



Understanding and Addressing the Drivers Behind the Nexus of Blue Crime, Drugs, Piracy, and Terror Prevalent Across the Atlantic

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Executive Summary

The Atlantic Ocean has become a complex hotspot for "blue crime", a nexus of transnational maritime crimes including drug trafficking, piracy, illegal fishing, human smuggling, oil theft and wildlife trafficking. These illicit activities are deeply interconnected, exploiting weak governance, socioeconomic vulnerabilities and governance gaps along both African and Latin American coasts while fuelling corruption and instability across the Atlantic basin. The region's vastness, strategic maritime routes and resource wealth, combined with porous borders and limited law enforcement capacity, provide fertile ground for organised criminal networks that span continents and leverage sophisticated logistics and financial systems. The impact on the legitimate blue economy is severe, with annual losses estimated at nearly \$40 billion and millions of jobs threatened. Current responses are fragmented with uneven regional cooperation and often misaligned external interventions. The policy brief advocates a holistic approach that integrates maritime security with socio-economic development, environmental sustainability and governance reform to effectively disrupt this resilient criminal ecosystem. This study recommends establishing integrated maritime surveillance networks, a permanent multinational maritime task force, financial intelligence cooperation, and livelihood programs to counter criminal recruitment, all within a comprehensive Pan-Atlantic strategy that aligns security, economic, and environmental goals to safeguard human security and the blue economy in the Atlantic region.

Introduction

The Atlantic Ocean has become the stage for an increasingly intricate and destabilising "blue crime" nexus in which drug trafficking, piracy, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, human smuggling, oil bunkering and the illicit wildlife trade no longer occur in isolation but rather reinforce one another through shared logistics, corrupt networks and overlapping markets¹. Yet, as the UN Security Council discovered during its first-ever debate on transnational organised crime at sea in 2019, the international community still lacks a common lexicon for what constitutes "blue crime," let alone a coherent strategy for mitigating the insecurities it generates for coastal communities, flag states and the wider Atlantic space.²

¹ Bueger, C., & Edmunds, T. (2020). Blue crime: Conceptualising transnational organised crime at sea. *Marine Policy*, 119, 104067.

² Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research (2020). *Blue Crime: Transnational Organised Crime at Sea*.



The Atlantic Ocean, stretching over 106 million square kilometres and linking four continents, has long served as a conduit for global trade and cultural exchange. Nearly 90 percent of Africa's trade passes through its waters, while fisheries employ millions and provide protein for over 200 million people. Coastal tourism, shipping, and offshore oil and gas further cement the Atlantic as a lifeline for global commerce and livelihoods. However, its strategic and economic importance also makes it a fertile ground for transnational organised crime. This policy brief, therefore, takes as its starting point two inter-linked questions: How can we understand and address the drivers behind the expanding nexus of blue crime across the Atlantic Ocean? and where can Pan-Atlantic cooperation make a tangible difference in advancing human security?

The concept of *blue crime*, a term capturing the diverse forms of transnational organised crime at sea, underscores how these activities intersect to undermine maritime security, economic resilience, and human well-being across the Atlantic Basin.³ While piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, drug trafficking from Latin America to West Africa and Europe and the proliferation of small arms have drawn significant attention, scholars caution that focusing on isolated threats obscures the interlinkages that sustain a broader criminal ecosystem.⁴

This criminal nexus exploits governance gaps, weak enforcement capacities and socioeconomic vulnerabilities on both shores of the Atlantic. In West Africa, piracy and drug smuggling have deepened insecurity in coastal communities, often intertwining with violent non-state actors. In South America, entrenched drug cartels and trafficking syndicates leverage maritime routes to extend their reach across the Atlantic, creating spillover effects that fuel corruption, violence, and instability.⁵ The fluidity of 'blue crime' demands integrated frameworks that capture its complex manifestations, from crimes against mobility to environmental crimes, while recognising the distinct but overlapping pathways through which these illicit activities operate.⁶

Despite recognition at the United Nations and in regional forums, pan-Atlantic cooperation remains fragmented. North Atlantic mechanisms such as Europol and the U.S. Joint Interagency Task Force-South are comparatively institutionalised, whereas South Atlantic efforts, such as the Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS), struggle with weak institutionalisation and divergent national threat perceptions.⁷ This asymmetry hampers the development of coordinated responses to shared security challenges. Meanwhile, external factors, including the European Union and the United States, have invested in

³ *ibid*

⁴ Duarte, É., Marcondes, D., & Carneiro, C. (2018). Facing the transnational criminal organizations in the South Atlantic. In *Maritime security challenges in the South Atlantic* (pp. 11-40). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

⁵ Mouzouni, M. (2016). Cooperation Against Transnational Crime: The Case of the Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic. The German Marshall Fund of the United States / OCP Policy Center. *Atlantic Currents*. 42-51

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *ibid*

capacity-building and maritime domain awareness initiatives, yet these often operate as “top-down” interventions misaligned with local priorities⁸.

A nuanced approach is imperative, one that moves beyond traditional, siloed security paradigms to adopt integrated strategies that address the socio-economic, political, and institutional vulnerabilities exploited by these illicit actors. Such an approach recognises that the effectiveness of interventions is directly proportional to their capacity to address the root causes and enablers of these complex criminal ecosystems.⁹ Fortunately, the Atlantic Centre has taken significant steps towards promoting pan-Atlantic cooperation among Atlantic coastal nations to foster robust partnerships and create strategies that enhance information sharing. This cooperation also promotes transnational efforts to combat common threats like piracy and drug trafficking while advocating for integrated solutions to address the military, environmental, economic, and social aspects of Atlantic security for safer and prosperous Atlantic for all of us.¹⁰ These efforts by the Atlantic Centre are in line with UN Security Council Resolution No. 2634 (2022), which encourages bilateral and multilateral partners to provide, where possible, adequate support to national and regional organizations within the Gulf of Guinea.¹¹

This policy analysis will delineate the conceptual framework of "blue crime" and its various manifestations, subsequently explore the interdependencies and reinforce dynamics that characterise the nexus of these transnational criminal enterprises. It will then propose policy recommendations aimed at disrupting these networks and fostering greater pan-Atlantic cooperation.

The Nexus of “Blue Crimes”, Drugs and Terrorism

Terrorist and criminal groups increasingly exploit one another’s networks for mutual commercial benefit. Terrorist organisations generate revenue through trafficking in arms, drugs, persons, and cultural property, as well as the illicit trade in natural resources such as timber, charcoal, gold, and oil. They also profit from kidnapping for ransom, extortion, and bank robbery. To legitimise and move these funds, they misuse commercial enterprises, non-profit organisations, donations, and crowdfunding. At the same time, criminal organisations benefit from terrorist tactics, adopting methods of intimidation, violence, and clandestine supply chains to strengthen their operations. Both actors are also taking advantage of the online domain, where illicit transactions and fraud provide new opportunities to expand their reach. This convergence creates a dangerous ecosystem in which terrorism and organised crime reinforce each other’s capabilities, sustain themselves financially, and threaten stability through the fusion of illicit enterprise and extremist violence.

⁸ ibid

⁹ Lindley, J., & Hübschle, A. (2024). Transnational maritime environmental crime. *Frontiers in Conservation Science*, 5, 1495064.

¹⁰ Obeng J.A & de Arantes e Oliveira F. (2024). Combating Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing in the Atlantic: Course Insight and Solution

¹¹ UN Security Council Resolution No. 2634 (2022). Adopted by the Security Council at its 9050th meeting.

The vast and resource-rich Atlantic basin has become attractive to both criminals and terrorists. The Atlantic economy generates more than 1.3 trillion dollars each year from fishing, shipping, offshore energy, tourism and marine biotechnology, yet criminal networks are hollowing it out by hiding their operations inside these very industries¹². In the fisheries sector, between 10-23.5 billion dollars vanish annually through drug-laden trawlers, trafficked crews, money laundering and weapon caches hidden in nets.¹³ Container shipping incurs annual losses exceeding \$7 billion, driven by narcotics smuggling that exploits containerised cargo flows across key Atlantic Ocean shipping routes.¹⁴ Ships transporting goods between South America, Europe, and Africa face infiltration by illicit drugs concealed in containers, aided by forged documentation, hijacked cargoes, and coerced crews. Offshore rigs and pipelines in regions such as the Gulf of Guinea suffer billions of dollars in losses annually due to oil theft, platform extortion, smuggling of spare parts, and environmental damage. Coordinated security efforts in places like Nigeria have significantly reduced but not eliminated these maritime crimes. Oil theft costs Nigeria millions of dollars each month, with approximately \$23 billion in oil revenue lost in 2022¹⁵, highlighting how maritime crime now increasingly overlaps with lawful commerce in the Atlantic Ocean.

Organised groups embed themselves through front companies that launder illicit profits while providing operational cover, and they rely on systematic bribery of port officials, customs agents, and maritime regulators who enable document fraud, flag hopping, and cargo that is never examined.¹⁶ They co-opt the same satellite navigation, encrypted communications, and automated identification systems that law-abiding captains use. At the same time, regulatory gaps such as patchy jurisdiction, opaque beneficial ownership, weak port-state control, lax crew vetting, and poor cargo screening combine with operational blind spots, including limited real-time tracking in remote waters, poor inter-agency data sharing, thin patrol assets, and cyber-defences that are easily breached. In the Atlantic region, ocean-based commerce currently contributes approximately \$1.5 trillion annually to the global economy, with potential to double by 2030, and sustainable sectors already provide millions of jobs across Africa and Latin America¹⁷.

According to the World Bank, “Blue economy is the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and ocean ecosystem health”.¹⁸ However, much of the region’s current activity, especially large-scale industrial fishing, falls outside this definition

¹² Hamilton, D. S., & Quinlan, J. P. (2023). The transatlantic economy 2023. *Transatlantic Bus. Council and Amcham-EU*.

¹³ UNODC (n.d). Fisheries Crime: transnational organized criminal activities in the context of the fisheries sector. 12p

¹⁴ World Customs Organization (2025). Infiltration of maritime cargo supply chains. Organized crime, cocaine and the internal conspirator. Supply Chain Integrity Project. 56p

¹⁵ Mbah, F. (2024). In Nigeria’s crude capital, a plan to win the war against oil theft.

¹⁶ Sigsworth, R. (2023). The fishing and cocoa industries show how criminal networks and corrupt officials exploit multinational supply chains. ENACT. World Custom Organization (2023). By Martin Benderson, Associate Director, Collective Action & Partnership Development, Maritime Anti-Corruption Network (MACN). Tackling corruption in maritime trade.

¹⁷ Madhani, A., Lee, M (2023). Atlantic nations commit to environmental, economic cooperation on sidelines of UN meeting.

¹⁸ Wilson Center (2023). Transatlantic Blue Economy Initiative – Policy Recommendations

due to unsustainable harvest levels and ecosystem degradation.¹⁹ The OECD projects that the global ocean economy could more than double to USD 3 trillion by 2030, yet warns that realising this potential in the Atlantic requires urgent safeguards against over-exploitation and environmental decline.²⁰ These include a comprehensive legal harmonisation of continent-wide advanced surveillance grids, sustainable blue-economy development strategies and community-based coastal monitoring to dismantle the entrenched criminal architecture and return the Atlantic's maritime commons to legitimate enterprise.

Drivers Behind the Nexus of Blue Crime and Terror within the Atlantic

Financial incentives from criminal activities might shift terrorists' motivations from ideological to financial, especially in the maritime space, complicating the challenge for government agencies. The terrorist activity cycle, including recruitment, radicalisation, training, funding, logistics, attack, evasion, and media exploitation, provides multiple intersection points between blue-crime and terrorism²¹. The nexus of blue crimes, drug trafficking, and terrorism in the Atlantic is driven by a complex interplay of factors, including geographic vulnerabilities, weak governance, economic incentives and the convergence of criminal and extremist interests.

Geographic Vulnerabilities and Advantages

The vastness and remoteness of the Atlantic, combined with weak maritime governance in certain areas, create opportunities for criminal activity.²² The region is home to great powers such as the United States, the European Union, and Brazil.²³ It also has the most vulnerable countries in the world, located along the coast of sub-Saharan Africa. The proximity of great powers and highly vulnerable states is a critical driver of insecurity in the Atlantic area. High volumes of shipping from North America and Western Europe traversing through vulnerable sub-Saharan African waters are prone to pirate attacks.²⁴ Poverty and corruption fuel human and drug trafficking from South America and sub-Saharan Africa to Europe and North America.²⁵ Porous borders, inadequate monitoring, and poor governance in sub-Saharan African countries create channels for these crimes to thrive.

The Atlantic space is undergoing an energy boom with new discoveries in some of the vulnerable countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Angola and Nigeria, which are fuelling conflict and blue crimes due to bad governance and weak institutions. Notwithstanding ageing societies in Europe and North America, the wider Atlantic space constitutes the landscape for an urban and demographic revolution. On both sides of the ocean, metropolises like London, New York, São Paulo or Lagos continue to sprawl, and Africa's population is projected to

¹⁹ Wilson Center (2023). Transatlantic Blue Economy Initiative – Policy Recommendations.

²⁰ Sumaila, U. R., & Villasante, S. (2025). Surging blue economy, increasing conflict risks and mitigation strategies. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 12, 1499386.

²¹ UNICRI (2024). The Nexus between Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism in Latin America - June 2024. 86p

²² Pigeon, M (2025). Atlantic piracy, current threats, and maritime governance in the Gulf of Guinea.

²³ Duodu, K. A., Schandorf, S.O., Sagoe, A (2023). Great power competition in the Atlantic: implications for maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea region. *Atlantic Centre report*. 125-147

²⁴ Dua, J. (2019). Piracy and Maritime Security in Africa. *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics*.

²⁵ UNODC (2024). Chapter 2. Trafficking in persons in and from Africa: a global responsibility. *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024*.

double in size by 2070 to around 3.2 billion people, making it the region with the largest population growth in the world²⁶.

The Atlantic Ocean is vast and dotted with archipelagos, remote islands, and poorly monitored coastlines. States like Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and other West African nations sit at critical crossroads between Latin America and Europe, making them natural hubs for the transshipment of drugs and migrants. The Gulf of Guinea, with its oil-rich waters and busy shipping lanes, is particularly prone to piracy and illegal oil bunkering²⁷. These geographic realities overwhelm the enforcement capacity of coastal states, creating spaces where criminal networks operate with relative ease.

Economic Incentives

Drug trafficking, piracy and other illicit activities offer significant financial gains, attracting both individuals and organised crime groups. For many coastal populations facing high unemployment, limited livelihood opportunities, and declining fish stocks, engagement in smuggling, piracy, or providing logistical support to traffickers offers immediate economic relief compared to fragile formal economies. For organised crime syndicates, the Atlantic offers both concealment and connectivity. Fishing vessels and commercial shipping are often used as covers for drug smuggling, arms trafficking and even human trafficking. The profits are immense: a single successful drug shipment can finance multiple piracy operations, bribe officials and purchase sophisticated equipment such as motherships, firearms, and surveillance technology. Oil theft and illegal fishing also feed into this illicit economy, with stolen petroleum products and high-value marine species traded across regional and international markets. These lucrative incentives create a reinforcing cycle: criminal groups exploit weak maritime governance and corruption to expand their reach, while impoverished coastal communities are pulled into the networks as couriers, informants, or participants in piracy.

Weak Governance and Corruption

Weak governance and corruption are central enablers of the illicit maritime economy across the Atlantic. Many coastal states in West and Central Africa face structural challenges, including under-resourced navies, limited surveillance capacity and fragile judicial systems. These gaps allow criminal networks to operate with relative impunity, particularly in vast maritime zones that far exceed national monitoring capabilities. For example, the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of Atlantic coastal states can stretch hundreds of nautical miles offshore, but patrol assets are often too few to provide consistent enforcement. Corruption compounds these weaknesses.²⁸ Officials at ports, customs, fisheries departments, and naval commands are often bribed to turn a blind eye to illegal activities, ranging from unlicensed fishing to the transshipment of drugs and arms.²⁹ In West Africa, syndicates involved in IUU

²⁶ UN, World Population Prospects (2024). The UN projects that Africa's population will double by 2070.

²⁷ Petit, Z (2023). The Gulf of Guinea: From Piracy to Oil Bunkering.

²⁸ UNIDIR (2024). Securing the Seas. 78p

²⁹ DCAF (2023). *Maritime Security and Justice in the Gulf of Guinea*.

fishing routinely pay bribes to avoid penalties.³⁰ Similarly, oil theft in the Gulf of Guinea thrives not only because of weak enforcement but also because corrupt actors within security agencies and state-owned enterprises collude with traffickers.³¹ These practices erode trust in governance institutions and further entrench illicit economies.

High Demand and Profitable Illicit Markets

The “Enterprise Theory” posits that organised crime emerges when legitimate markets fail to satisfy demand for illicit goods or services, allowing criminal groups to profit from high-risk, high-reward opportunities.³² The Atlantic Ocean connects three major consumer hubs, North America, Europe, and increasingly, Africa. These markets create strong demand for drugs, trafficked humans, counterfeit goods, and illegally harvested natural resources. For example, Latin America is the world’s largest producer of cocaine, and West Africa has become a critical transit zone for shipments to Europe. Similarly, arms trafficked across the Atlantic feed ongoing conflicts in West and Central Africa. Because profit margins are extraordinarily high, often exceeding billions of dollars annually, organised crime groups have strong incentives to continue operating, even in the face of occasional interdiction.

Convergence of Interests

Terrorist and criminal groups increasingly exploit one another’s networks for mutual commercial benefit. Terrorist organisations generate revenue through trafficking in arms, drugs, persons, and cultural property, as well as the illicit trade in natural resources such as timber, charcoal, gold, and oil. They also profit from kidnapping for ransom, extortion, and bank robbery.³³ To legitimise and move these funds, they misuse commercial enterprises, non-profit organisations, donations, and crowdfunding. At the same time, criminal organisations benefit from terrorist tactics, adopting methods of intimidation, violence, and clandestine supply chains to strengthen their operations. Both actors are also leveraging the online domain, where illicit transactions and fraud present new opportunities to expand their reach. This convergence creates a dangerous ecosystem in which terrorism and organised crime reinforce each other’s capabilities, sustain themselves financially, and threaten stability through the fusion of illicit enterprise and extremist violence.³⁴

In the Atlantic, the convergence of interests between organised crime and terrorist groups is increasingly evident, with both exploiting maritime and coastal vulnerabilities for mutual gain. Drug trafficking routes from Latin America to West Africa, for example, are not only managed by transnational cartels but also taxed or protected by armed groups in the Sahel and coastal regions, providing extremists with vital funding for recruitment and weapons. In the Gulf of Guinea, piracy networks tied to oil theft have overlapped with militant groups in the Niger

³⁰ Geall, S., Gruber, C., Lam, R., Schlieman, L., Shea, L., Sumaila, U. R., & Yozell, S. (2023). Charting a blue future for cooperation between West Africa and China on sustainable fisheries. Stimson Center.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Smith, D. C. (1978). Organized crime and entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Criminology and Penology*, 6(2), 161-177.

³³ UNODC, Theoretical frameworks on the linkages between organised crime and terrorism

³⁴ Mariya Y. Omelicheva, *Rethinking Intersections of Crime and Terrorism: Insights from Political, and Economics of Violence*, National Defence University.



Delta, creating hybrid economies where political grievances and profit motives reinforce one another. Fishing vessels, cargo ships and even small artisanal boats double as platforms for smuggling narcotics, arms and contraband, while the profits from these trades are recycled into terror financing. This blurring of lines between organised crime and extremism strengthens both sides: syndicates gain protection and access to arms, while terrorist groups secure steady income streams, ultimately embedding maritime crime within wider regional insecurity.

Porous Borders and Inadequate Security Infrastructure

The interface between land and sea is particularly vulnerable. Ports across West and Central Africa often lack the scanning technology, trained personnel or secure storage facilities needed to enforce maritime laws effectively.³⁵ Similarly, coast guards are frequently under-equipped, operating with a handful of outdated patrol vessels that cannot cover vast Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)³⁶. Criminal groups exploit these weaknesses by routing illicit cargo through poorly monitored ports or landing sites.³⁷ Once onshore, weak customs and border controls allow illicit goods to move seamlessly into inland markets, further complicating interdiction.

Inadequate International Cooperation

Maritime crime is transnational by nature, but responses remain fragmented. While frameworks such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct in the Gulf of Guinea exist, implementation is inconsistent and often hampered by resource constraints.³⁸ Neighbouring states may have different political priorities, leading to weak coordination in joint patrols or intelligence sharing. Jurisdictional disputes also complicate efforts to prosecute offenders, as crimes committed in international waters often fall into legal grey areas.³⁹ The lack of harmonised laws, inadequate information sharing and absence of sustained multinational cooperation allow criminal networks to thrive by exploiting jurisdictional boundaries.⁴⁰

Conflict and Political Instability

Where states are weakened by conflict or political instability, the maritime domain becomes a haven for criminal enterprises. Armed groups often use the proceeds from oil theft, piracy, or trafficking to finance their insurgencies.⁴¹ In Nigeria's Niger Delta, for example, militant groups have long relied on oil bunkering and piracy to fund operations.⁴² Similarly, political

³⁵ Okafor-Yarwood, I. (2024). West Africa's coast was a haven for piracy and illegal fishing-how technology is changing the picture.

³⁶ Okafor-Yarwood, I., Eastwood, O., Chikowore, N., & de Oliveira Paes, L. (2024). Technology and maritime security in Africa: Opportunities and challenges in Gulf of Guinea. *Marine Policy*, 160, 105976.

³⁷ Carpenter, A. (2012). Security and Europe's Sea Ports: threats and issues facing maritime gateways to Europe. In *Policing and European Studies research conference*, Dundee, Scotland.

³⁸ Tanimu, K. (2024). THE YAOUNDÉ CODE OF CONDUCT AND THE FIGHT AGAINST CRIME IN THE GULF OF GUINEA: AN ANALYSIS. *Nigerian Defence Academy Journal of Military Science and Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2(1), 1-12.

³⁹ Khan, A., Usman, M., & Amjad, S. (2020). Jurisdictional Challenges in Prosecuting Maritime Crimes: A Comparative Analysis. *International Review of Social Sciences*, 8(11), 376-382.

⁴⁰ Usman, M., Khan, A., & Amjad, S. (2021). Implications of transnational crime on maritime jurisdiction and enforcement. *International Review of Social Sciences*, 9(04), 456-462.

⁴¹ Balogun, W. A. (2018). Crude oil theft, petrol-piracy and illegal trade in fuel: an enterprise-value chain perspective of energy-maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea. *Lancaster University* (United Kingdom).

⁴² Iniemi, O., & Yoroki, E. (2024). Illegal Oil Bunkering and National Security: An Assessment of the Niger Delta Region. *Social Facts: FUOTUOKE Journal of Sociology and Anthology*, 4(1), 1-17.

instability in Guinea-Bissau has turned the country into a hub for Latin American drug cartels.⁴³ In such contexts, governments are often more focused on internal power struggles than securing maritime borders, giving criminals a freer hand at sea.

Limited Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)

The ability to detect, track, and respond to activities at sea remains severely underdeveloped in much of the Atlantic. Many states lack advanced radar systems, satellite tracking, Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) or integrated command centres. Even when such tools exist, data sharing across agencies or between neighbouring countries is weak. As a result, authorities often only respond to crimes after they occur rather than preventing them. This reactive posture is especially problematic for crimes like piracy, where early detection of suspicious vessels could prevent attacks or for drug trafficking, where interdiction depends on timely intelligence.

Mapping the Architecture of Transnational Organised Crime

The Transnational organised crime in the Atlantic Ocean is sustained by complex, multilayered criminal networks that mirror the operational sophistication of multinational corporations.⁴⁴ These networks operate through distinct architectural levels, each designed to maintain control, maximise profits and adapt to evolving security challenges.⁴⁵ At the command level, strategic leaders oversee financial management, territorial control and long-term decision-making.⁴⁶ Horizontal links connect organisations across regions, enabling partnerships between equal-level syndicates such as West African trafficking groups and Latin American cartels.⁴⁷ The operational level coordinates routes, logistics and enforcement, ensuring the secure flow of illicit goods across maritime corridors.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, vertical integration allows syndicates to dominate entire supply chains- from drug production in South America to retail distribution in European and African markets. At the tactical level, actors handle transportation, security and local distribution, often supported by service networks of specialists in logistics, financial services and illicit security.⁴⁹

The key players illustrate the globalised nature of these networks. West African organisations, including Nigerian criminal enterprises and Ghanaian trafficking groups, leverage strong diaspora links in Europe and the Americas, infiltrate fishing fleets, and exploit customs corruption to dominate Gulf of Guinea routes.⁵⁰ Their portfolios extend beyond narcotics into cybercrime and financial fraud. Latin American cartels- notably Colombian syndicates and Brazilian factions- control major Atlantic ports, pioneer advanced trafficking technologies such

⁴³ Bybee, A. N. (2011). *Narco state or failed state? narcotics and politics in Guinea-Bissau*. George Mason University.

⁴⁴ Wall, D. S. (2018). Understanding Transnational Organised Crime. *Policing*, 6(4), 354-359.

⁴⁵ Williams, P. (2001). Transnational criminal networks. *Networks and networks: the future of terror, crime, and militancy*, 1382, 61.

⁴⁶ Duarte, É., Marcondes, D., & Carneiro, C. (2018). Facing the transnational criminal organizations in the South Atlantic. In *Maritime security challenges in the South Atlantic* (pp. 11-40). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

⁴⁷ *ibid*

⁴⁸ FIAP (n.d). Co-operation as a tool to disrupt illicit maritime trafficking

⁴⁹ Basu, G. (2014). The strategic attributes of transnational smuggling: Logistics flexibility and operational stealth in the facilitation of illicit trade. *Journal of Transportation Security*, 7(2), 99-113.

⁵⁰ Moström, E. (2025). Foreign Exploitation and the Rise of Organized Crime: A Qualitative Case Comparison of Ghana and Nigeria.

as semi-submersibles and launder proceeds through sophisticated financial webs.⁵¹ Their operations are reinforced by alliances with African and European groups, enabling arms trafficking into conflict zones and cocaine distribution across continents. European criminal organisations, including the Italian American Mafia and Eastern European networks, maintain historical ties across the Atlantic, employing traditional structures of port infiltration, labour racketeering and money laundering, while also innovating through cybercrime, human trafficking and exploitation of EU free movement.

The operational characteristics reveal patterns of recruitment, violence, and adaptability. Recruitment is often based on family, ethnic, or community ties, reinforced by corruption of state officials and the use of legitimate businesses as fronts.⁵² Territorial control is enforced through violence, intimidation, and the elimination of rivals, ensuring unchallenged command of trafficking routes. Adaptation strategies include rapid responses to law enforcement crackdowns, diversification into new markets and the adoption of digital technologies. These criminal networks exploit economic vulnerabilities and legal loopholes, infiltrating both local and global trade systems.

Proposed Priority Intervention to Mitigate Blue Crimes Within the Atlantic

1. **Launch an Atlantic Maritime Fusion Network:** Create joint, real-time surveillance centres that pool satellite imagery, AIS data, radar feeds and human intelligence from all Atlantic coastal states. Shared “blue picture” reduces blind spots exploited by traffickers, pirates and terrorists.
2. **Stand up a Permanent Atlantic Maritime Task Force:** Pool naval, coastguard and customs assets into a rotating multinational squadron empowered by harmonised legal protocols for hot pursuit, boarding, extradition and asset seizure. Rapid-response cells can hit gun-running or drug shipments before they switch jurisdictions. This could be done on regional basis with active coordination among regional forces.
3. **Institute Atlantic Blue-Livelihood Funds:** Targeted micro-finance, aquaculture training, and coastal-tourism co-ops in high-risk ports (e.g., Conakry, Recife, Cotonou) to undercut recruitment into piracy and narcotics networks by offering legal income streams tied to the sustainable blue economy.
4. **Build a Pan-Atlantic Financial Intelligence Shield:** Link Financial Intelligence Units across Africa, Latin America, Europe, and North America with common standards for beneficial-ownership registries, crypto-monitoring and trade-based laundering alerts. Coordinated freezing and asset-recovery mechanisms dry up the money behind guns, drugs and terror finance.

⁵¹ OECD (2016), *Illicit Trade: Converging Criminal Networks*, OECD Reviews of Risk Management Policies,

⁵² Marine, F. J. (2006). The effects of organized crime on legitimate businesses. *Journal of Financial Crime*, 13(2), 214-234.

5. **Create an Atlantic Security & Resilience Organisation:** A permanent forum combining security, environmental and development mandates to mainstream climate-adaptation plans, enforce sustainable fisheries and coordinate long-term institutional reforms, turning fragmented national efforts into a single architecture for human security across the Atlantic.

Conclusion

The Atlantic can no longer be treated as a collection of national maritime environs; it is a single, contested commons where drugs, guns, piracy, terrorism and blue crime have merged into one self-reinforcing system. This study confirms that these threats are not coincidental overlays but a deliberately interwoven ecosystem: drug profits finance assault-rifle shipments that protect pirate anchorages; illicit fishing revenues launder terror funds; and corrupt port officials simultaneously service traffickers and insurgents. Each layer of illegality shields and strengthens the others, producing a resilient network that outpaces any single navy, prosecutor or development agency acting alone.

The Atlantic security nexus represents one of the most significant transnational security challenges of our time. Its impacts extend far beyond immediate security concerns, affecting economic development, environmental sustainability, and social stability across the Atlantic region. The window of opportunity for effective intervention is narrowing as criminal networks become more sophisticated and entrenched. Delay in implementation will only compound the challenges and increase the costs of future interventions. The choice is clear: act decisively now with coordinated, comprehensive strategies, or face escalating costs and diminishing options in the future. The security and prosperity of the Atlantic region depend on our collective response to this challenge.