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OCEANPOLITICS AND TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE SOUTHEAST PACIFIC: CHALLENGES FOR MARITIME GOVERNANCE AND REGIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract

This theoretical-descriptive article analyzes the interaction between ocean politics and the dynamics of transnational maritime organized crime (TMOC) in the Eastern South Pacific. It argues that state weakness, governance gaps, and the growing strategic relevance of ocean space converge in a context where illicit actors have developed transnational projection capabilities comparable in speed and flexibility to those of states. Taking Ecuador as an illustrative case, tensions between public policy, maritime security, and multilateral cooperation are identified. A new conceptual framework on the "parallel oceanpolitics" of crime is proposed, and implications for regional stability and human security are outlined.

Keywords Oceanpolitics; Maritime governance; Security; Southeast Pacific; Transnational organized crime.

1 INTRODUCTION

Oceans are the cause and the sustenance of life, and humankind has depended on them throughout its history. Today the seas are the veins and arteries that channel between 80% and 90% of world trade (UNCTAD, 2024). In this way, some human communities have managed to draw close to the legacy of the seafaring peoples of Polynesia or the Mediterranean thalassocracies, seeing in the ocean not merely a source of resources, but a space vital to the subsistence of their commercial and state power (Gómez, 2023a).

Following the legacy of the British Empire, the United States has consolidated its hegemony through a solid appropriation of the role of guarantor of freedom of navigation. Despite responses from other global actors, the maritime power of the US Navy currently has no rival. The People's Republic of China, for its part, has shown its interest in breaking free of its continental constraints to become an actor with a global presence, focusing much of its attention precisely on the South China Sea.

This process generates tensions not only with regional neighbors that claim sovereignty over their own waters, but also with the United States itself, which seeks to keep the People's Republic of China in a position that is easy to contain (Gortaire-Morejón, 2023). The national security strategy published in November 2025 by the Donald Trump administration is a key piece in this new geopolitical puzzle.

This document, which represents a dramatic strategic shift by retracting the United States' role as a global actor in order to focus more on its hemispheric domain, proposes, among other things, drawing "on our consolidated friends in the hemisphere to control migration, stop the flow of drugs, and strengthen stability and security on land and at sea" (United States, 2025, p. 16).

In parallel, it also aims to reorganize the Coast Guard and the Navy to focus on actions against illegal migration, drug trafficking, and control of transit routes (United States, 2025). In this way, the ideas about the centrality of the sea as a space of national power, established by Alfred Mahan (1918) and elevated to their own sphere of analysis through the vision of oceanopolitics built by Martínez Busch (1993), highlight the importance of the sea for states.

Yet the strategic centrality of the sea contrasts with the limited "maritime culture" of several coastal states of the South Pacific, where the projection of power and the provision of public goods, among them security, control, and the administration of justice, lag behind the pace at which transnational organized maritime crime (TOMC) adapts.

Ecuador's case is paradigmatic and has drawn particular attention over the past five years because of the multilevel crisis that has turned it into one of the most violent states in the region and, with due qualifications, in the world. The country combines a privileged geostrategic position and an extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), with incalculable environmental value tied above all to the Galápagos Islands, but also great wealth in resources, alongside fragmented and weak institutions, intermittent operational capabilities, and discontinuity in maritime policy.

At the same time, TOMC has refined its logistics through better practices for contaminating containers, fast boats, semi-submersibles, and the use of drones, as well as its infiltration of port nodes and even government administration, eroding functional sovereignty and increasing the violence associated with the cocaine market, turning the country into a critical node in the geopolitics of organized crime (Emmerich, 2015; UNODC, 2024). Both Colombia and Peru add to this environment as the two states with the highest cocaine production globally.

Political and securitization efforts have proven insufficient to deal with the great adaptive capacity of criminal economies and actors. Cocaine production has thus reached record levels, with seizures rising 220% between 2012 and 2022 (UNODC, 2024). Although much of this production, especially from the VRAEM, follows a route through the Amazon, the Pacific route is key to sustaining irregular groups and criminal organizations in the region.

Finally, Chile, which had managed to stay away from transnational crime chains for several decades, has begun to show evidence of having become significantly incorporated into the global drug-trafficking supply chain (Fiscalía de Chile, 2021). Chilean ports are thus increasingly exploited for cocaine shipments and for moving chemical precursors, particularly those originating from China, used to manufacture synthetic drugs in the region.

Although the security situation in Chile has not deteriorated as much as in other countries of the region, there are variations, such as the rise in homicides linked to drug trafficking and reports of the

presence of transnational organizations from Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela in the country, that warrant attention and concern (Pechinsky, 2021; Cavalari, Manjarrés, and Newton, 2025).

Criminal groups have thus been identified that have established transnational alliances across every country of the Southeast Pacific, generating logistics chains that rely on the diversification and refinement of methods of institutional capture (corruption), recruitment (coercion and intimidation), and territorial occupation, even promoting practices meant to instill a cultural environment built on violence and terror, along with their own line of innovation and development (Cortes Castillo, 2020; Fiscalía de Chile, 2021; Torres, 2021; Echeverry Andrade, Jaramillo, and García Llave, 2024; Rodríguez, 2024; Stevenson, 2024; Angulo, 2025).

Much of this success is tied to a transnational vision of the criminal economy, one that prioritizes its own interests and profits over notions such as nationalism or a sense of homeland. At the same time, the use of the sea as a flexible zone in the exercise of sovereignty has opened the door for organized criminal groups to view it as a space for appropriation and use.

The relevance of the sea within TOMC's logistics chain merits its own level of analysis and stands out through lines of action taken in other regions, such as the deployment of US forces in the Caribbean near Venezuela, which have included the sinking of speedboats supposedly headed toward the United States carrying drugs (Bertrand Schmitz and Cohen, 2025).

In this sense, this article, from a theoretical-descriptive approach, seeks to describe and analyze the articulation between oceanopolitics, maritime governance, and TOMC in the Southeast Pacific, proposing the concept of "parallel oceanopolitics" to refer to the criminal appropriation of the state's essential functions at sea.

The article draws together classic and contemporary literature (Mahan, 1918; Till, 2004; Emmerich, 2015; Gómez, 2023a, 2023b), strategic intelligence frameworks (Kent, 1965; Gibson, 2014; Lowenthal, 2020), and recent evidence on maritime governance and criminal incidence in the paradigmatic case of Ecuador.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: OCEANOPOLITICS, GOVERNANCE, AND CRIME

2.1 OCEANOPOLITICS AS AN EXTENSION OF THE GEOPOLITICS OF MARITIME POWER

From the military strategic tradition, control of sea lanes, including archipelagos, atolls, and straits, as well as of naval bases, confers decisive advantages (Corbett, 1911; Mahan, 1918). In the twenty-first century, however, the oceanopolitical vision spills beyond the military sphere to incorporate global logistics chains, environmental regimes, technological innovation, data, and standards for the safety of human life at sea.

The notion of maritime power combines material capabilities (fleets, coast guards, surveillance) and institutional capabilities (public policy design, technical diplomacy, regulation), and demands both

strategic clarity in doctrine and the political will needed to orient the state's efforts toward investment in means and capabilities.

For the purposes of this analysis, we draw on the school of thought developed by the Chilean admiral and commander-in-chief of the Chilean Navy between 1990 and 1997, Jorge Martínez Busch, who held that oceanopolitics is a branch that seeks to have "political management appreciate the influence of the sea on the vital cycle of the state" (1993, p. 3).

Álvarez Aguirre holds that oceanopolitics is a growing discipline, and that, as the importance of the sea increases, the need to preserve and protect the oceans, vital to human existence, becomes ever more evident, giving it growing relevance in the political, social, and economic spheres (2024, p. 73). For Gómez, oceanopolitics "is about occupying ocean space as a genuine space for the state's knowledge and development" (2023b, p. 154).

On its relationship to geopolitics, he holds that neither precedes the other; rather, both concepts "arise spontaneously from the moment humankind understood the importance a given geographic space holds for its survival and development" (Gómez, 2023b, p. 164). This opens up a far deeper interpretation of states' obligations and possibilities with respect to the sea. The rules of the game in maritime governance dynamics are set chiefly by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

However, the failure of countries such as Peru to sign it, or of Colombia to ratify it, is also a reminder that states' oceanopolitical interests continue to play a fundamental role in international dynamics.

The weakening of the multilateral system, driven by the contraction of the United States' role as financier and regulator, also constrains the implementation of all the principles agreed within the United Nations framework, since there is less coordination when it comes to taking collective action, and the field reverts to a scenario in which each state's individual power sets the tone for the exercise of sovereignty across every domain, maritime included.

In any case, it is worth noting that maritime governance continues to respond to more flexible criteria than governance on land. Playing on the phrase, maritime governance is rather liquid. It is precisely as a consequence of this factual reality that non-state actors operating outside the law exploit these power vacuums to achieve their objectives. Given its impact on citizen security and well-being, drug trafficking tends to be the first problem addressed.

Other offenses intervene here as well, however: illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, piracy, the transport of material extracted through mining for processing, the movement of illegally logged timber, the shipment of captured exotic species, migrant smuggling and trafficking in certain parts of the world, and bulk contraband (Gortaire-Morejón, 2025, p. 24).

2.2 TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED MARITIME CRIME (TOMC): ADAPTATION AND FUNCTIONAL CAPTURE

TOMC operates through diversified portfolios and deploys low-signature technologies, resorting to violence in the most serious cases. Conceptually, this configures a "parallel oceanopolitics": illicit networks

that occupy maritime space, and even come to replace essential functions that belong to the state, such as security, dispute arbitration, and logistics dynamics, at coastal nodes and high-density routes.

This is achieved partly by exploiting the absence of an oceanopolitical vision, since decision-makers see the sea as a secondary space, generating vacuums that criminal actors can occupy. As Till puts it: the success of transnational crime, such as drug trafficking, increases the power of those who defy civilized states and everything they represent; it undermines their prosperity, security, and capacity to connect with other countries (2004, p. 294).

The struggle to resolve this problem also weakens democratic debate, as it draws legitimate actors into internal squabbles that divert attention from the primary objective, which should be recovering sovereign control over security.

The maritime vector of drug trafficking, moreover, combines three families of methods: a) contamination of containers and cargo aboard large deep-draft vessels; b) fast boats and artisanal fishing vessels that operate as transit or transfer platforms; and c) low-signature devices such as Low-Profile Vessels (LPVs) and fully submersible vehicles (Bagley, 2008; Kropiwnicka, 2018; Woolston and Shuldiner, 2025). These activities intermingle with acts of violence against fishing communities, members of state security forces, and private companies, as well as with cooptation strategies.

Between 2024 and 2025, most seizures of submersible devices were concentrated in the American Pacific: 83% of cases were recorded along South and Central American routes, with a sustained upward trend through the 2020s (Woolston and Shuldiner, 2025). Fiberglass, low-thermal-signature semi-submersibles (range ≤ 500 km), launched from the Colombian-Ecuadorian mangroves, reveal a level of criminal R&D that already rivals formal industrial capabilities and calls for a broader state technological response (Woolston and Shuldiner, 2025).

Although a minority, these devices reveal the financial and logistical muscle of the cartels and constitute a warning signal to expand public investment in detection. In any case, this is a combined challenge, since it is not only a matter of detecting and stopping the material being exported, but also of curbing production itself.

It should be noted that the Office of Inspector General of the United States Department of Homeland Security reported that seized cocaine fell short of the 690-ton target, pointing to a gap between actual flows and interdiction capabilities (OIG, 2025). The plausible explanation combines modal migration (more land and air routes), improvements in maritime evasion, and greater adoption of technology (GPS, reduced signatures, drones).

Hence the recommendation to reinforce fast interceptors, digital capabilities, and databases, along with regulatory updates (OIG, 2025); yet one can also glimpse a political justification for expanding the use of lethal force by the Donald Trump administration, backed by certain sectors of regional and global conservatism. Such approaches, however, disregard other links in the TOMC chain, which may involve the same actors or entirely different ones.

Taking into account the interconnection of criminal economies, and the absence of corrective measures that would otherwise discourage the commission of illegal activities, a purely punitive and militarized approach could simply displace activity toward other branches of TOMC. This aligns with the structural weakness of the states that make up the Southeast Pacific. Mazzuca (2021) has described the countries of the region as patrimonialist states, capturable by elites and factions, criminal groups included.

At the state level, the legitimacy of the use of force depends on its subjection to the law and its orientation toward public goods. Criminal overflow at sea is, therefore, an indicator of a deficit in capacity and governance rather than a mere "police problem." In this way, the technical adaptation of organized crime groups is complemented by the functional capture of the state apparatus at critical points along the maritime-port chain.

Mechanisms such as trade misinvoicing (over- or under-invoicing in foreign trade), document forgery, the use of offshore centers and tax havens, and the cooptation of customs and port officials, and even members of state security forces, make it possible to mask illicit capital as regular private flows (UNODC, 2024). The profitability of these illicit economies reduces incentives to attack the structure of the system, and anti-corruption rhetoric coexists with de facto tolerated schemes, shielded by administrative and judicial weaknesses.

It should be stressed that this is a heterogeneous process, a constant struggle between actors who seek to effectively eliminate acts outside the law and those who, whether co-opted or coerced, become part of criminal acts against the state and public order. In this way, the forces seeking to preserve the established order must contend with disruptions, both external and internal, driven by the commission of illicit activities aimed ultimately at profit or the accumulation of power.

In this sense, interdiction operations and the use of armed force are symptoms, more than solutions, to problems of a structural nature that require a deeper and more strategic role for the state as the entity that articulates power and the national interest.

The adaptive character of TOMC requires an evolving, integrated response that includes: a) combining material interdiction (hybrid interceptors, thermal/satellite sensors, ocean patrols); b) updating legal frameworks to close loopholes and harmonize evidentiary and cooperation standards; c) reinstating strategic intelligence as a function of the state (not of the moment); and d) strengthening commercial and financial traceability to discourage misinvoicing and the use of opaque jurisdictions (Bagley, 2008; Kropiwnicka, 2018; OIG, 2025; UNODC, 2024).

2.3 STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE IN THE MARITIME DOMAIN

Strategic intelligence constitutes the hinge between understanding the phenomenon and state action against TOMC. In the Southeast Pacific, its purpose should not be to "keep count of events," but to anticipate routes, actors, methods, and windows of opportunity in order to dismantle nodes before they carry out operations, while at the same time protecting the state's strategic assets and the legal maritime economy.

This requires advanced systems, genuine interoperability between agencies, and reliable institutional environments, particularly in contexts where institutional capture and the politicization of intelligence have eroded early warning and evidence-based decision-making. The strategic intelligence literature (Kent, 1965; Gibson, 2014; Lowenthal, 2020) emphasizes the need to integrate OSINT, risk assessment, and the design of courses of action within complex environments.

At sea, this demands inter-agency fusion, technical diplomacy, and multilevel cooperation to anticipate, deter, and dismantle illicit networks with minimal externalities for human rights and legitimate trade. The region already has instances of maritime cooperation among its states, such as the Permanent Commission for the South Pacific (CPPS), and efforts to exchange intelligence at the regional level have recently been consolidated, such as the South American Strategic Intelligence Alliance.

Bilateral or multilateral efforts by security forces and competent bodies in these countries add to this picture. Nonetheless, TOMC actors remain capable of defying state controls. Building a better response requires consolidating an effective architecture that combines automatic identification, long-range tracking, integrated surveillance repositories, geographic intelligence (GEOINT) visualization services, national watchlists of vessels of interest, and standardized information-sharing models.

The logic of these tools must be twofold: to standardize understanding of the problem across multiple actors and decision-making levels, and to enable dynamic responses that interdict, deter, or dismantle with proportionality and operational timeliness. Intelligence flows should reach those capable of turning information into lawful action (customs, maritime authorities, prosecutors' offices, the interdiction units of security forces) under standards that protect sources and data.

At the regional level, multilevel exchange and joint operations reduce the information asymmetry that TOMC exploits between jurisdictions. Otherwise, legal, technological, and political gaps hinder synchronization and feed the gray zones exploited by criminal networks. A north-south gap persists in the region in access to, and mastery of, advanced intelligence tools.

The current juncture shows that the way forward is not to replicate models developed elsewhere, but to adjust design to installed capabilities, build interoperability gradually, and prioritize high-impact, cost-effective modules. While cooperation agreements are woven that allow access to technology and training without generating critical dependencies, it also becomes necessary to assign responsibilities to the states that make up the destination link for illicit goods such as drugs, timber, minerals, and IUU-caught fish.

3 CRIMINAL MARITIME GEOGRAPHY: A VIEW FROM THE ECUADORIAN CASE

The Pacific corridor, running from Chile to Mexico, concentrates several routes for cocaine and other illicit-origin products, with consolidation nodes at ports across South and Central America. As noted earlier, the technical evolution of "narco-submarines" and semi-submersibles has extended their range and payload (Woolston and Shuldiner, 2025), reducing the interception rate.

The phenomenon also responds to sociopolitical circumstances, however, within the framework of the state weakness affecting Latin American countries (Mazzuca, 2021), amplified by the multi-crisis scenario brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Organized crime was able to exploit conditions of need to recruit and coerce various social segments into joining the chain of criminal economies. One of the key milestones in the Southeast Pacific has been the accelerating transformation of Ecuador into a key node for the transport of illicit goods.

The decomposition of the governance environment, the loss of state capabilities, and a series of political crises turned the country into territory that was easy to occupy, to the benefit of local criminal organizations that established ties with criminal actors from neighboring countries and from Mexico. This has been clearly exploited, plunging the country into an environment of extreme violence that has led it to be ranked the sixth most conflict-affected country in the world according to the "Conflict Index" compiled by ACLED (ACLED, 2025).

The capture of Ecuadorian territory has been marked by armed violence. This is a phenomenon that began in the prisons, through a series of prison massacres, and gradually spread to marginalized urban areas and even the country's most important cities, with particular severity along the coastal region (Gortaire-Morejón, 2024).

In response to the escalation of violence, the Ecuadorian government opted for a contested declaration of a Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC), which has been challenged even by high institutions such as the Constitutional Court of Ecuador (2025) and has not served as a comprehensive solution to the problem, given that even in 2025 homicides rose 47% relative to the previous year (OECD, 2025). TOMC's "criminal geography," in this sense, cannot be read as a simple map of routes.

It is, rather, a dynamic architecture of nodes, corridors, and support zones that reconfigures itself according to: a) logistical opportunities (ports, estuaries, export infrastructure); b) windows of institutional vulnerability (corruption, control gaps, information capture); and c) social conditions that facilitate recruitment and community silence.

The pattern observed shows a consistent triangulation between port, urban territory, and maritime space, where violence and cooptation operate as mechanisms of criminal governance, with technology serving as a multiplier of operational reach. TOMC tends to consolidate wherever international connectivity and the capacity for concealment converge.

Along the coast, this is expressed in the overlap of: a) large terminals and export chains; b) amphibious spaces that are difficult to surveil (estuaries, mangroves, artisanal coves); and c) transit or resupply points that extend the radius of operation. Within this logic, Galápagos appears not only as an ecological sanctuary but also as a logistical asset. A specialized informant described it as "the sea's great gas station" (personal communication, April 22, 2025), referring to its use for resupply and the continuation of illicit voyages.

In May 2025 alone, seizures of 1.3 tons and 3.1 tons of cocaine were recorded in the archipelago (El Comercio, 2025; Primicias, 2025). This kind of evidence reinforces the point that criminal geography is

not limited to the coastline: it includes oceanic support points that allow controls near the continental area to be avoided. It should also be noted that the most decisive criminal technology is not always the most visible, but rather the one that blends into the licit economy.

The contamination of containers and cargo is complemented by the use of fast boats and fishing vessels, and intertwines with other offenses such as piracy, IUU fishing, illegal mining, wildlife trafficking, arms and explosives trafficking, and even terrorism. In terms of incentives, the difference between local networks and transnational structures lies in the capacity to move "macro-shipments": a single ton of cocaine placed in Europe can be worth around USD 35 million (Pachano, 2024).

Similarly, a single ounce of gold surpassed USD 4,300 by the end of 2025, part of a rally that has not stopped growing over the past five years (Inversoro, 2025). Amid this juncture, criminal groups exploit gaps in documentation and regulatory loopholes along trade routes to add illegally extracted gold into official supply chains, making it difficult to trace and allowing profits to be reinvested in other segments of their criminal economy (UNODC, 2025).

This expectation of profit sustains schemes of corruption and coercion built around privileged information (routes, destinations, control profiles), the exploitation of blind spots, and cargo manipulation, even in high-turnover export products (bananas, canned tuna) (Espín, 2025). The capture of the port environment, therefore, must be understood as a process of infiltrating systems, not merely one of drugs "passing through."

This is further compounded by the takeover of the prison system, an active presence in marginalized areas, and the use of front companies that launder organized crime's money while also functioning as a genuine source of national production. The containment of the organized crime problem, including its TOMC dimension, thus depends on hybrid public-private mechanisms.

Ricardo Blanco highlighted practices tied to international accreditation and seal-control cycles, the use of cameras and scanners, and even the hiring of security teams kept separate from a vessel's crew to reduce the risk of internal contamination (personal communication, April 23, 2025). In this model, it is not only the state that assumes responsibility for national security; citizens, through their companies, also help shield the environment from the degradation associated with organized crime.

Emblematic cases illustrate the scale of the problem, such as the seizure of 20 tons of cocaine aboard the MSC Gayane, which shows how contamination can reach large vessels in global trade and draw the private sector into TOMC's supply chains (La Monica, 2019).

The corporate response, loss of accreditations, and internal regulatory redesign suggest that logistics governance is a field of contestation where crime learns, but where control can also be tightened where clear reputational and commercial incentives exist; it also demonstrates that not every response must come from the military sphere. In terms of concrete gaps, Espín (2025) identifies operational, technological, and institutional limitations that crime exploits.

These include: reliance on manual procedures, the obsolescence of control infrastructure, and interoperability deficits. Among the proposals to address this problem are advanced profiling and scanning, the use of artificial intelligence for risk analysis, and the use of interconnected digital platforms for port and logistics management (for example, Navis N4 and AP+), complemented by exclusive physical control areas, systematic equipment recalibration, and the strengthening of operational customs capabilities (Espín, 2025).

This agenda is relevant because it shifts the focus from tactical reaction toward a control architecture that raises the cost of contamination, one that can also extend to the fight against illegal mining and IUU fishing. There are, of course, acts of violence, piracy, and contests over material capabilities that require a forceful response from state security forces. One of the findings regarding the Ecuadorian case is that the maritime expansion of crime in Ecuador now incorporates repertoires of violence that were previously marginal.

Between 2017 and 2022, 850 attacks against the fishing community of Esmeraldas were reported (Dalby, 2022), largely linked to the theft of engines and fast boats (critical assets for other drug-trafficking tasks). Even in 2025, an assault on a Navy vessel with the theft of its engines was recorded (Gortaire Morejón, 2025), which represents a qualitative leap: not merely predation against civilians, but a direct challenge to the state's coercive capacity.

Piracy draws on young people aged 16 to 25 from marginalized neighborhoods, linking maritime violence to urban precarity and the availability of labor for illicit economies (Amerise, 2023).

Open-source evidence systematized in the research also shows scenarios of armed confrontation and operations launched from maritime platforms: attacks on patrol boats after they intercepted contaminated merchant vessels, raids on artisanal docks with multiple victims, and episodes of hostility against coast guard units during inspections for fuel trafficking (Escuela de Capacitación y Doctrina Naval – CIMCON, 2023; Gortaire-Morejón, 2025).

The analytical point is not the individual cases, but the pattern, since the sea has ceased to be merely a "route" and has become an operational theater, where violence serves functions of cargo protection, deterring control, and capturing material resources. Another relevant finding is the convergence of maritime crimes that, seen separately, appear secondary, but that together feed criminal ecosystems. IUU fishing can cost developing countries between USD 2 billion and 15 billion annually (Liddick, 2014), affecting food sovereignty and ecosystems.

The research also gathers evidence that fleets and chains associated with IUU fishing can share supply channels (resources and fuel) and, in some cases, use the same means for drug trafficking, arms trafficking, or human trafficking (Puspoayu and Setyowati, 2018; Manrique, 2020). In terms of criminal geography, this matters because it widens the layers of cover under activities with a legitimate façade that facilitate persistence, mobility, and contact between illicit networks, raising the criminal system's resilience against traditional interdiction.

To understand why the problem is accelerating, it helps to see that the sea is not merely a geographic space that is easy to exploit; rather, TOMC's expansion coincides with a juncture in which social vulnerabilities and political tensions reduce control capacity and increase the supply of recruitable actors.

The region, and coastal environments in particular, faces sustained perceptions of insecurity; Latin America appears as the region that feels most insecure in the world (Gallup, 2024), and over the past decade the regional average suggests that 2 out of every 10 people have been victims of crime (Lupu et al., 2023). In parallel, the relationship between inequality and violence stands out as a persistent explanatory core (Wilkinson, 2006; Haddad et al., 2024).

On the Ecuadorian coast, it can be stressed that inequality, state neglect, and infrastructure insufficient for the local population (with relative exceptions in major ports) generate conditions that make the growing incorporation of local actors into organized crime "predictable." In causal terms, the juncture does not automatically "produce" crime, but it does create an environment in which TOMC can: a) recruit more cheaply; b) buy silence more effectively; and c) shift the costs of risk onto marginalized young people.

Added to this are recent impacts that strain governability and everyday economic life. The pandemic functioned as a social and political shock with long-term effects (Lewkowicz et al., 2022; Sorsa and Kivikoski, 2023), and in the Ecuadorian case the dramatic character of its health impact was documented in a current hotspot of violence, the province of Guayas (Fernandez-Naranjo et al., 2024). In contexts like this, territorial and logistical control becomes more porous, and geographic space can be exploited to advantage.

In a crisis environment, institutional routines degrade, social tolerance for "quick fixes" rises, and illegal markets that finance armed control expand. The operational result is that criminal geography grows denser precisely where crisis increases informality, precarity, and distrust, and where public policy tends to respond with short emergency cycles that fail to rebuild capabilities in a sustainable way.

Although the Ecuadorian case stands out as exemplary of this reality, it cannot be overlooked that it is a reality shared across the Southeast Pacific. In sum, the evidence shows that TOMC projects power by combining covert logistics (cargo contamination, information capture, corruption), coercive capacity (maritime violence, piracy as a means of capturing assets), and the exploitation of gray economies (IUU fishing, resupply, and cover activities), demonstrating a parallel oceanopolitical vision.

The resulting criminal geography is not random, since it responds to a rationale of risk minimization and connectivity maximization, reinforced by a socioeconomic and political juncture that, far from being mere backdrop, operates as a catalyst for recruitment, impunity, and territorial expansion.

4 CONCLUSIONS

TOMC has built a parallel oceanopolitics that exploits governance gaps and jurisdictional asymmetries. An effective response requires a state maritime policy, institutional continuity, interoperability, and

technical diplomacy. As Till puts it: "maintaining order at sea requires a higher level of awareness, effective policies, and integrated governance" (2004, p. 294).

Regional cooperation in the Southeast Pacific must move from normative adherence to joint operational exercises involving intelligence exchange, coordinated patrols, container control, and the adoption of a genuine oceanopolitical vision. It should also be understood that human security and human rights are multipliers of effectiveness, not obstacles to achieving security objectives. In line with what US Navy Vice Admiral R. L. Conolly once argued, control of the sea is not an end in itself; what matters is the exploitation of that control (Till, 2004, p. 137).

While traditional visions of the sea approached it as a strategic setting for interstate war, the current juncture demands a clear vision of its occupation in peacetime, in order to prevent its use by non-state actors pursuing illegitimate objectives.

The use of state force must be anticipated and complemented by an improvement in strategic intelligence and a concerted effort to generate public policies that promote better living conditions for the region's citizens.

Failing to achieve this objective may result not only in a failed attempt to contain criminal organizations, radicalizing them or temporarily or territorially displacing their sphere of action, but also in weakening the bond between citizens and their state, contributing to instability, social conflict, and the perpetuation of poverty and inequality.

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