Security Council (UNSC)

STUDY GUIDE

Alone we make noise, together we make peace.

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TOPIC:

Transnational Drug Trafficking and Non-State Armed Groups: A Threat to International Peace and Security

COLEGIO DEL MUNDO · WORLD SCHOOL · ÉCOLE DU MONDE

Table of Contents

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Introduction to the Committee

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the principal organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security. Established in 1945, following the devastation of World War II, it was created as part of the broader United Nations system to prevent future global conflicts and uphold a stable international order. Unlike other UN bodies, the Security Council has legally binding authority under international law. It can adopt resolutions that mandate compliance by member states, authorize the use of force, impose sanctions, and establish international tribunals. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the Council is empowered to act decisively in situations that threaten global peace and security.

To fulfill its mandate, the UNSC employs a range of tools: diplomatic mediation to prevent or resolve conflicts, economic sanctions to deter aggression or illicit activity, peacekeeping operations to stabilize fragile regions, and, in exceptional cases, the authorization of military action. These mechanisms allow the Council to respond flexibly to both immediate crises and long-term security threats.

Over the years, the UNSC has taken significant action to address transnational threats closely tied to this committee's topic. Resolution 1373 (2001), adopted in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, laid the foundation for global counterterrorism measures. Resolution 2195 (2014) recognized the role of transnational organized crime—including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking—in fueling conflict. Resolution 2482 (2019) further emphasized the nexus between organized crime, terrorism, and instability, explicitly linking the drug trade to armed groups. More specifically, Resolution 2368 (2017) imposed sanctions on individuals and entities associated with ISIS and Al-Qaeda, targeting their financing networks, including those tied to narcotics.

In addition to adopting resolutions, the UNSC has deployed peacekeeping operations in conflict zones where illicit trafficking sustains violence, such as the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). These missions illustrate the Council's recognition that drug trafficking and organized crime are not only law enforcement issues but also critical threats to international peace and security.

Background of the topic

Understanding the Key Concepts

Transnational Organized Crime (TOC)

TOC refers to criminal networks that operate across borders, engaging in illicit activities such as drug trafficking, money laundering, arms smuggling, human trafficking, corruption, and financial crimes. Over decades, these networks have evolved from localized rings into sophisticated global enterprises, often diversifying into multiple illegal markets. Their activities exploit weak governance, corruption, and porous borders, fueling instability worldwide.

Transnational Drug Trafficking

The cross-border cultivation, manufacture, distribution, and sale of illicit drugs is one of the most profitable global criminal economies. According to the UN, this illicit trade undermines socio-economic and political stability, generating hundreds of billions in profits annually. Cocaine trafficking in Latin America, heroin production in Afghanistan, and synthetic drugs in Southeast Asia illustrate how global demand sustains sprawling criminal networks. Today, Europe has overtaken the United States as the largest cocaine market, fueling new routes across Africa and intensifying competition among cartels.

Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs)

These armed entities—such as rebel factions, terrorist groups, paramilitaries, and organized gangs—are not officially tied to governments but often control territory and populations. NSAGs rely heavily on illicit trade, including drugs, to finance operations, recruit fighters, and procure weapons. In Colombia, the FARC financed decades of insurgency through cocaine; in Afghanistan, the Taliban relied on opium; and in the Sahel, groups linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIS exploit smuggling routes to sustain violence.

Threats to International Peace and Security

The convergence of TOC, drug trafficking, and NSAGs destabilizes governments, fuels conflict, and corrodes institutions. Drug profits empower cartels and insurgents, creating hybrid threats that blur the lines between organized crime and warfare. This nexus weakens states, fosters corruption, and increases the risk of humanitarian crises and regional instability, making it a direct matter for the UN Security Council.

Historical Background

The struggle against transnational drug trafficking and organized crime has evolved over the past five decades, shaped by shifting political priorities and international interventions. The so-called “War on Drugs,” launched by U.S. President Richard Nixon in 1971, marked the beginning of a global militarized response to narcotics. The policy framed drug use and trafficking as existential threats to national security and public health, prompting large-scale law enforcement crackdowns and foreign operations. While this approach temporarily disrupted some trafficking routes, it also fueled mass incarceration, militarized policing, and new patterns of violence without fully dismantling criminal networks.

In Latin America, anti-drug strategies became intertwined with broader geopolitical objectives. The most prominent example was **Plan Colombia**, a U.S.-backed initiative launched in 2000 that combined military aid, aerial eradication of coca crops, and institutional reforms to combat both the cocaine trade and insurgent groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Although Plan Colombia weakened insurgent capabilities, it also displaced coca cultivation into neighboring countries and contributed to severe human rights violations. Similarly, the **Mérida Initiative**, announced in 2008 between the United States and Mexico, sought to strengthen Mexican security institutions and disrupt powerful cartels such as Sinaloa and Los Zetas. Yet, this strategy coincided with unprecedented violence, as fractured cartels fought for territorial control.

Other attempts, such as **Operation Condor** in the 1970s and 1980s or Colombia’s campaigns against the Medellín and Cali cartels in the 1990s, reinforced the pattern that crackdowns often shifted, rather than eliminated, illicit activity. The war against the FARC in Colombia, the militarization of Mexico’s drug fight beginning in 2006, and the reliance on private security forces across the Andes revealed the limits of conventional state-centric approaches. By the early 21st century, drug trafficking had become deeply entrenched in the political economies of several regions, pushing organized crime into hybrid forms that blurred the lines between crime, insurgency, and terrorism.

Current Situation and Emerging Challenges

Today, drug trafficking and organized crime present new patterns that reflect globalization, technological change, and shifting consumer markets. Cartels and non-state armed groups have transformed from localized actors into transnational networks that diversify their sources of revenue. Cocaine trafficking remains a dominant stream of illicit income, but groups now also profit from synthetic drugs, human smuggling, arms trafficking, and illegal mining. This diversification not only shields them from fluctuations in drug markets but also extends their influence across multiple sectors of the global underground economy.

A striking contemporary development is the global expansion of Latin American cartels, particularly Mexican organizations such as the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG). These groups now operate far beyond their traditional territories, with logistics chains reaching Europe, Asia, and Africa. Europe has surpassed the United States as the largest cocaine market, fueling fierce competition among traffickers and creating new transit hubs in West Africa. In fragile states such as Guinea-Bissau or Mali, weak governance provides ideal conditions for traffickers to launder profits, secure routes, and collude with armed groups.

Another defining trend is the rise of hybrid threats. Organized crime groups increasingly collaborate with terrorist and insurgent organizations, trading weapons, protecting trafficking corridors, and providing financial support in exchange for safe passage. In Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban financed much of its war effort through opium cultivation and trade, while in the Sahel, extremist groups aligned with Al-Qaeda or ISIS profit from smuggling networks that include narcotics. These alliances make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between criminal and political violence, intensifying the destabilizing effects on regional and global security.

Finally, the persistence of these dynamics highlights how organized crime exploits weak or corrupt institutions. In countries like Mexico and Brazil, drug cartels have eroded state authority to the point of challenging government legitimacy, edging parts of these nations toward conditions resembling narco-states. At the same time, the global demand for narcotics continues to rise, sustaining criminal economies that weaken governance, undermine the rule of law, and fuel cycles of violence across multiple continents.

The international community has recognized these evolving challenges, and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has increasingly addressed the nexus between organized crime, drug trafficking, and armed conflict. In Resolution 1373 (2001), adopted after the September 11 attacks, the UNSC linked transnational financial flows to terrorism. Resolution 2195 (2014) directly acknowledged the role of organized crime, including drug trafficking, in fueling conflict and undermining security. Two years later, Resolution 2331 (2016) emphasized how trafficking networks intersect with human trafficking and terrorism, reinforcing the urgency of coordinated responses. More recently, Resolution 2482 (2019) explicitly recognized the convergence of terrorism, organized crime, and drug trafficking as hybrid threats to peace and stability.

Together, these resolutions reflect the UNSC's growing awareness that combating transnational drug trafficking is no longer solely a law enforcement or public health issue but a matter of international peace and security. They also lay the foundation for future multilateral strategies, combining border security, financial intelligence, and counterinsurgency with efforts to strengthen institutions and promote sustainable development.

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Key Stakeholders and Positions

United States

The U.S. has historically led global anti-narcotics efforts, framing drug trafficking as both a public health and national security issue. Through initiatives like Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative, Washington has provided military aid, intelligence-sharing, and law enforcement training to disrupt cartels and insurgent groups financed by drugs. U.S. policy emphasizes strict border security, international cooperation on law enforcement, and the disruption of financial flows connected to cartels. However, critics argue that the militarized approach has fueled violence and displacement while failing to curb overall supply.

Latin American States

- **Mexico**: At the epicenter of global drug trafficking, Mexico faces internal violence from cartels that challenge state authority. Its position stresses international cooperation to reduce arms flows from abroad, enhance development programs, and build stronger institutions to counter criminal infiltration.
- **Colombia**: A country long impacted by narco-financing of insurgent groups, Colombia highlights its mixed experiences with Plan Colombia. It supports continued international assistance but also advocates for balancing enforcement with peacebuilding and rural development.
- **Brazil**: Increasingly affected by cocaine flows through its ports, Brazil calls for regional cooperation in South America, focusing on maritime security and addressing the nexus between trafficking and urban violence.

European Union (EU)

Europe has become the largest cocaine market, overtaking the U.S. in recent years. The EU emphasizes demand reduction, anti-money laundering measures, and cooperation with Latin America and West Africa to disrupt supply chains. Europol and EUROPOL-led task forces have worked to dismantle trafficking routes, but the EU also stresses the importance of addressing social and economic vulnerabilities that allow cartels to expand.

West African States

Countries such as Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Nigeria serve as critical transit hubs for cocaine entering Europe. Weak governance and corruption make these states highly vulnerable to infiltration by transnational criminal organizations. Their position calls for greater international support to strengthen institutions, border security, and financial oversight, as well as development aid to reduce reliance on illicit economies.

Afghanistan and the Taliban (De Facto Authorities)

Afghanistan has historically been the world's leading opium producer, with the trade financing armed groups including the Taliban. While the Taliban announced a ban on opium cultivation in 2022, evidence suggests production continues, often funding both domestic governance structures and transnational criminal networks. The Taliban's position is ambiguous: publicly rejecting narcotics while covertly relying on them for revenue.

Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs)

Groups such as FARC dissidents in Colombia, Mexican cartels (Sinaloa, CJNG), ISIS affiliates in the Sahel, and Al-Qaeda-linked factions exploit drug trafficking to fund operations, purchase arms, and exert territorial control. Their interests lie in maintaining access to trafficking corridors and resisting state or international disruption. They represent the most direct link between drug economies and threats to international peace and security.

United Nations Bodies

- **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**: Leads international monitoring of drug markets and supports member states with technical assistance, legal frameworks, and data collection. UNODC advocates for comprehensive strategies that combine law enforcement with development.
- **United Nations Security Council (UNSC)**: Has passed multiple resolutions linking drug trafficking with organized crime, terrorism, and armed conflict. It promotes stronger border security, financial oversight, and international cooperation.
- **International Criminal Court (ICC)**: While not directly involved in drug control, the ICC can prosecute leaders of NSAGs when drug-financed activities involve war crimes or crimes against humanity.

Regional Organizations

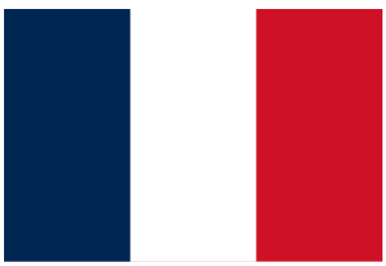
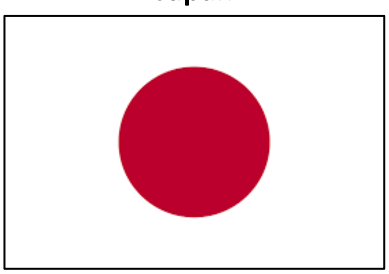
- **Organization of American States (OAS)**: Through its Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), it provides a forum for cooperation on drug demand reduction, judicial reform, and anti-money laundering.
- **African Union (AU)**: Increasingly vocal about the destabilizing effects of drug trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel, the AU calls for stronger international support to address governance weaknesses.
- **European Union & ASEAN cooperation**: Joint initiatives target trafficking networks, improve law enforcement capacity, and strengthen judicial frameworks in Southeast Asia, a growing hub for synthetic drug production.

Civil Society and NGOs

Human rights organizations and policy think tanks (e.g., the International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime) advocate for strategies that go beyond militarization. They emphasize the importance of human rights protections, community development, and harm reduction policies, warning against approaches that fuel violence without addressing root causes such as poverty, inequality, and demand for narcotics.

Countries

Country	Position
The United States of America 	Prioritizes the “War on Drugs” through military, intelligence, and law enforcement initiatives. Supports sanctions, extradition treaties, and counternarcotics cooperation abroad. Strong advocate of linking drug trafficking to terrorism financing.
People’s Republic of China 	Emphasizes state sovereignty and non-interference. Advocates for tackling financial crimes and synthetic drug trafficking. Calls for development-based approaches and rejects militarization.
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 	Supports multilateral frameworks and intelligence-sharing to curb global narcotics routes. Advocates for financial transparency to disrupt money laundering networks tied to armed groups.

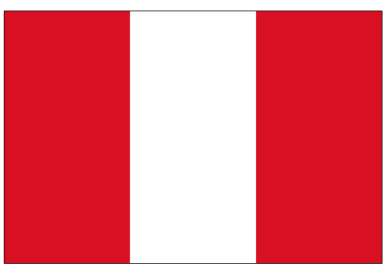
Russian Federation 	Concerned about narcotics routes from Afghanistan and Central Asia destabilizing its borders. Advocates for stronger regional cooperation through CSTO and UN frameworks, but wary of Western-led interventions.
French Republic 	Active in West Africa and the Sahel, where drug trafficking funds terrorism. Supports EU and UN missions targeting trafficking networks. Strong proponent of linking counter-narcotics with counterterrorism.
Japan 	Strongly supports global anti-trafficking measures, focusing on maritime security, synthetic drugs, and financial transparency. Works closely with UNODC and G7 partners.
Germany 	Prioritizes tackling money laundering and organized crime within Europe. Supports UN and EU initiatives, advocates for balancing enforcement with prevention and treatment.

South Korea 	Strongly supports global anti-drug efforts and intelligence-sharing. Concerned about trafficking networks tied to organized crime and North Korean smuggling operations.
Brazil 	Affected as both a producer (precursor chemicals) and transit country for cocaine. Advocates for stronger regional cooperation in Latin America but resists external military interventions.
Italy 	Strong focus on combating organized crime and mafia links to international drug networks. Supports stronger law enforcement cooperation through EUROPOL and UN frameworks.
Mexico 	One of the most affected countries by drug cartels. Seeks international cooperation but prioritizes sovereignty. Balances between security approaches and calls for shared responsibility with consumer nations.

India 	Faces trafficking challenges along its borders with Pakistan and Myanmar. Strong advocate of regional cooperation in South Asia and tougher controls on synthetic drugs.
South Africa 	Faces growing trafficking through its ports. Advocates for African Union cooperation, capacity building, and tackling links between drug trafficking and insurgent groups in the continent.
United Arab Emirates 	Increasingly active in combating financial crimes, money laundering, and trafficking routes through the Gulf. Supports stricter border controls and intelligence-sharing.
Ukraine 	Focused on internal stability amid war. Concerned that drug smuggling routes may fund separatist and terrorist groups in the region. Supports international cooperation but prioritizes post-conflict governance.

North Korea 	Accused of state involvement in narcotics trafficking to generate revenue for its regime. Officially denies participation but faces international sanctions for illicit activities.
Iran 	Shares a long border with Afghanistan, a major trafficking route. Heavily invested in border security operations. Calls for international recognition of its efforts, while criticizing Western sanctions.
Afghanistan 	Major global source of opium. Instability enables NSAGs (including the Taliban before 2021) to finance operations through narcotics. Current de facto authorities face global pressure to curb production.
Spain 	Concerned about cocaine routes from Latin America and hashish routes from North Africa. Active in EU and Mediterranean initiatives to curb trafficking.

Portugal 	Known for its decriminalization approach to drug use, emphasizing public health, prevention, and rehabilitation rather than punitive measures. Advocates for harm reduction globally.
Colombia 	Epicenter of coca cultivation and trafficking. Has received international aid (Plan Colombia). Supports crop substitution and development policies but struggles with cartel and insurgent financing.
Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela 	Venezuela emphasizes state sovereignty and often criticizes external military or interventionist approaches to the drug problem. It acknowledges challenges with trafficking routes across its territory, particularly toward the Caribbean and Europe, while calling for greater cooperation through regional mechanisms such as CELAC and UNASUR. Its government also highlights the need to address socioeconomic roots of trafficking rather than relying solely on enforcement.

Türkiye 	Positioned as a strategic transit country between Asia and Europe, Türkiye faces challenges with heroin trafficking from Afghanistan and synthetic drug routes. It advocates for strong international cooperation in intelligence-sharing and law enforcement, while also supporting UN and regional initiatives like those under the Council of Europe. Türkiye stresses balancing robust enforcement with respect for sovereignty.
Panama 	As a key transit hub due to the Panama Canal and its financial sector, Panama faces significant vulnerabilities to cocaine trafficking and money laundering. The country advocates for international cooperation on maritime security, stricter controls on financial flows, and stronger institutional capacity to combat transnational organized crime. Panama calls on major consumer nations to share responsibility by reducing demand.
Peru 	One of the world's top coca leaf producers, Peru highlights its dual challenge of combating trafficking while addressing the poverty of rural communities involved in coca cultivation. The government supports international aid for alternative development programs, crop substitution, and technical assistance. Peru underscores shared responsibility, urging consumer nations to tackle demand while producer states work on sustainable livelihoods.

Previous UN Actions and Resolutions

The United Nations has played a central role in developing international legal frameworks to address the nexus between drug trafficking, transnational organized crime (TOC), and non-state armed groups. Through conventions and Security Council resolutions, the UN has sought to strengthen global cooperation, standardize legal approaches, and provide tools for states to combat these threats.

Key Security Council Resolutions

- **Resolution 1373 (2001):** Adopted in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, this resolution required states to prevent and suppress the financing of terrorism. While primarily targeting terrorist networks, it also recognized that illicit revenues—including those derived from drug trafficking—could fund terrorist activities, thereby linking narcotics control to counterterrorism efforts (United Nations Security Council, 2001).

- **Resolution 2195 (2014):** This resolution explicitly acknowledged that terrorists benefit from transnational organized crime, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking. It urged member states to enhance cooperation in border security, information-sharing, and law enforcement to disrupt the financial flows sustaining terrorism (United Nations Security Council, 2014).

- **Resolution 2482 (2019):** Marking one of the strongest recognitions of the crime-terror nexus, this resolution emphasized the growing connections between terrorism and organized crime, particularly drug trafficking. It encouraged states to adopt measures for more robust border security, intelligence collection, and joint operations, highlighting the urgent need for coordination to prevent terrorist organizations from profiting from illicit economies (United Nations Security Council, 2019).

UN Conventions and Treaties

- **1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs:** Established a unified system to control the production, manufacture, and distribution of narcotic substances, consolidating earlier treaties.

- **1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances:** Extended controls to synthetic drugs and other psychotropic substances.

- **1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Vienna Convention):** Introduced measures against money laundering, precursor chemical control, and enhanced international cooperation in enforcement.

- **2000 UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Convention):** A milestone treaty addressing the broader structures of organized crime, including provisions for extradition, mutual legal assistance, and asset recovery.

These resolutions and conventions have significantly advanced international cooperation. They have enabled member states to coordinate joint operations, seize large drug shipments, and disrupt financing channels that fuel both organized crime and terrorism. They have also brought greater recognition of drug trafficking as a global security threat, not merely a criminal or public health issue.

Current Challenges and Debates

One of the most pressing challenges in the contemporary security landscape is the increasingly blurred line between transnational organized crime and politically motivated non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Drug trafficking serves as a critical source of revenue for these groups, enabling them to purchase weapons, recruit members, and sustain prolonged conflicts. This so-called *crime–terror nexus* is particularly visible in regions with weak governance or fragile institutions, such as parts of Latin America, West Africa, and Southeast Asia, where illicit economies often substitute for legitimate state authority.

Diversification and Adaptability of Criminal Networks

Drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and NSAGs have proven highly adaptable in the face of law enforcement measures. Operating through flexible, decentralized structures, they can rapidly replace captured leaders, reconfigure their networks, and exploit new trafficking routes. This adaptability makes them resilient to traditional counternarcotics strategies and allows them to remain embedded in local economies while expanding their global reach.

Expansion of Illicit Economies

Beyond narcotics, many NSAGs have diversified their portfolios to include arms smuggling, human trafficking, illegal resource extraction (such as gold or coltan mining), and increasingly, cyber-enabled crimes. This diversification enhances their financial base, increases their influence over civilian populations, and complicates international responses. By intertwining with local economies, these groups create dependency, making eradication efforts politically and socially sensitive.

Debates on the Applicability of International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

A growing legal and ethical debate centers on whether large-scale criminal organizations engaged in drug trafficking and sustained violence should be considered parties to armed conflict under international humanitarian law. The prevailing interpretation holds that the applicability of IHL depends on the *intensity of violence* and *level of organization*, not the ideological motives of the actors involved. However, critics argue that treating DTOs as armed groups risks conflating criminality with political insurgency, potentially diluting legal protections for civilians and complicating humanitarian responses. This tension highlights the need for nuanced legal frameworks capable of addressing hybrid actors that blur the boundaries between crime and war.

Balancing Security and Human Rights

Another central debate concerns the balance between security enforcement and the protection of human rights. Heavy-handed militarized approaches to counter-narcotics often exacerbate violence, displace communities, and fuel cycles of corruption. At the same time, insufficient enforcement can allow drug trafficking networks and NSAGs to flourish, undermining state legitimacy. This dilemma underscores the challenge for policymakers: how to dismantle illicit economies while ensuring compliance with human rights and international law.

Case Studies

The Taliban and Afghanistan's Opium Economy

Afghanistan has long been the world's leading producer of opium, and the Taliban's involvement in this illicit economy has been central to both their insurgency and the destabilization of the region. Since their initial rise to power in the 1990s, the Taliban have systematically taxed opium production and, at times, directly participated in trafficking networks. Following their ouster in 2001, the group increasingly relied on the drug trade to finance its insurgency against the Afghan government and international forces. Farmers were subjected to a 10% tax (*ushr*) on their opium harvests, while traffickers and refiners were charged protection fees, generating hundreds of millions of dollars annually. Estimates suggest that between 10% and 50% of the Taliban's funding derived from narcotics.

This symbiotic relationship between narcotics and insurgency has had devastating consequences. The drug economy has fueled pervasive corruption, weakened state legitimacy, and entrenched cycles of violence, particularly in southern provinces where up to 80% of households are involved in the opium trade. The Taliban's access to drug revenues enabled them to recruit fighters, procure weapons, and sustain logistics, thereby prolonging the conflict. Beyond Afghanistan's borders, Afghan opiates have spread addiction, organized crime, and instability across Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan. International counter-narcotics campaigns have often proved counterproductive: eradication policies fostered resentment among rural communities, inadvertently strengthening the Taliban's support base and illustrating the difficulty of disentangling insurgency from illicit economies.

The FARC in Colombia: Cocaine, Conflict, and Regional Instability

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) provide a stark example of how non-state armed groups leverage drug trafficking to fund conflict and challenge state authority. Founded in the 1960s as a Marxist-Leninist insurgency, the FARC entered the cocaine trade in the late 1970s. Initially, they taxed coca growers and traffickers operating in their territories, but over time, they expanded into direct cultivation, production, and trafficking. At their peak, the FARC controlled extensive coca-growing regions and clandestine laboratories, generating annual revenues estimated between $150 million and $3.5 billion.

Drug profits enabled the FARC to expand their military capacity, finance recruitment, and sustain operations for decades. Their involvement in narcotics intensified violent competition with right-wing paramilitaries and other armed actors, producing cycles of mass displacement, massacres, and entrenched insecurity in rural Colombia. The FARC's operations extended into neighboring states, contributing to the regionalization of organized crime and destabilization across South America. Although the 2016 peace agreement marked a formal end to the FARC's insurgency, the legacies of drug-financed conflict endure. Power vacuums in former FARC-controlled territories have been filled by new criminal organizations, while coca cultivation levels remain high due to persistent poverty, limited state presence, and ongoing global demand for cocaine.

West African Drug Trafficking Networks and State Fragility

West Africa has emerged as a major transit hub for cocaine shipments traveling from Latin America to Europe, illustrating the intersection of transnational crime, weak governance, and regional instability. Countries such as Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, and Ghana have become strategic points for Latin American cartels, which collaborate with local networks to store and re-export narcotics across porous borders.

The influx of drug revenues has penetrated political and security institutions, fueling corruption, weakening law enforcement, and, in some cases, implicating senior officials in trafficking operations. Guinea-Bissau has been labeled Africa's first *"narco-state,"* with military and political elites directly benefiting from the trade. This dynamic has destabilized fragile democracies, undermined reform efforts, and empowered local militias that profit from illicit economies. The spread of drug money and arms has contributed to sporadic violence, the erosion of state authority, and heightened vulnerability to extremist and armed groups. As a result, West Africa has become a focal point of global concern, not only as a transit hub but also as a region where organized crime and non-state armed actors converge to challenge both regional stability and international security.

Mexico: Cartels, Violence, and the Erosion of State Authority

Mexico represents one of the most urgent contemporary cases where drug trafficking and non-state armed groups converge to undermine peace and security. Drug cartels, such as the Sinaloa Cartel, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), and others, control vast trafficking routes that supply much of the cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and synthetic opioids (notably fentanyl) consumed in the United States and beyond. These cartels function as highly sophisticated transnational criminal organizations, with armed wings that rival state security forces in firepower and organization.

Cartel profits, estimated in the tens of billions of dollars annually, fund not only drug production and distribution but also systemic corruption, assassination networks, and parallel systems of governance in regions where state presence is weak. Entire communities in states like Michoacán and Guerrero have fallen under cartel influence, with armed groups taxing local businesses, regulating populations, and fighting for control of strategic territories. Violence linked to the drug war has resulted in more than 350,000 deaths and tens of thousands of disappearances since 2006, when the Mexican government declared a militarized campaign against organized crime.

The Mexican case illustrates the transformation of drug trafficking into a full-scale challenge to sovereignty, governance, and human rights. Cartels are increasingly linked to global supply chains, including precursor chemicals imported from Asia for synthetic drugs. Their infiltration of state institutions, ranging from municipal police to federal agencies, has fueled debates about whether Mexico risks becoming a “narco-state.” Internationally, Mexico’s crisis has direct repercussions for the United States and Central America, where trafficking routes, migration flows, and arms smuggling intertwine, creating a complex regional security dilemma.

Possible Solutions and Future Perspectives

The persistence of transnational drug trafficking and its links to non-state armed groups (NSAGs) requires a multifaceted and long-term approach. Responses must go beyond immediate security concerns to address the deeper issues of governance, economic development, and public health. Solutions therefore span across security, socioeconomic development, regulation, and international cooperation, requiring both short-term enforcement and long-term structural reforms.

Security and Law Enforcement Measures

- **Sanctions and Enforcement:** Targeted sanctions can prevent armed groups and cartels from accessing financial resources, purchasing weapons, or expanding their influence. When carefully designed, these sanctions can weaken criminal organizations while avoiding unnecessary harm to civilian populations.

- **Peacekeeping and Stabilization Roles:** UN peacekeeping operations or multinational stabilization missions can help monitor trafficking routes, support national security forces, and protect civilians from drug-related violence. By reinforcing state authority in fragile areas, such missions can reduce the territorial control of armed groups while promoting the rule of law.

Development and Socioeconomic Solutions

- **Alternative Livelihoods:** Promoting legal and sustainable alternatives to illicit economies, such as cash crops, small-scale enterprises, and access to markets, can reduce community reliance on drug cultivation and trafficking. These initiatives are most effective when paired with education, microcredit, and vocational training programs.

- **Investment in Rural Development:** Broad-based investments in infrastructure (roads, schools, healthcare, and communications) strengthen state presence and reduce the appeal of criminal groups. Development policies that prioritize rural and marginalized communities can disrupt the conditions that traffickers exploit to secure loyalty and labor.

Public Health and Demand Reduction

- **Reducing Global Demand:** The demand for illicit drugs fuels global trafficking networks. Education campaigns, rehabilitation services, and harm reduction strategies can reduce consumption and weaken the financial base of armed groups. International cooperation is critical to standardize best practices and ensure accessibility of treatment.

- **Regulation Debates:** Scholars and policymakers increasingly debate whether stricter regulation or partial legalization of certain substances could reduce illegal markets. While controversial, these discussions highlight the need for innovative strategies to weaken trafficking networks directly by addressing the demand side.

Financial and Technological Tools

- **Public–Private Partnerships:** Governments, financial institutions, and private companies can collaborate to track and disrupt illicit money flows. Partnerships enable better monitoring of suspicious transactions, enhance transparency in global banking, and limit opportunities for laundering profits from drug trafficking.

- **Border Control and Interdiction:** Improved technology, such as advanced scanning systems at airports and seaports, combined with better-trained officers, can strengthen interdiction capacity. Coordinated patrols and intelligence-sharing across borders are essential to prevent drugs and arms from moving along transnational routes.

Governance, Peace, and Stability Approaches

- **Strengthening State Institutions:** Weak judicial systems, corruption, and poorly equipped law enforcement agencies create fertile ground for criminal organizations. Supporting judicial reforms, anti-corruption measures, and professionalization of security forces can enable states to reclaim control and reduce opportunities for traffickers.

- **Promoting Rule of Law and Accountability:** International assistance should emphasize governance reforms that empower states to combat impunity. Transparent institutions and accountability mechanisms can restore citizen trust and limit the space in which organized crime and NSAGs operate.

Future Perspectives

The path forward requires a comprehensive and coordinated strategy. While law enforcement remains essential, it cannot succeed in isolation. Long-term stability depends on reducing the structural drivers of the drug economy, such as poverty, weak governance, and lack of opportunity. Technology and innovation will increasingly play a role, but solutions must remain grounded in respect for human rights and international law. Ultimately, success will hinge on fostering global solidarity, where states, civil society, and the private sector work together to dismantle trafficking networks while empowering communities to build sustainable peace.

Guiding Questions

Understanding the Root Causes

- What structural factors—such as poverty, weak governance, corruption, or porous borders—allow drug trafficking and related illegal activities to persist across regions?
- Should the international community focus primarily on law enforcement, or place greater emphasis on addressing the root causes of drug economies, such as lack of development and opportunity?

Role of the United Nations and International Efforts

- What role has the United Nations Security Council played in addressing drug trafficking as a threat to international peace and security?
- How effective have past international efforts—such as sanctions, peacekeeping missions, or UNODC programs—been in reducing trafficking and mitigating its impact?
- How can the Security Council ensure that its actions respect state sovereignty while still protecting international peace and security?

State Responsibilities and Cooperation

- What specific responsibilities should producer, transit, and consumer countries each bear in reducing the drug trade?
- What challenges do states face when trying to implement anti-drug policies, particularly in conflict zones or areas of weak governance?
- How can international cooperation be improved to share intelligence, coordinate border controls, and disrupt transnational trafficking routes?

Tools and Strategies

- What role can technology (e.g., AI, surveillance, blockchain) and financial monitoring tools play in cutting off resources to armed groups funded by drug trafficking?
- What alternative development strategies could reduce communities' reliance on illicit drug economies, and how can these be made sustainable?
- How should public health approaches, such as rehabilitation, education, and harm reduction, be integrated into global drug policy?
- Could regulation or controlled legalization of certain substances reduce the power of criminal organizations, and what are the risks of this approach?

Suggested Readings and Resources

- **ScienceDirect – "Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime" (2024)**

  A peer-reviewed article that explores the dynamics of drug trafficking as part of transnational organized crime, analyzing its impact on governance, security, and social stability. Useful for understanding the academic framework of the "crime-terror nexus." https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S004723522400014X

- **UNODC – World Drug Report 2025 (Key Findings)**

  The UN Office on Drugs and Crime's flagship report provides up-to-date data on global drug production, trafficking routes, consumption trends, and emerging threats. Essential for delegates seeking reliable statistics and evidence-based insights. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/WDR25_B1_Key_findings.pdf

- **UNODC Education for Justice – Drug Trafficking Module**

  A resource that introduces the key issues of drug trafficking within the framework of transnational organized crime. It explains definitions, historical trends, and case examples, making it a valuable starting point for research. https://www.unodc.org/e4j/zh/organized-crime/module-3/key-issues/drug-trafficking.html

- **UN Security Council Press Release (2023)**

  Official summary of a Security Council debate on transnational organized crime, highlighting member states' positions and the Council's concerns regarding its links to terrorism and instability. Useful for understanding how the UNSC frames the issue. https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15533.doc.htm

- **UN News – Global Drug Trafficking Update (2025)**

  A news article from the UN covering recent developments in drug trafficking, including shifting routes, new markets, and the involvement of armed groups. Helpful for identifying the most current global trends. https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/05/1163741

- **International Review of the Red Cross – "Can Criminal Organizations Be Non-State Parties to Armed Conflict?"**

  A legal and humanitarian perspective examining whether large-scale criminal groups, such as drug cartels, could fall under international humanitarian law. Critical for delegates debating the legal classification of NSAGs involved in trafficking. https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/can-criminal-organizations-be-non-state-parties-to-armed-conflict-923

- **UN Secretary-General's Remarks to the Security Council (2023)**

  The Secretary-General outlines the growing challenges posed by transnational organized crime, including drug trafficking, and emphasizes the need for stronger multilateral cooperation. Important for understanding the UN's leadership perspective. https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-12-07/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-transnational-organized-crime-growing-challenges-and-new-threats

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