

# Understanding and Addressing Atlantic Human Security Threats: Drugs, Guns, Piracy, and Terror

## I. Introduction

The Atlantic basin—spanning from Latin America and the Caribbean to Europe and West Africa—faces intertwined human security threats manifested through drug trafficking, arms smuggling, maritime piracy, and terrorism. These illicit flows not only threaten regional stability but also undermine development, governance, and public safety.

To address these challenges effectively, it is essential to understand the underlying drivers—ranging from economic incentives and weak institutions to porous borders—and to craft multifaceted solutions based on regional and international cooperation.

Latin America's Atlantic seaboard, in particular, is a critical conduit for illicit drug flows to Europe and beyond. Drug traffickers leverage narco-submarines, go-fast boats, and clandestine vessels, along with routine commercial shipping channels, to smuggle significant quantities of narcotics.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, traffickers are increasingly adopting unmanned marine vessels and chemical disguise methods to evade detection—a troubling sign of evolving tactics.<sup>2</sup>

## II. Drivers of Trans-Atlantic Illicit Flows

### 1. Economic Incentives and Weak Institutions

- **Drug Trafficking and Exploitation of Trade Infrastructure:** Illicit networks increasingly exploit containerized trade routes to move drugs efficiently and covertly across the Atlantic. With fewer than 2 percent of the nearly 100 million containers entering Europe inspected, traffickers embed drugs at origin, during transit, or en route by tampering with sealed containers—and benefit from corruption and complicity among port workers, customs agents, and freight operators.<sup>3</sup> In Southern Europe, ports like Gioia Tauro remain key entry points: in 2006, as much as 80 percent of Europe's cocaine transiting from South America arrived via this Italian port, which suffers from infiltration by organized crime groups such as the 'Ndrangheta
- **Arms Smuggling and Criminal-Terrorist Nexus:** The diversification of criminal economies has led to strategic alliances between trafficking groups, armed insurgents, and extremist organizations. In West Africa especially, instability and porous borders amid deteriorating governance have enabled the flow of firearms—from post-conflict arsenals to war profiteers—into the hands of armed groups such as AQIM and IS-affiliated movements.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/narco-sub-cocaine-atlantic-ocean-2qczp2zmj>

<sup>2</sup> <https://channel16.dryadglobal.com/latin-american-drug-traffickers-evade-authorities-with-unmanned-vessels-and-chemical-innovations>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/building-barriers-and-bridges-need-international-cooperation-counter-caribbean-europe-drug>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.newcentre4s.org/EN/2024/10/31/sahel-terrorism-and-surge-of-trafficking/>

- **Port Insecurities and Maritime Crime:** An expanding array of maritime crimes—armed robbery, vehicle theft, drug and arms smuggling—plagues Latin American Atlantic ports. Roughly 14% of global maritime incidents occur across South and Central America, with hotspots including ports in Brazil (Macapá, Santos), Colombia (Cartagena), Peru (Callao), Ecuador, Haiti, and others.<sup>5</sup> These crimes not only endanger seafarers and cargo but also expose shipping operators to reputational and operational vulnerabilities.
- **Regional and Transnational Security Implications:** Latin America's Atlantic environment is increasingly a zone of trans-Atlantic criminal convergence, where demands in Europe and North America meet supply from Latin American mafias. Linguistic and cultural ties—e.g., between Brazil and Lusophone Africa—enhance trafficking routes.<sup>6</sup> Technological innovations—from 3D-printed weapons to encrypted communication platforms and drones—are empowering criminal groups with stealth and scalability in smuggling operations.

## 2. Geography, Marginality, and Governance Gaps

- **Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea:** The Gulf of Guinea—a key transit corridor for oil and shipping—has become a piracy hotspot due to weak maritime governance, high youth unemployment, and limited economic opportunities in coastal communities. Although some regional cooperation (e.g., the Yaoundé Architecture) has helped reduce incident frequency, underlying socio-economic drivers remain unaddressed, raising the risk of renewed threats.<sup>7</sup>
- **Transshipment Corridors and Smuggling Networks:** Arms, drugs, and fighters often traverse complex overland and maritime corridors. For example, weapons flow from Libya through Niger into Nigeria and onward to Gulf coastal zones via smuggling networks that exploit weak oversight and established migrant routes.<sup>8</sup> These corridors are relatively “invisible,” camouflaged within legal trade and poorly regulated shipping systems.

## 3. Porous Borders and Maritime Crime Convergence

- **Maritime Crime as Security Threat:** In small Caribbean island states and West Africa, porous maritime borders facilitate the convergence of drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and terrorism. The lack of coordinated maritime surveillance exacerbates these risks.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.intelligencefusion.co.uk/insights/resources/article/exploring-port-security-threats-in-south-and-latin-america/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/maritime-security-atlantic>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/atlantic-piracy-current-threats-and-maritime-governance-in-the-gulf-of-guinea/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://africasecurityreport.com/2025/02/15/with-150-million-daily-active-users-instagram-stories-is-launching-ads/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-%E2%80%93-un-general-assembly-3rd-committee-crime-information-and-technologies\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-%E2%80%93-un-general-assembly-3rd-committee-crime-information-and-technologies_en)

CARICOM countries, for instance, report that many serious crimes—including firearms smuggling and money laundering—stem from illicit weapons purchased abroad and smuggled via sea.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Terrorist and Armed Group Financing

- **Trafficking as Funding Mechanism for Terrorists:** Terrorist organizations increasingly rely on smuggling—of drugs, arms, and migrants—to finance operations. In the Sahel, traffickers and terror groups often converge in illicit markets, sharing smuggling networks and channels to fund ideological agendas through criminal enterprises.

### III. Addressing the Issue

#### 1: Surveillance and Enforcement Are Necessary—but Not Sufficient

Enhanced law enforcement and interdiction can yield tactical successes, yet without ameliorating structural vulnerabilities, criminal actors simply adapt. For instance, despite increased maritime patrols, Gulf of Guinea pirate groups still pose long-term threats due to unaddressed poverty and youth marginalization.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, container smuggling persists because technology and governance gaps allow traffickers to exploit trade’s opacity.<sup>12</sup>

#### Interdisciplinary, Multilateral Coordination Is Essential

- **Maritime Operations and Intelligence Fusion:** The MAOC-N (Maritime Analysis & Operations Centre – Narcotics), launched in 2007 and based in Lisbon, exemplifies effective multilateral coordination. It brings together liaison officers, customs, police, and military staff from across Europe to pool maritime and aviation intelligence for drug interdiction missions.<sup>13</sup>
- **EU-Caribbean Collaboration:** Recent developments include the EU Roadmap, the European Ports Alliance, and stronger EU-Latin America/Caribbean (CELAC) partnerships that emphasize port security and anti-smuggling operational partnerships.<sup>14</sup>

#### Address Underlying Socioeconomic Conditions

- **Community Resilience and Alternative Livelihoods:** In the Gulf of Guinea, addressing youth unemployment and weak local economies is critical to reducing individuals’ incentives to engage in piracy.<sup>15</sup>
- **Capacity Building and Legal Reform:** Strengthening port infrastructure, customs, and investigative capacity in the Caribbean and West Africa—paired with legal

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<sup>10</sup> <https://press.un.org/en/2023/gashc4374.doc.htm>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/atlantic-piracy-current-threats-and-maritime-governance-in-the-gulf-of-guinea/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/building-barriers-and-bridges-need-international-cooperation-counter-caribbean-europe-drug>

<sup>13</sup> <https://maoc.eu>

<sup>14</sup> <https://hague.company/en/topics/transnational-crime-and-port-security/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/atlantic-piracy-current-threats-and-maritime-governance-in-the-gulf-of-guinea/>

frameworks that enable intelligence sharing and anti-corruption measures – is needed to counter smuggling and trafficking.

## **Recognize and Disrupt Criminal-Terrorist Convergences**

Understanding that terrorist groups and criminal networks often share logistical and financial resources means interventions must be designed to disrupt these intersections, not just treat them as separate threats. Counter-terrorism responses must integrate anti-trafficking, counter-narcotics, and border security strategies.

## **IV. Possible Recommendations**

To tackle the drivers and protect human security across the Atlantic, the following multi-layered strategies could be recommended:

- 1. Strengthen Port and Trade Security**
  - Expand UNODC-WCO Container Control Program units in the Caribbean and West Africa to reduce smuggling opportunities.
  - Enhance port inspections, container sealing, and tracking systems across Atlantic trade hubs.
- 2. Enhance Multinational Intelligence Sharing and Maritime Operations**
  - Support and replicate models like MAOC-N for the Caribbean-West Africa corridor.
  - Facilitate data sharing on high-risk vessels, ports, and operators.
- 3. Build Coastal Community Resilience**
  - Invest in job programs, education, and local development in piracy-affected areas (e.g., Gulf of Guinea).
  - Support sustainable livelihoods to reduce economic dependency on illicit activity.
- 4. Reinforce Legal and Institutional Frameworks**
  - Enable cooperative legal mechanisms for asset seizure, prosecution, and extradition.
  - Combat corruption through training, oversight, and transparency initiatives.
- 5. Target Criminal-Terrorist Supply Chains**
  - Identify and dismantle financial and logistical networks supporting both trafficking and extremist groups.
  - Implement sanctions and financial intelligence targeting dual-use networks.
- 6. Foster Inter-regional Collaboration**
  - Strengthen EU-LAC, EU-African, and Caribbean-West Africa partnerships to coordinate investments, policy reforms, and operational support.
  - Encourage regional governance frameworks like the Yaoundé Architecture as models for mutual response strategies.

Strategy	Description
<b>Regional Maritime Cooperation &amp; Surveillance</b>	Strengthen networks like Campaign Martillo, ORION, CICTE, CAMAS, ROCRAM, and EU-CELAC initiatives to boost interdiction and maritime coordination.
<b>Technological Capability Enhancements</b>	Invest in satellite tracking, radar, UAVs, and maritime fusion centers. Illegal submersibles and chemical camouflage require advanced detection technologies.

<b>Port Governance and Law Enforcement Reform</b>	Improve customs screening, container tracking, and anti-corruption protocols at critical ports like Santos, Paranaguá, Callao, and Cartagena.
<b>Socioeconomic Recovery and Local Resilience</b>	Address joblessness in maritime communities, especially fishing regions like Venezuelan Sucre, to prevent drift into piracy and smuggling.

## V. Conclusion

The human security challenges of **drugs, guns, piracy, and terrorism across the Atlantic** are deeply interlinked, driven by economic desperation, governance failures, porous borders, and criminal-terrorist coordination. Addressing them demands more than enforcement; it requires **integrated strategies** that combine **surveillance and interdiction, socio-economic development, legal reform, and multilateral cooperation**.

Criminals and terrorists exploit both systemic weaknesses and geopolitical fractures. Only by understanding the interplay between these drivers—and by implementing sustained, collaborative, targeted interventions—can the international community move from reactionary measures to durable resilience and security across the Atlantic.