and organized crime. As David Mulroney, Canada's former ambassador to Beijing, stated: "There is a very tight, incestuous relationship between organized crime in China and within diaspora communities, and the United Front. Co-opting criminal networks is one of the Party's preferred tools for […] for foreign interference" (Cooper, 2021, p. 367). McGregor & Mitchell (2023) and Cooper (2021) also raise concerns about Chinese organized crime and CCP-linked capital serving as a conduit for political corruption and cultivation of state-embedded actors across Canadian institutions, citing the impunity with which the Vancouver Model continues to operate. The sentencing of Cameron Jay Ortis and the arrest of William Majcher, both former RCMP officers, for leaking secrets and/or allegedly working for the benefit of Chinese intelligence, also raise questions about potential corruption and complicity among Canadian officials (AP News, 2024; Trinh, 2026).

A particularly insidious dimension of PRC's *geocriminality* is the use of triad networks and United Front structures to monitor, intimidate and silence members of the Chinese diaspora who criticize the CCP. CSIS investigations revealed that the United Front was central to Chinese intelligence's attempts to "spy on, harass and attack Chinese-Canadians who dare to speak out against Beijing" (Cooper, 2021, p. 324). A CSIS (2025) Public Report identified foreign interference targeting ethnic, religious and cultural communities as a significant threat to Canada's social cohesion and national security, noting that such activities include "intimidation or coercion of members of ethnic, religious and cultural communities in Canada" (p. 34). Former CSIS director Michel Juneau-Katsuya confirmed that CSIS first recognized in the 1990s that the UFWD was "using Chinese organized crime figures to cultivate Canadian politicians on one hand and to target Chinese dissidents on the other," a direct continuation of tactics perfected in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Cooper, 2021, p. 324).

Chinese intelligence services also reportedly exploit their relationships with triad-linked front companies and business networks to conduct economic espionage and circumvent sanctions or export restrictions in Western jurisdictions (McGregor & Mitchell, 2023, p. 13; Cooper, 2021, p. 404). By the 2020s, such activity had intensified dramatically. CSIS (2025) identifies the PRC's targeting of "intellectual property and emerging technologies, most notably those related to artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotechnology, and aerospace" as a persistent national security concern (p. 38). As Western economic pressure on China expanded, Beijing increasingly turned to triad-linked networks to circumvent export controls and financial restrictions. The Belt

and Road Initiative has provided additional cover for geocriminal activity. As Project Mosaic documented, UFWD agent Guo Taicheng publicly admitted to building the first Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) supply-chain project in Surrey, British Columbia, adjacent to the US border. Intelligence assessments this project linked to broader Chinese efforts to establish logistics infrastructure capable of bypassing Western trade controls (McGregor & Mitchell, 2023, pp. 212-214). The United Front's network of businesses, hometown associations, trade councils and triad connections provides an ideal infrastructure for such activities, as these entities operate at the intersection of legitimate commerce and illicit trade.

Collectively, the diversity of these domains strongly suggests that Chinese *geocriminality* is not a collection of isolated transgressions but an integrated instrument of statecraft. The party-state leverages organized crime not because it lacks conventional tools, but because criminal intermediaries offer unique advantages such as deniability, access to illicit financial channels, coercive capacity outside legal frameworks, and penetration of communities and institutions that formal state channels cannot reach. In 2024, a GI-TOC report explicitly stated that China continues to leverage criminal networks to achieve "broader geopolitical aims, beyond more immediate intelligence and security objectives," signaling what it terms "a new phase in the instrumentalization of criminal actors" (Thorley, 2024, p. 22). China's *geocriminality* is then not limited to specific operational tasks of intelligence services but is linked to Beijing’s larger vision for shaping global governance. As the PRC’s global economic and political standing increases, so does the global reach and scale of its state-enabled criminality. Comolli and Rose (2021) demonstrate that economic corridors and infrastructure projects associated with China’s Belt and Road Initiative consistently "coincide or intersect with established trafficking routes and criminal hubs" in Southeast Asia and across Africa (p. 5). Special Economic Zones (SEZs) established along BRI corridors have become particular vectors for criminal exploitation.

The Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Laos, presided over by Zhao Wei, a Chinese national sanctioned by the US Treasury as the head of a "transnational criminal organization," exemplifies this dynamic (p. 21). The GTSEZ houses casinos, cyber-fraud compounds and illicit trafficking networks, while the International Crisis Group (2023) has assessed that the zone "can be exploited by Beijing for intelligence gathering and power projection." Thorley's (2024) report situates BRI physical infrastructure risks within a broader normative shift. China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), announced by Xi Jinping in 2022, promotes a vision of "common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security" grounded in non-interference in internal affairs and respect for sovereignty (p. 6). While this rhetoric appears unobjectionable on the surface, Thorley (2024) argues that the GSI's rendering of security resists "the use of legal sanctions to punish violators of international norms" (p. 6). The

mechanism through which China's alternative governance model spreads is primarily bilateral rather than multilateral.

Thorley (2024) documents how the GSI is disseminated through bilateral security agreements, law enforcement training sessions and joint statements with second countries like Nepal, Zambia, Solomon Islands and Syria. The practical implication is a system of bilateral security frameworks that provides heads of affiliated states with a wide remit for action in the name of security without corresponding accountability mechanisms, creating permissive conditions for state-linked criminality. The convergence of the BRI and the GSI is therefore the key structural development enabling Chinese *geocriminality* at the systemic level. The BRI provides the physical infrastructure through which illicit goods, capital and personnel can flow. The GSI provides the normative infrastructure – a framework of non-interference, sovereignty absolutism and elite discretion that shields the party-state and its allied criminal actors from international accountability. Together, they create an international environment in which *geocriminality* is not merely tolerated but structurally facilitated.

The historical trajectory of China's geocriminal practice reveals a structural logic that is distinct from the Russian case, yet equally consistent with the chosen theoretical framework. Where Russia's instrumentalization of organized crime emerged as a compensatory tool under conditions of asymmetric confrontation, China's *geocriminality* reflects the imperatives of a rising great power whose global interests have expanded faster than the formal mechanisms of state power can conventionally sustain. From a structural realist perspective, China's reliance on criminal intermediaries is not a symptom of state weakness but an adaptation to the fundamental gap between the scope of its geopolitical ambitions and the constraints imposed by sovereign jurisdictions of other states and international legal norms. China’s party-state possesses ample conventional capabilities like the world's largest standing army, a vast intelligence apparatus and growing naval reach, but these tools are ill-suited for the deniable influence operations, illicit financial penetration and covert political manipulation that *geocriminality* can facilitate. China's instrumentalization of organized crime has been continuous and escalating since the Deng-era rapprochement with Hong Kong triads, accelerating in step with China's integration into the global economy and the expansion of its overseas interests. The structural incentives driving this practice are therefore likely to intensify, as China's rivalry with the US deepens and the BRI extends its reach into jurisdictions with weak governance and porous borders that permit geocriminal networks to thrive. The China case study demonstrates that *geocriminality* can be an enduring instrument of statecraft available to any major power that faces a gap between its strategic objectives and the conventional legal or diplomatic means available to pursue them.

### 8.3 Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran serves as another example of contemporary *geocriminality*, in which organized crime is systematically institutionalized within a state's broader foreign policy objectives. In contrast to the Russian and the Chinese cases, Iran's geocriminal practice is instrumentalized for purposes of regime survival and preservation of a revolutionary state subject to prolonged systemic pressure and exclusion from the international system.

The origins of Iran's *geocriminality* can be traced back to the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, through which the institutional and ideological structure of contemporary Iran was created. The overthrow of the monarchy and establishment of a Shia Islamic Republic rapidly transformed Iran into an internationally isolated revolutionary state. Relations with the United States collapsed following the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-1981, while the new regime faced internal insurgencies, regional hostility and major economic disruption. The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 further intensified these pressures. The eight-year conflict militarized the new state, strengthened the autonomy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), normalized asymmetric warfare and entrenched a siege mentality within Iran's strategic culture. It was during this period that some of Iran's earliest links to Shia militias in Iraq were forged, as these anti-Saddam forces fought alongside Iran, often integrating directly into the IRGC command structure (Mailey, 2024, p. 16). At the same time, sanctions and arms embargoes forced Tehran to develop alternative procurement channels, smuggling routes and covert financial mechanisms to sustain its economy and the war effort. These dynamics continue to shape Iran's geopolitical position today. The Islamic Republic remains highly constrained by severe economic sanctions, periodic domestic unrest, diplomatic isolation from much of the West and an enduring military asymmetry vis-à-vis the US and its regional allies. At the same time, Tehran continues to perceive itself as encircled by hostile powers and vulnerable to external efforts aimed at weakening or destabilizing the regime. Under such conditions, deniable and asymmetric instruments of statecraft only increase in their strategic utility.

As Hussein (2025) notes, Iranian leadership concluded that direct use of state operatives for assassinations and covert operations abroad was "too risky and too visible", while crippling international sanctions compelled it to generate revenue and procure military equipment through illicit means. In this approach, Tehran adopted what Hussein (2025) calls the "be like water" maxim, becoming less reliant on ideological allies alone and "successfully turning transnational crime cartels into a tool of foreign policy." GI-TOC's (2025) Organized Crime Index confirms this assessment, characterizing Iran as a state with a high level of criminality, in which the IRGC dominates illicit markets ranging from human trafficking and arms trade to cybercrime and illicit financial flows (p. 5).

The institutional core of Iran's *geocriminality* is centered on the IRGC, alongside the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Unlike conventional military institutions, the IRGC developed into a hybrid structure concerned with political, security and economic spheres, maintaining substantial influence across major sectors of Iran's economy. According to Mailey (2024), the organization's control over ports, airports, border crossings and commercial infrastructure creates both the "incentive and opportunity to tap into illicit markets" (p. 9). The IRGC's penetration of strategic industries is so extensive that the US Financial Crimes Enforcement Network declared Iran a primary money laundering concern, severing Iranian banks from the global financial system (p. 11). Its operational role extends well beyond money laundering and procurement. The IRGC also functions as an institutional manager of a wide network of proxies that facilitate sanctions evasion and covert action abroad. Mailey (2024) describes Unit 190 of the IRGC Quds Force as specifically responsible for operations supporting Iranian-aligned militias across the Middle East, including their financing and material support (p. 6). GI-TOC's (2026) analysis characterizes Unit 190 as a "hybrid intelligence and criminal system," emphasizing that its weapons smuggling operations are sustained by illicit finance and laundering networks including hawala financial systems, trade-based money laundering and cryptocurrency through Gulf intermediaries, collectively functioning as a "parallel treasury". Across the IRGC, various units share overlapping smuggling responsibilities, underscoring the "centrality of illicit activity to the mission and mandate of the entire organization" (p. 6).

Maritime sanctions evasion and oil smuggling infrastructure is of particular value to Iran, as it allows Tehran to continue its oil exports and maintain access to this primary revenue source. Iran crafted an elaborate shadow shipping network "based on ship-to-ship transfers, manipulated identification systems, re-flagging and falsified ship documentation, working through criminal maritime brokers in the Gulf, Southeast Asia and China" (GI-TOC, 2026). Mailey (2024) documents that organizations monitoring these flows refer to the practice as "subterfuge shipping", with the main purpose being concealment of the origin. ownership and destination of Iranian crude (p. 6). The US Treasury identified numerous oil smuggling networks that rely on "document forgery, labyrinths of shell companies, bribery and fraud," with one network sanctioned in 2022 involving a range of entities spanning the Afghan chargé d'affaires in Moscow, a Russian oil trading firm and a UAE-based shipping company (p. 6). The GI-TOC (2025) Organized Crime Index confirms that Iran has been able to sustain and even expand its oil exports through such methods (p. 4). It must be highlighted that these shadow trade networks do not operate in isolation. They appear closely integrated with financial facilitators, Hezbollah-linked entities and money laundering intermediaries that form a single geocriminal ecosystem that links maritime oil trade to Iran's broader shadow economy (Mailey, 2024, p. 7).

Iran's relationships with non-state and criminal structures that make up that shadow economy vary considerably. Mailey (2024) identifies four broad categories of non-state actors leveraged by Tehran. They include ideologically aligned armed groups like Hezbollah, the Houthis and Shia militias, homegrown Iranian criminal organizations, purely transactional partnerships with transnational criminal networks and cybercriminal actors (pp. 2, 8). Distinctions between them are often fluid. As Mailey (2024) observes, "many proxy groups that begin as ideological affiliates take on characteristics of a purely profit-driven criminal organization," while crime groups and ideological allies alike "have leveraged high-tech partnerships with hackers or developed cyber capabilities themselves" (p. 8). The GI-TOC (2025) index also notes that foreign criminal actors do not maintain a strong operational presence within Iran itself, precisely because state-embedded actors dominate the country's key criminal markets (p. 7).

Among Iran's regional partners, Hezbollah occupies an especially important position. Since the 1980s, the organization developed into simultaneously a militarized political movement and a sophisticated international criminal enterprise closely aligned with Tehran's policy in the Middle East. Hezbollah possesses the "highest degree of institutionalized strategic and operational coordination with Tehran," and this collaboration extends directly into interaction with criminal markets (Mailey, 2024, p. 12). A former FBI official described Hezbollah's infrastructure as "second to none when it comes to moving counterfeit goods, stolen merchandise or drugs" (p. 13). Its Business Affairs Component (BAC) manages a global network of licit and illicit commercial enterprises across the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Europe and North America (p. 14).

Origins of this infrastructure lie partly in the Syrian-Lebanese criminal nexus that emerged during the Lebanese Civil War and expanded under Syrian occupation of Lebanon. Burman and Blanga (2025) draw on declassified Israeli, CIA and US government documents to reconstruct how Hezbollah, Syrian military intelligence and senior Assad regime figures constructed an extensive criminal syndicate involving drug trafficking, counterfeit currency production and money laundering (pp. 100-102). At its height during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the syndicate supplied 75 percent of global hashish demand, half of Europe's heroin supplies, and 20 percent of US heroin consumption, operating at least nine drug labs in the Beqaa Valley near Hezbollah installations (p. 104). Syrian officers facilitated global distribution networks extending across Europe, Latin America and North America, using couriers to ship drugs into North America from Haiti and return with second-hand cars to sell in Africa (p. 108).

This criminal ecosystem evolved substantially following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. Cooperation between Hezbollah, Assad and Iranian-backed militias into what has been described as a "Captagon economy" centered on industrial-scale production of synthetic

amphetamines (Ibrahim, 2022). By 2022, local production of Captagon accounted for 80 percent of the world's total supply, with a trade value estimated at $57 billion (Burman and Blanga, 2025, p. 135). Iran-backed actors played a significant facilitating and protective role within the broader Syria-Hezbollah narcotics ecosystem (Mailey, 2024, p. 23). A Jordanian military spokesperson specifically denounced Iran's proxy militias as "the most dangerous of the Captagon traffickers due to the ulterior political motives associated with their operations" (p. 23). Drug trade took on a strategic dimension, allowing Iran and its proxies to generate revenue for their operations. As Ibrahim (2024) documents, drug smuggling was pursued "not only for financial purposes, but also to threaten 'enemy countries'" (Ibrahim, 2022). Captagon trafficking networks became instruments of asymmetric warfare that flooded rival societies with addiction and granted political leverage over regional states. Mailey (2024) reports that the Assad regime used the Captagon trade as an "agenda item" in regional normalization, framing Captagon seizures as a sign of good will and "utilizing its agency over the drug trade to extract political and financial concessions from other countries" (p. 24). This strategy proved effective, as Burman and Blanga (2025) claim that the Arabian Peninsula states, alarmed by the scale of Captagon flows across their borders, were compelled to re-engage with Assad and end Syria's isolation in exchange for promises to halt the drug trade (p. 115). Transnational narcotics trafficking was then instrumentalized by Syria and Iran simultaneously, as a revenue source, a weapon of societal destabilization and a bargaining chip in regional diplomacy.

Beyond Captagon, Iran's strategic use of narcotics trade extends across multiple drug commodities and transit corridors. The heroin routes running from Afghanistan through Iran and into Europe became a strategic tool in its own right. Mailey (2024) maps Iran's state-crime nexus across four countries along these routes – Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Albania. He notes that each of them "is home to a mix of the Iranian regime's political opponents and sympathizers" and exhibits vulnerabilities that Tehran exploits (p. 30). By embedding its criminal networks along these routes, Iran gains leverage over transit states, penetrates their security institutions and acquires infrastructure for coercive operations. In Turkey, MOIS and IRGC-linked criminal groups have become deeply embedded and "run the gamut of its illicit priorities," from oil smuggling and money laundering to assassinations and abductions (p. 32). In Azerbaijan, they penetrated the security sector, as evidenced by the 2022 arrest of Azerbaijani border agents for trafficking drugs across the Iranian border (p. 32). GI-TOC fieldwork in February 2024 also found that Iran was using trafficking operations to obtain a supply of US dollars that it is otherwise cut off from due to sanctions (p. 19). The highly diversified architecture of Iran's state-facilitated drug trade thus advances Tehran's key strategic foreign policy objectives. It generates revenue for its economy, funds regional proxies, compromises neighboring transit states and offers cover

for coercive action against dissidents.

Transnational political repression is one of the most direct and visible manifestations of Iran's *geocriminality*. A growing body of reports and investigations reveals that Tehran increasingly relies on criminal actors to conduct assassinations, kidnappings, surveillance and intimidation campaigns targeting dissidents, journalists and foreign adversaries. As GI-TOC (2026) points out, this cooperation is "not ideological" in nature, as Iran recruits "co-opted gangs, Eurasian organized crime figures and foreign nationals" for its coercive operations abroad. Between 2017 and 2020, Tehran was linked to the murders of media entrepreneur Saeed Karimian and an IRGC defector Massoud Molavi, as well as the abduction of an Iranian dissident Habib Chaab (Mailey, 2024, p. 33). In 2024, two Canadian nationals with ties to the Hells Angels biker gang were indicted in the US for conspiracy to murder two people in Maryland at the direction of Iranian intelligence services (US Department of Justice, 2024; Bell, 2025). A year later, a federal jury in the US convicted an Azeri-Iranian and a Georgian national of murder for hire that targeted a US-based journalist, Masih Alinejad, on behalf of the Iranian government (US Department of Justice, 2025). A central figure behind these coercive actions is Naji Sharifi Zindashti, an Iranian-Turkish drug trafficker believed by Canada's CSIS, the US Department of Justice and the US Treasury Department to lead a network that is responsible for numerous assassinations and kidnappings across multiple jurisdictions "in an attempt to silence Iran's perceived critics" at the behest of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (CSIS, 2025; Bell, 2025).

European security services have also reported increasing cooperation between Iranian intelligence and local criminal organizations. Hussein (2025) and Sayneh (2025) document Tehran's cultivation of relationships with Sweden's Foxtrot drug distribution network, whose leader Rawa "the Kurdish Fox" Majid is assumed to have been recruited by MOIS after fleeing to Iran in September 2023. Majid subsequently worked with Iranian agents to orchestrate an attempted attack on the Israeli embassy in Stockholm in 2024 (Sayneh, 2025). The US Treasury Department subsequently sanctioned the Foxtrot network as a transnational criminal organization for its involvement in drug trafficking and attacks against Israelis and Jews in Europe (US Treasury Department, 2025). Iran also allegedly maintains a relationship with the Irish Kinahan cartel, that is reported to launder its money through the Iranian resort island of Kish, conduct business with Hezbollah and having attempted to purchase airplane parts on behalf of Tehran (Hussein, 2025). All these arrangements illustrate the growing convergence between transnational organized crime syndicates and Iran's state-directed covert action, with criminal intermediaries offering Tehran local operational knowledge and capacity, as well as deniability and reduced political risk.

However, Iran's geocriminal practice is not limited to the material domain, increasingly

extending into cyberspace as well. According to Mailey (2024), Tehran has cultivated relationships with cybercriminal actors who conduct financially motivated cyberattacks while benefiting from operational protection within Iran (p. 9). Iran's cyber operations are "carried out by a mix of state-embedded entities and non-state proxies that often have strong links to the MOIS and IRGC" (p. 9). The GI-TOC (2025) Organized Crime Index suggests that, Iran-linked cyber groups engage in hacking, espionage and cyberattacks targeting foreign institutions, and notes that Iran's cyber ecosystem is "increasingly integrated into global criminal networks, with malware and hacking services procured from international cybercrime forums" (p. 5). The 2013 Albanian case illustrates this convergence particularly clearly. Following Albania's decision to host members of the Iranian dissident Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) group, Iran conducted repeated cyberattacks against Albanian government infrastructure. The bulk of these attacks was perpetrated by Homeland Justice, an Iranian state-sponsored hacktivist group (Mailey, 2024, p. 35). These attacks have "targeted government systems with crippling persistence, bringing the government's internet presence to a standstill on several occasions" (p. 35). Canada's CSIS (2025) further noted that Iran-aligned cyber groups such as the CyberAv3ngers have targeted Western critical infrastructure, combining "offensive cyber operations with cyber-enabled influence operations in the pursuit of geopolitical goals" (p. 51).

This case study reveals that Iran's *geocriminality* spans a wide range of activities, from sanctions evasion to drug trafficking, to transnational coercion and cyber operations. Tehran's geocriminal practices appear to be highly integrated within a single institutional architecture managed by the IRGC, the Quds Force and MOIS. What distinguishes Iran from other cases of *geocriminality* is not merely the scale or sophistication of its illicit networks, but the degree to which they have been institutionalized over four decades into a durable system of statecraft, in which organized crime plays a central role in Iran's foreign policy and the survival of the regime. Iran's instrumentalization of organized crime appears to be even more institutionalized and directly managed than Russia's. Unlike Russia, where criminal networks fused with state institutions during the chaos of privatization and institutional fragmentation of the early post-Soviet period, Iran's *geocriminality* developed from the outset within the core structures of the revolutionary regime itself.

The IRGC did not adapt pre-existing links with criminal networks to a change in structural pressure on the state, but actively constructed and managed illicit activity as an instrument of survival, asymmetric warfare and sanctions resistance. In this sense, Iran's approach to *geocriminality* resembles a model of direct state-managed criminality embedded within the regime's security doctrine. The Iranian case then highlights the extent to which prolonged geopolitical isolation and exclusion from the international system can incentivize the

institutionalization of illicit economies within state structures. Decades of sanctions, diplomatic pressure and military asymmetry constrained Tehran's ability to pursue its regional objectives through conventional means. Under such conditions, *geocriminality* evolved into a rational and relatively low-cost strategy for circumventing constraints and projecting influence abroad, while minimizing the risks of direct interstate confrontation. Moreover, it transformed from an auxiliary instrument of covert action into a permanent component of state power itself.

## 9. Threat Trajectory and Enabling Factors:

Analysis of the history of *geocriminality* and the three contemporary case studies reveals state instrumentalization of organized crime for foreign policy objectives to be a historically recurring and persistent phenomenon in international politics. Geocriminal practice appears to be less of a function of the state's regime type or ideological orientation, but rather of systemic constraints, pressures and incentives. Across different historical periods and political systems, states repeatedly turned to cooperation with criminal intermediaries at times of increased interstate security competition bound by systemic limitations. Nuclear deterrence, global alliance structures, economic interdependence, international legal norms and reputational costs significantly constrain the ability of states to conventionally respond to perceived threats via openly coercive or revisionist foreign policy. These structural constraints within an anarchic international system then incentivize development of covert and deniable statecraft strategies to circumvent them. These findings corroborate the structural realist argument that "states are functionally similar units," whose relations are primarily influenced by "the distribution of capabilities across the system rather than domestic regime type" (Waltz, 1979, p. 99).

Case study review further indicates a consistent trend toward proliferation of selective tolerance, co-optation and even institutional integration of criminal networks by the security services of some of the key powers within the international system. This growth of geocriminal practice can be explained by the increasing convergence between the operational needs of intelligence services and capabilities possessed by organized crime. Modern covert action operations rely on obscure logistics and funding, recruitment of proxy actors, infiltration of foreign institutions, cyber capabilities and deniable violence. Organized crime groups already specialize in precisely these functions. Twenty-first century transnational criminal networks have become numerous and sophisticated enough to effectively provide ready-made covert infrastructures that are self-sustaining, deniable and disposable. These qualities make them universally suitable for any state that strives to overcome exogenous limitations specific to their position on the world stage.

On the systemic level, such proliferation of geocriminal practice can also be attributed to

the imitation dynamics described by structural realist theory. Waltz (1979) argues that interstate rivalries drive states to compete "in the arts and the instruments of force," which eventually leads them to "imitate each other and become socialized to their system" (pp. 128, 132). For example, Russia's deployment of its shadow fleet and the illicit financial infrastructure in its support is strikingly similar to Iran's approach to evading sanctions on its oil exports. At the same time, Iran's leveraging of drug trafficking networks to finance regional paramilitary proxies closely resembles similar American practice during the Cold War. The principal difference between the three case studies lies not in how *geocriminality* operates, but in what structural constraints states seek to overcome through it. Russia, China and Iran can be said to represent three distinct typologies of contemporary *geocriminality*: *compensatory-revisionist*, *expansionary-integrative* and *survivalist*.

Russia represents a *compensatory-revisionist* form of *geocriminality*. Moscow's reliance on criminal networks intensified sharply after 2014 and especially after 2022 as sanctions, diplomatic isolation and military constraints limited its conventional options. Criminal actors embedded in Russia's institutions since the 1990s evolved from purely profit-seeking entities to foreign policy force multipliers capable of facilitating sanctions evasion, intelligence gathering, sabotage, cyber operations and intelligence gathering against a conventionally stronger West. *Geocriminality* therefore functions as a readily available and low-cost mechanism through which Russia can continue contesting the international order despite structural disadvantages.

China exemplifies the *expansionary-integrative* approach. Unlike Russia and Iran, Beijing is not as heavily isolated or conventionally weakened. Instead, Chinese geocriminal practices support the ambitions of a rising great power seeking to expand influence globally while preserving the economic edge essential to its continued ascent. Chinese criminal-state collaboration therefore focuses less on compensating for conventional weakness or isolation and more on economic penetration, technology acquisition and covert political influence to maintain its dynamic rise.

Iran adopts a *survivalist* model. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, prolonged sanctions, regional isolation and regime insecurity incentivized the new regime in Tehran to institutionalize smuggling routes, covert finance systems and criminalized proxy structures into core mechanisms of regime survival since the inception of the Islamic Republic. Unlike Russia, whose *geocriminality* expanded sharply with increased geopolitical pressure, Iran initially developed its links with organized crime as a form of statecraft embedded within the IRGC and Iran's broader political economy.

These varied typologies of geocriminal practice can be interpreted through the structural realist lens as manifestations of the three causes of international conflict identified by Waltz

(1959). He argues that interstate competition and conflict operates at three levels: the nature of man, the internal structure of states and the anarchic state system (p. 12). The observed typologies reflect the interaction of all three levels, with the anarchic state system being the “permissive cause,” where no overarching authority can prevent states from undertaking the risks of war, or, by extension, the risks of *geocriminality* (p. 234). In anarchy, as Waltz explains, "each state is the final judge of its own cause" and "any state may at any time use force to implement its policies" (p. 160). This condition applies equally to the use of criminal proxies as a means of coercion when the use of overt force is perceived as too costly or ineffective. The internal structure of each state then determines the institutional form geocriminality takes. Russia's fusion of intelligence services with organized crime, China's party-state coordination with triad networks, and Iran's embedding of illicit networks within the IRGC each flow from their distinct domestic institutional histories. The nature and choices of individual leaders further shape the timing, intensity and strategic direction of geocriminal practice, dependent on their perception of threat and calculation of risk. The three typologies are therefore best understood as structurally conditioned variations of realist logic, each reflecting a different weighting of the same three causal forces.

Overall, observed trends suggest that state-crime collaboration is likely to continue proliferating and become further entrenched within the contemporary international system. The ongoing transition from the relatively stable unipolar post-Cold War order toward increasingly competitive multipolarity is producing a highly conflictual environment marked by intensifying rivalries among global and regional powers alike. The overlap between key dynamics within the sphere of interstate security and the trajectory of global organized crime is likely to deepen and incentivize geocriminal practice. GI-TOC analysts conclude that unipolarity and the liberal international order appear to be in terminal decline, with the corollary that organized crime will increasingly be used as an instrument of geopolitical competition (Williams, 2024, p. 6; GI-TOC, 2025, p. 5). NATO (2021) experts signal that global security competition is becoming increasingly “persistent, simultaneous and boundless,” blurring the line between “traditional military actions and non-military activities that can have disruptive and destructive effects” (p. 3, 4). As a result, the pool of state actors willing to instrumentalize criminal networks is bound to increase. As more states adopt such practices, the normalization of state-crime collaboration will likely reduce reputational and political costs for others considering similar tactics, accelerating diffusion across the system. Williams (2024) projects that by 2040, mutually beneficial symbiotic relationships between authoritarian states and criminal organizations are likely to become the norm (p. 14). Meanwhile, criminal groups are becoming more mobile and more adept at transnational coordination than the institutions tasked with stopping them, taking advantage of fractures in international relations and erosion of global cooperation (GI-TOC, 2025, p. 32). This

erosion and the current inability of international institutions to mitigate the increasing threat of *geocriminality* deserves special attention, specifically because it is a transnational problem that states cannot isolate themselves from through unilateral actions or policies.

## 10. International Legal and Institutional Gaps:

The following institutional and legal review section will explore key reasons that account for the failure of existing international institutional and legal frameworks to mitigate the observed proliferation of *geocriminality*. The initial observation about the architecture of the international system reveals a duality where geocriminal practices occupy a space between two traditionally separate domains of international governance. On one side lie matters of sovereignty, state consent, territorial integrity and armed conflict, governed primarily by the UN Charter and international humanitarian law. On the other lie largely de-politicized matters of law enforcement and organized crime that are addressed through police cooperation mechanisms like INTERPOL and treaties such as the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC).

*Geocriminality* is a phenomenon that exists in the gap between these two realms. It falls below the threshold of conventional armed conflict because it is conducted through deniable non-state intermediaries rather than uniformed military forces. Yet it also exceeds ordinary criminality because the activity is directed or enabled by state intelligence and security service in pursuit of political goals. No major international institution formally recognizes *geocriminality* as a distinct form of state behaviour. Despite evident historical precedence, the concept itself only emerged in academic and policy literature in recent years. Existing frameworks were designed for a geopolitical environment in which organized crime was generally understood as exclusively a police matter. *Geocriminality* deliberately blurs the distinction between state and non-state activity, allowing governments to exploit ambiguity with regard to responsibility and intent. Activity of criminal proxies can be presented or interpreted as autonomous illicit behaviour rather than deliberate state-sanctioned acts. This creates major evidentiary obstacles for international legal mechanisms that rely on clear attribution of responsibility to sovereign actors.

### 10.1 The United Nations Charter and Limits of Collective Security

The UN Charter was primarily designed to regulate overt interstate aggression and maintain collective security among sovereign states. Article 2(4) prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of states, while Chapter VII empowers the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) with an exclusive right to determine threats to international peace and security, as well as to authorize collective measures in response

(UNC, 1945, pp. 3, 9).

The UNSC remains the principal body responsible for enforcement within the international legal order. Unlike the UN General Assembly (UNGA), whose resolutions are generally non-binding recommendations that reflect political consensus rather than enforceable law, UNSC resolutions possess binding legal authority over member states (p. 7). In theory, this gives the UNSC a capacity to address transnational security threats, including sanctions evasion, terrorist financing and organized crime. In practice, however, the UNSC remains constrained and often deadlocked by the political interests of its permanent members (National Intelligence Council, 2021, p. 99). As Kemp (2022) highlights, "the UN is weak and often bypassed," with no state or alliance "willing to take on the challenges of global leadership" (p. 100).

This creates a major obstacle for addressing *geocriminality*. As this study has shown, several states accused of instrumentalizing organized crime are themselves major regional or global powers that possess extensive diplomatic influence and, in some cases, veto authority within the UNSC. Consequently, any enforcement action against state-linked criminal activity would be highly selective and politically contingent. International responses are often shaped by broader geopolitical alignments and rivalries, rather than by consistent application of legal principles (Aydin-Dusgit et al., 2025, p. 3).

Furthermore, the Charter system was not designed to address deniable coercion conducted below the threshold of armed attack. Geocriminal practices rarely constitute conventional uses of force in the legal sense envisioned by the Charter framework. Attribution remains difficult, escalation thresholds are ambiguous and states frequently avoid openly acknowledging such operations specifically to remain beneath the threshold that would trigger collective security mechanisms of the UN Charter. Resulting legal ambiguity creates a permissive environment in which states can exploit criminal intermediaries while avoiding many of the consequences traditionally associated with overt aggression. International law remains comparatively well-developed regarding conventional interstate warfare but is significantly weaker when it comes to covert forms of warfare. As contemporary strategic rivalry increasingly shifts into the gray-zone between war and peace, the institutional architecture of the UN system appears progressively less capable of effectively regulating state behavior (Aydin-Dusgit et al., 2025).

### 10.2 Limits of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)

UNTOC represents the most comprehensive international legal framework for combatting organized crime. Opened for signature since 2000, the Convention seeks to "promote cooperation to prevent and combat transnational crime more effectively" (UNODC, 2004, p. 5). Yet despite its broad scope and widespread adoption among states in the international system, UNTOC

contains several major limitations regarding *geocriminality*.

The first limitation is definitional. The Convention defines an organized criminal group as one acting "in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit" (p. 5). This definition clearly distinguishes organized crime from politically motivated violence such as terrorism or insurgency. However, when criminal networks are directed by intelligence or security services for geopolitical objectives, their purpose extends beyond material gain. The state itself remains absent from the Convention's framework, except as an actor responsible for criminalizing the conduct of non-state criminal actors within its jurisdiction.

The second limitation derives from sovereignty protections embedded throughout UNTOC. Article 4 requires implementation consistent with "the principles of sovereign equality and territorial integrity of States" and that of "non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other States" (p. 7). Similar protections appear throughout provisions governing mutual legal assistance and joint investigations (p. 25). These safeguards are politically necessary for international cooperation, but they also shield state-sponsored criminality from meaningful external scrutiny. States accused of geocriminal practices can always invoke sovereignty protections to resist investigations or enforcement.

Third, enforcement mechanisms themselves remain weak and decentralized under the Convention. The Conference of the Parties possesses no investigative authority, enforcement mechanism or meaningful compliance system. Mutual legal assistance remains voluntary and may be refused on grounds of national security interests (p. 24). Jurisdictional provisions of the treaty remain overwhelmingly territorial, making it difficult to address criminal operations orchestrated transnationally through a mix of covert state and non-state structures.

Thus, UNTOC remains a framework highly effective at facilitating voluntary technical cooperation against conventional organized crime, but powerless in addressing state instrumentalization of criminal networks. As Williams (2025) projects, state protection for organized crime "will undermine the progress made since the signing of [UNTOC]" (p. 15). He further warns that effects of intense geopolitical competition create an increasingly permissive environment of state-sponsored organized crime, suggesting that the UNTOC framework is not only limited, but faces active erosion as states formally or informally withdraw from global governance commitments (p. 8, 15).

### 10.3 INTERPOL and Limits of Police Cooperation

INTERPOL faces similar constraints. Article 2 of its constitution defines the organization's role as facilitating cooperation between criminal police authorities regarding "prevention and suppression of ordinary law crimes" (ICPO-INTERPOL, 1956/2023, p. 3) This

limitation is critical because *geocriminality* does not function as ordinary crime but as covert state activity conducted through criminal intermediaries. Its National Central Bureaus are themselves organs of member states, appointed by each country to ensure liaison with national departments and the General Secretariat (p. 6). Naturally, this includes those states potentially engaged in geocriminal practices. Consequently, INTERPOL depends operationally on cooperation from the very governments whose conduct may require scrutiny.

This creates opportunities for institutional exploitation. Recent intelligence assessments have documented allegations that authoritarian states have attempted to misuse INTERPOL mechanisms against political dissidents and exiled opponents (National Intelligence Council, 2021, p. 100). Such cases illustrate a broader structural issue, where institutions built upon state cooperation cannot easily regulate the states that sustain them. This creates a paradox whereby an institution established to uphold the rule of law is being abused, inter alia for *geocriminality*, to break it. The US Department of State (2022) highlights the abuse of the INTERPOL Red Notice system, noting that governments attempt to conceal politically motivated persecution by requesting notices for what "appear on their face to be ordinary law crimes […] but are in fact fabricated charges" (p. 3). This concealment strategy is particularly effective with INTERPOL information diffusion, whereby communications are sent selectively to specific National Central Bureaus but will be reviewed by INTERPOL only after they have already been acted upon, making them "presumably the most commonly exploited" form of abuse (p. 3).

Furthermore, INTERPOL was also specifically established as a politically neutral mechanism for technical police coordination, not as a body capable of confronting politically sensitive matters. Article 3 of its constitution strictly forbids "any intervention or activities of a political, military, religious or racial character" (INTERPOL, 1956, p. 3). Yet *geocriminality* is inherently political because it involves criminal activity directed toward foreign policy objectives of states. Notably, even the United States declined to publicly identify states accused of abusing the INTERPOL Red Notice and diffusion systems, citing concern for potential “retaliation against the United States and its international law enforcement efforts” and negative impact on the “effectiveness of INTERPOL’s law enforcement work with member countries” (US Department of State, p. 4). The organization is therefore structurally constrained from addressing the phenomenon beyond narrow technical cooperation on isolated criminal cases.

### 10.4 OSCE and Limits of Cooperative Security

Among existing institutions, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) comes closest to bridging the divide between security and criminal governance. The OSCE Istanbul Charter (1999) commits to a comprehensive approach addressing "the human,

economic, political and military dimensions of security as an integral whole" and frames OSCE as "the inclusive and comprehensive organization for consultation, decision-making and co-operation in its region" (p. 3). Its comprehensive security framework recognizes organized crime and corruption as broader security threats rather than purely domestic law-enforcement matters, stating that "international terrorism, violent extremism, organized crime and drug trafficking represent growing challenges to security" (p. 2).

However, the OSCE framework embeds structural limitations that constrain its ability to confront *geocriminality*. Paragraph 10 of the Charter (1999) explicitly affirms consensus as the basis for all decision-making, meaning any participating state accused of geocriminal practices can unilaterally block collective action (p. 5). Paragraph 18 further acknowledges that "difficulties can arise from the absence of a legal capacity of the Organization," recognizing that lack of an independent legal personality prevents the OSCE from enforcing compliance in a manner of a treaty-based institution (p. 7). Consequently, the OSCE also remains constrained by the political realities of interstate competition.

As geopolitical tensions intensified since 2014, OSCE increasingly devolved into a diplomatic battleground rather than an effective mechanism for collective security governance (Bloed, 2025, p. 7). Kemp (2022) underscores the key underlying challenge: "cooperative security only works if the sides want to cooperate" (p. 86). Bloed (2025) traces this breakdown to the reversal of the OSCE's foundational "communities of values" concept that once contributed to consensus among members, many of whom now assert restrictive interpretations of sovereignty and non-intervention (pp. 4, 7).

These limitations reflect the broader erosion of the post-Cold War cooperative order under which the organization was founded. OSCE's institutional logic depended heavily on assumptions that participating states shared a basic universal commitment for cooperative security, rule-based governance and normative convergence. Increasing fragmentation of the post-Cold War international system has significantly weakened these assumptions. The US National Intelligence Council (2021) confirms this by identifying a pattern of multilateral institutions becoming "hollowed out or sidelined by rival powers" (p. 99). Bloed (2025) reaches an even starker conclusion that essential prerequisites for the OSCE cooperative security model, namely "reciprocity, mutual respect and trust," "no longer exist" among the organization's key participating states (p. 8).

### 10.5 Geopolitical Fragmentation and Institutional Paralysis

The institutional weaknesses identified above are being intensified by broader transformations of the international system. Gradual but increasingly competitive transition from the relatively stable post-Cold War order is weakening the cooperative foundations upon which

many international institutions depend. This breaks down trust which reduces cooperation, sharing of intelligence and mutual legal assistance. Scholars and policy analysts increasingly observe a global environment characterized by geopolitical fragmentation, declining trust between major powers and erosion of multilateral governance. Aydın-Düzgit et al. (2025) confirm that geopolitical competition, US unilateralism and populist grievances have converged into a systemic upheaval where no single alternative vision of order has yet emerged to replace the declining liberal international framework (pp. 10-11). Kemp (2022) identifies this as a crisis of confidence, in which the "huge trust deficit" between states and the international organizations they created leaves "twentieth century organizations trying to deal with twenty-first century problems" (p. 96).

These trends directly benefit transnational criminal networks, which often adapt more rapidly to changing conditions than formal state institutions. It also gives them a bigger opportunity space in which to operate. At the same time, such an environment increasingly incentivizes states to weaponize global interdependence itself. Financial systems, migration flows, critical cyber infrastructure, sanctions regimes and illicit markets are becoming elements of strategic competition. This creates a dangerous feedback loop. Intensifying geopolitical rivalry weakens international cooperation while simultaneously increasing incentives for covert and deniable methods of competition. As institutional paralysis deepens and geopolitical competition increases, opportunities for state-criminal collaboration will likely expand further.

### 10.6 Structural Sources of Institutional Failure

From a structural realist perspective, the examined institutional and legal gaps are predictable consequences of the organizing principle of the international system itself. As Waltz (1979) argues that, unlike domestic political systems, international politics are "decentralized and anarchic," operating in the formal absence of government (p. 88). All international institutions are built within this anarchic environment and reflect its constraints. The UN Charter, UNTOC, INTERPOL and the OSCE all depend on the voluntary cooperation of sovereign states, with none of them possessing an independent enforcement capacity. As Waltz (1979) notes, whatever elements of authority emerge internationally are "barely once removed from the capability that provides the foundation for the appearance of those elements" and "authority quickly reduces to a particular expression of capability" (p. 93). When *geocriminality* is practiced by major powers that sit on the UN Security Council, dominate INTERPOL's National Central Bureaus or can block OSCE consensus, such institutions will not be able to police this behaviour and hold the practicing states accountable.

The gap between the two governance domains that *geocriminality* exploits is itself a structural artefact of anarchy. The domain of armed conflict among states and the domain of

criminal law enforcement cooperation were designed around the distinction between the hierarchic domestic realm, where states hold a monopoly on legitimate force, and the anarchic international realm, where they do not. Geocriminal practices persist because they exploit such distinctions. They are simultaneously state-directed yet deniable, political yet criminal. The existing legal and institutional architecture of international relations presupposes categories that *geocriminality* deliberately blurs, while the permissive nature of anarchy ensures that no authority exists to resolve the ambiguity. Therefore, reforms to rein in the proliferation of state-crime collaboration can only be possible through consensus within the international community, among states with capacity to monitor and enforce it. As Waltz (1979) emphasizes, "the only remedy for a strong structural effect is a structural change" (p. 111). Any meaningful constraint on *geocriminality* would require a transformation within the organizing principle of the system itself, yet the states most capable of pursuing it currently have little incentive to do so.

On the other hand, Aceves et al. (2025) offer a historical counterpoint, observing that "international law has always been shaped by crisis" and that moments of rupture have repeatedly "forced states to confront the inadequacy of existing rules to imagine alternatives." The unresolved question then is whether the mutual vulnerability to geocriminal practices can serve as one of the catalytic pressures that prompted systemic changes in the past. This thesis argues that the institutional paralysis and systemic fragmentation discussed earlier has not necessarily preemptively closed the door for a cooperative international response *to geocriminality*.

## 11. Mutual Vulnerability as Grounds for Interest-Based Cooperation:

The analysis of legal and institutional gaps demonstrated that existing international frameworks are poorly equipped to address *geocriminality* and mitigate its proliferation. The anarchic nature of the international system and the observed structural incentives for state instrumentalization of organized crime seemingly preclude the possibility of containing it by means of international cooperation and institutional reform. However, this thesis argues that mutual vulnerability to the unintended consequences of *geocriminality* constitutes a potentially viable foundation for rationalist and pragmatic interstate cooperation rooted in self-interest. Unlike normative and legalistic approaches, which typically postulate the requirement of trust and convergence of values among states, interest-based cooperation stems from a shared recognition of a common threat.

### 11.1 Why Cooperate?

Waltz's (1979) structural realism establishes that the anarchic nature of the international system leads states to "rely on the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make

for themselves" (p. 111). In such a system, security and survival become the highest end, compelling states to consider relative gains of cooperation and fear relative disadvantages resulting from it, which often precludes joint action even when absolute gains are available (p. 105). However, this framework does not render cooperation impossible but specifies the conditions under which it is constrained. Waltz (1979) suggests that "concern for absolute gains may replace worries about relative ones" if the great-power balance is stable (p. 195). He also discusses transnational issues like pollution, population growth and nuclear proliferation as systemic problems that "can be solved only through the common efforts of a number […] of states," noting they are "so pressing that national interest must be subordinated to collective need" (p. 139). On the other hand, he also sees economic interdependence between states as a mutual vulnerability, yet considers it to be unequally distributed, becoming a vector of power rather than grounds for cooperation (p. 138, 153).

The present study has so far demonstrated that contemporary *geocriminality* is largely enabled by the effects of globalization and increased connectivity among states. Financial, logistic and communication linkages of global interdependence have indeed become threat vectors for organized crime to exploit. However, this thesis argues that unchecked instrumentalization of organized crime by states will have systemic consequences that no state can insulate itself from through unilateral action. The mutual vulnerability created by *geocriminality* does not stem from unequal economic interdependence but from the broadly shared consequences it generates for international security as a whole. Emergence of cooperative mitigation of geocriminal practices depends on whether states increasingly perceive the long-term destabilizing consequences of such actions as outweighing their short-term utility.

The most immediate consequence of *geocriminality* is what intelligence professionals refer to as *blowback*. Breen (2017) defines *blowback* as "unintended or unanticipated consequences resulting from ill-conceived (or perhaps also well-conceived) covert operations" (p. 108). Critically, Breen's (2017) empirical study of covert operations emphasizes that blowback is not confined to failed operations, since even successful ones "can give rise to a spectrum of minor to significant, deleterious, unintended consequences" that accumulate over time and across domains (p. 107). His evaluation of 49 declassified CIA covert action programs demonstrates that only 41 percent were successful over the long term (p. 113). *Blowback* from covert operations can manifest itself in the form of consequences rebounding directly at the sponsoring state, imitation and retaliation by the affected state(s), as well as delayed long-term effects on the international community as a whole.

History of piracy and privateering serves as a useful example of all three forms of *blowback*. As this study demonstrated, the privateering system of the early modern period was,

in essence, state-sponsored maritime piracy. The very features that made privateering politically and strategically attractive generated a range of consequences that eventually compelled all major European powers to cooperate in suppressing the very system they had enabled. Direct blowback against sponsoring states manifested in the tendency of privateers to continue predatory activities outside the legally permitted bounds. Kempe (2021) describes the story of Cusack, a freelance privateer who raided under English *letters of marque* during the Anglo-Dutch wars but began attacking Danish and Swedish vessels after peace had been declared. Kempe (2021) highlights that his actions "redounded upon the reputation of the English Crown and must have negatively affected the relations of England with other countries" (p. 49). Benton (2005) illustrates a similar example of the English captain Henry Morgan who raided Spanish vessels under a commission that did not explicitly authorize such attacks. In such cases, the Spanish Crown retaliated not against Morgan but against English colonial interests, generating diplomatic crises that the English Crown was forced to manage (p. 711).

The imitation and retaliation dynamic is also observable in the history of state-sanctioned piracy. As maritime competition intensified, England, France and the Dutch Republic all came to rely extensively on licensed raiders and the issue of privateering became “a central feature of international disputes at sea" (Kempe, 2021, p. 50). Increasing competition across the state system drove European powers to issue *letters of marque* at "truly inflationary proportions," as each power sought to match its rivals' capacity for maritime predation (p. 50). Kempe (2021) shows that these licenses were "not only easy to acquire for the immediate subjects of a sovereign but were also issued to the subjects of other nations," creating a market for maritime violence that transcended any single state's capacity to manage it (p. 50). The result was a self-perpetuating cycle, where key powers resorted to privateering, compelling rivals to adopt the same methods. The proliferation of raiding commissions then produced an oversupply of experienced raiders who turned their skills to unsanctioned predation when peace left them unemployed.

This proliferation resulted in the most consequential form of *blowback* - the cumulative erosion of the maritime order upon which all European powers depended (p. 55). The blurring of the line between state-sanctioned and purely private violence developed into a challenge for the sovereign order itself. The open seas ceased to function as a regulated space for any of the powers that initially benefited from the use of privateers. At the systemic level, the unchecked proliferation of privateering meant that no state could reliably distinguish friend from foe at sea, safeguard its merchant vessels from capture or conduct trade without subsidizing the very violence that disrupted it. The community of European states gradually recognized that what had once been a flexible instrument of asymmetric warfare had become a structural impediment to the basic functioning of interstate commerce and diplomacy. By declaring the freelance sea robber

to be a “common enemy of all nations” (*hostes humani generis*), European powers created a normative foundation for coordinated action that did not require trust or shared values. Acknowledgement of mutual vulnerability was enough for rivals to cooperate. As Kempe (2021) put it: “the exclusion of pirates was the lowest common normative denominator in a community of nations that was otherwise profoundly divided” (p. 55).

History of piracy and the illustration of the three-tier *blowback* spurring international cooperation among rivals can reasonably be projected onto contemporary *geocriminality*. In both cases, states rely on actors whose utility derives from deniability and whose actions are only partially subject to state control. Consequently, the same dynamics of direct blowback, reciprocal escalation and systemic disruption can be observed in the modern era.

Direct *blowback* of *geocriminality* was highlighted by McCoy (2003) and Webb (1998), who linked tolerance and abetting of drug trafficking networks by the CIA to the increased flow of narcotics to the illicit markets of the US and its allies in Europe. In China’s case, Comolli and Rose (2021) note that tolerance toward criminal activity linked to Belt and Road infrastructure has led to criminals to appropriate the BRI brand to legitimize their operations and ultimately undermine one of the BRI's own objectives, one of them being to encourage stability through economic development. In Russia’s case, the 2017 NotPetya malware attack had the objective of crippling Ukrainian critical infrastructure, but spread to cause over $10 billion in damages globally, notably striking a major Russian oil company in the process (Greenberg, 2018).

The case of Iran contracting Canadian Hell’s Angels members for a political assassination signals the willingness of criminals to work for the highest bidder, regardless of national origins or political leanings. Russia’s practice of hiring "disposable" low-level criminals or adopting "crime-as-a-service" approach to cybercriminality serves as further evidence of this trend. These criminal networks are not loyal agents of Tehran or Moscow but freelancers who would be equally willing to work for a different patron if the terms were favourable. This opens the door for false-flag operations, politicized interpretations of purely criminal incidents, and misdirected retaliation, all of which threaten to further complicate diplomacy and international security.

At the structural level, as Kemp (2022) highlights, organized crime in itself has become a global phenomenon and “reached macro-economic proportions” (p. 106). Governments are losing the war on drugs, and well-armed criminal groups are challenging their monopoly on violence (p. 106). In the context of *geocriminality*, evidence suggests that, much like late-stage privateering in the eighteenth century, organized crime is increasingly evolving into a freelance enterprise that threatens global security and the stability of the international system. The three levels of *blowback* each illustrate that proliferation of unrestricted use of criminal proxies by states can generate systemic and mutual threats that no single state can manage alone. The contemporary equivalent

of the interstate consensus that led to the abolition of privateering has not yet emerged, but structural preconditions for it are increasingly visible. What remains to be addressed is how interstate cooperation can be operationalized to achieve such a consensus.

### 11.2 How to Cooperate?

Rationalist cooperation approaches, proposed by Axelrod (1984) and adapted by Kemp (2022) to the contemporary international security context, offer a mechanism through which states can potentially translate recognition of mutual vulnerability into cooperative restraint. One of Axelrod's (1984) central arguments is that "cooperation can emerge in a world without central authority" (p. 3). The critical variable is not trust, shared values or supranational institutions, but what he refers to as the "shadow of the future" (p. 124). When interactions between entities are bound to repeat over time, future consequences matter sufficiently and cooperation can become advantageous over time. In such conditions, cooperation is "based on reciprocity" and can be sustained even without friendship or foresight" (p. 95). Kemp (2022) agrees that "trust is not a prerequisite" and suggests that cooperation is "based on realpolitik and self-interest, not selflessness" (pp. 9, 10). From Axelrod's (1984) perspective, fostering cooperation requires "extending the shadow of the future" by making interactions more durable and more frequent (p. 129). Kemp (2022) operationalizes that logic by stressing that international relations are "made up of a series of interactions between the same parties over a longer period of time" (p. 7).

Axelrod (1984) also suggests a behavioral strategy that promotes cooperation. With a simple computer tournament, he was able to determine that *tit-for-tat* was the most effective approach to sustain cooperation and penalize defection (p. 31). The rule is simple – cooperate on the first move, then mirror whatever the opponent did on the previous move. Robust empirical success of this strategy was attributed to four key properties (p. 176). First, *tit-for-tat* is *nice* – it never defects first and avoid conflict. Second, if the opponent defects, it is *provocable* – immediately retaliating against defection. Third, it is *forgiving* – proportionality and reciprocity make return to cooperation possible, preventing defection from becoming self-perpetuating. Fourth, it is *clear* – its logic is recognizable to the parties and signals that defection is penalized, while cooperation is reciprocated. Crucially, *tit-for-tat* succeeds without seeking relative advantage and promotes mutual interests rather than exploiting the other's weakness (p. 137). As Kemp (2022) points out: "*tit-for-tat* goes to the heart of how mankind has organized itself for centuries" (p. 8).

So far, this thesis was able to establish that the "shadow of the future" of *geocriminality* is proliferation, *blowback*, unpredictability and degradation of the security environment for all states. Since states already interact with each other bilaterally or within international

organizations, the key barrier to cooperation in limiting geocriminal practices is a lack of official recognition of the phenomenon as a mutual vulnerability across the international system. Such recognition is certainly gaining traction among international security experts and the academic community. Williams (2024) considers it “critical” to recognize that organized crime is increasingly used as an instrument of statecraft (p. 23). Thorley (2024) specifically urges “the entry of *geocriminality* into the international relations lexicon” (p. 22). Schuett and Schramm (2025) echo these calls by stressing that “*geocriminality* is no longer theoretical” and “poses a global strategic threat that demands international cooperation”.

However, this concept has yet to officially appear on the international stage. No major international institution formally recognizes *geocriminality* as a distinct form of state behaviour. The earlier analysis of international legal and institutional gaps also revealed that no existing treaty or security framework accounts for the instrumentalization of criminal networks as a tool of foreign policy. Given the context of a disintegrating post-Cold War order and the ongoing competitive transition to multipolarity, calling for comprehensive multilateral treaties or ambitious institutional reforms to address state-criminal collaboration is unlikely to succeed.

Kemp (2022) offers a way out of this paradox by reframing the relationship between anarchy and cooperation. He argues that “self-help requires states to work together and that fear of anarchy drives cooperation rather than conflict” (p. 76). Precisely because the system is increasingly unregulated and unpredictable, states have an interest in creating predictability and restraint on issues of mutual self-interest. This directs the analysis toward *confidence-building measures* (CBMs) as the appropriate framework for initiating international cooperation on *geocriminality*. As Kemp (2022) explains, CBMs are "tools to lower tensions and make it less likely that a conflict might break out, escalate, or re-emerge through a lack of information, misunderstanding, mistake, or misreading of the actions of a potential adversary" (p. 62). They are measures designed specifically for the current conditions of low trust, high uncertainty, and intense competition between actors who nevertheless share a common interest in avoiding the most dangerous outcomes of their rivalry. They are "incremental and conditional," reflecting the discussed *tit-for-tat* logic (p. 67).

International cooperation on mitigating *geocriminality* can be framed as a CBM among rivals in their broader intensifying security competition. The very fact of rival states acknowledging this shared vulnerability and agreeing, perhaps even secretly, to limited reciprocal restraints on their geocriminal practices could be the first step of a *tit-for-tat* cycle of de-escalation in a highly unstable international environment. Such cooperation would establish communication channels and working relationships between security officials of rival states that currently have limited direct contact. Opening of such channels “may itself be a CBM if the sides have had

limited to no contact for some time" (p. 68). *Geocriminality* is therefore not only a problem to be solved, but an opportunity to be seized. Its acknowledgement as a common threat to the international community would create a rare convergence of interests among rivals who agree on little else.

The history of piracy and privateering again serves as a guide for what such a process can achieve beyond its immediate objectives. European powers did not move directly from widespread reliance on licensed maritime predation to the Declaration of Paris. The process unfolded for more than a century, during which bilateral and multilateral understandings accumulated incrementally. Kempe (2021) notes that gradual understanding of the common threat among states gave rise to a minimal legal consensus expressed in unilateral measures, as well as bilateral treaties (p. 55). Progression from unilateral restraint to bilateral agreements to a multilateral consensus precisely reflects the incremental *tit-for-tat* logic of CBMs. Each step reduced uncertainty, demonstrated feasibility of cooperation, and established precedents that fostered trust for coordinated action across the international system.

Cooperation to abolish piracy and privateering also had spillover effects that extended beyond the suppression of maritime predation itself. Convergence of legal treatment of piracy across divided national systems of maritime law provided an "important component for the formation of interrelationships" in international law more generally (p. 55). The cooperation that began as a response to a shared threat of piracy contributed to the broader development of the law of the sea. As Cattelan (2023) observes, the establishment of this initial body of customary law of the sea served as a key reference point for the UN Conventions of the Law of the Sea (p. 151). Benton (2005) similarly argues that the nineteenth century "inter-state agreements to suppress piracy and police the seas" brought "the opening of an arena for true internationalism" (p. 722).

In this context, the currently observed lack of institutional or legal frameworks capable of formally addressing *geocriminality* is not necessarily a barrier to cooperation. The lack of universal recognition of mutual vulnerability to *geocriminality* is. Kemp (2022) notes that most social relations are governed by social norms rather than formal agreements, arguing for viability of "informal 'rules of the game' based on experience, informal understandings, and tacit agreements" (p. 82). Cooperation can emerge tacitly among states, even as they continue to compete in other domains. Unofficial discussions on the sidelines of UN Security Council meetings, across INTERPOL offices or in the hallways of the OSCE can answer Thorley's (2024) call to introduce *geocriminality* into the lexicon of international relations.

Such spaces are focal points where groundwork for CBMs is often laid. As Kemp (2022) observes, one should "not underestimate the importance of informal dialogue and development of personal contacts that is enabled by international organizations" (p. 89). The fact that

representatives from countries hostile or indifferent to one another can be in continuous contact "in the lobbies and lounges behind the scenes" is itself a structural asset of the existing institutional landscape (p. 89). These interactions can provide opportunities for building a shared understanding of the systemic threat of *geocriminality* and exploring the feasibility of restraint, without initially requiring a formal mandate or a treaty amendment. Academic researchers, policy experts, law enforcement officials and former intelligence officers adjacent to relevant international organizations have an important role to play in *geocriminality* entering the working vocabulary within them. Proliferation of the term itself can become a tool for signaling a common problem, which would be the first step toward recognition of mutual vulnerability as a precondition for cooperation. Once the threat is broadly acknowledged, the iterative *tit-for-tat* de-escalation cycle can be launched as part of addressing *geocriminality* specifically, as well as more broadly, with willingness of states to cooperate on *geocriminality* serving as a CBM that facilitates resolution of other issues among them.

In this sense, *geocriminality* is not only a symptom of international disorder. It can be a catalyst for rebuilding elements of cooperative security within an increasingly fragmented international system. The path from recognition to restraint will not be linear, but the theoretical framework, historical precedent and practical mechanisms identified throughout this study suggest that it is viable.

## 12. Conclusion:

Broadly speaking, this thesis aimed to bridge a considerable gap within academic scholarship on international relations. Andrew and Mitrokhin (1999) point out that "most academic historians have been slow to recognize the role of intelligence communities in international relations" (p. 544). Walton (2023) also refers to intelligence as traditionally being the "missing dimension" of research on statecraft and diplomacy (p. 16). International relations theory has largely assigned intelligence activities, organized crime and non-state actors to the margins of its analysis. In fact, Waltz's (1979) approach to structural realism is premised on states and their capabilities being the only significant actors in international politics. As he puts it, states "set the scene" in which non-state actors "stage their dramas," and "when the crunch comes, states remake the rules by which other actors operate" (p. 94). This study attempted to address the lack of attention to intelligence and organized crime in international relations theory, by placing interaction between them within a structural realist framework that retains the state as the primary unit of analysis. What this study ultimately offers is not a revision of structural realism, but an extension of its reach into a domain that has remained largely absent from well-established theoretical paradigms.

To achieve this, the study sought to apply structural realist framing to answer a) why *geocriminality* increasingly threatens international security; and b) why and how international cooperation can effectively mitigate this threat. Historical tracing, contemporary case study analysis and assessment of international institutional and legal gaps yielded the necessary evidence to provide three principal answers.

First, *geocriminality* threatens international security because structural conditions of the contemporary international system increasingly converge with the proliferation and growing sophistication of transnational organized crime networks. The international system is transitioning from relatively stable unipolarity to increasingly competitive multipolarity, intensifying rivalry among major powers. At the same time, nuclear deterrence, alliance structures and international legal norms continue to constrain the overt use of military force. States facing these constraints seek alternative means of projecting power and influence, as well as imposing costs on adversaries. Simultaneously, technological and economic globalization enabled criminal networks to operate across borders with speed and sophistication that outpaces the capacity of states to disrupt them. These networks now possess capabilities that are directly useful to intelligence and security services of states facing systemic limits and pressures in the international system. Illicit finance infrastructures, smuggling routes, cyber tools, coercive potential and access across jurisdictions are all features of organized crime that intelligence services require for covert operations. Conditions of constrained security competition and geopolitical tension align with the growing capabilities of organized crime to create incentives for states to instrumentalize that alignment for foreign policy goals.

The gravity of the resulting threat is hard to overstate. *Geocriminality* is no longer an episodic marginal practice. As this study has demonstrated, major powers within the international system have progressively integrated it into their foreign policy toolkits in systematic and institutionalized ways. This allows them to implement hybrid strategies against adversaries while avoiding the political and legal consequences of overt aggression. The cumulative effect is an erosion of the rule of law and the integrity of financial systems, as well as a high potential for destabilization of interstate relations, and, consequently, international security as a whole. The use of the US military in Venezuela in 2026 and the capture of Nicolas Maduro has shown that allegations of geocriminal practices can be used as a justification for kinetic action against a state.

Second, the outlined systemic threat of *geocriminality* was identified as a mutual vulnerability for all states within the international system, which can serve as grounds for international cooperation to become feasible. What makes *geocriminality* dangerous is also what makes cooperation possible. The transnational reach of organized crime means that no state can unilaterally manage threats posed by it or its instrumentalization by other states. The threat itself

provides the foundation for the response. Since the international system is defined by repeated interactions among states, which creates a shadow of the future where the long-term costs of unregulated geocriminal practices are increasingly likely to be recognized as exceeding their short-term utility, thereby creating incentives for reciprocal restraint.

Finally, cooperation need not begin with grand multilateral agreements, treaties or legal reforms. It can begin with smaller, practical steps that build confidence among rival states. Once mutual vulnerability to *geocriminality* is broadly acknowledged, states can embark upon an incremental confidence-building process rooted in self-interest rather than trust. Once *geocriminality* enters the working vocabulary of international security professionals through academic and policy discourse, it can be effectively framed as a shared systemic threat rather than an accusation against specific states. This reframing opens the door for informal dialogue within existing international institutional spaces, without the pressure of formal mandates or treaty commitments, gradually building a shared understanding of the threat. A confidence-building approach could then be applied to cooperation on the mitigation of *geocriminality* itself, as well as such cooperation serving as a first step for a *tit-for-tat* approach to broader de-escalation in areas of strategic competition.

Assessment of the historical precedent of international anti-piracy efforts and framing of geocriminal practices within a coherent realist-informed theoretical framework for cooperation both strongly suggest that structural foundations for a coordinated interstate response to *geocriminality* are already in place. The question is whether states will recognize their mutual vulnerability to this threat, before the costs of instrumentalizing and enabling organized crime become irreversible. Just like pirates, organized crime is a common enemy of all nations, regardless of how useful it may seem to enable it in the short-term.

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