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Convergence between transnational organized crime and contemporary terrorism in Latin America: the Ecuadorian case between pragmatism and utopia

Abstract

This study examines the convergence between transnational organized crime and the instrumental use of terror in Latin America, with particular emphasis on the Ecuadorian case. Through a qualitative documentary approach with an analytical-interpretive scope, the study integrates academic literature, reports from international organizations, official statistics, and verifiable documentary sources. The analysis suggests that Ecuador constitutes a particularly illustrative case of this convergence, visible in the rise of lethal violence, the use of explosives, the expansion of illicit economies, and the activity of non-state armed actors with criminal governance capacity. This study argues that predominantly reactive state responses show structural limitations when confronted with hybrid threats of an adaptive and transnational nature. Consequently, it concludes that the effectiveness of state responses to this hybrid threat depends on the sustained articulation of an understanding of the international context, territorial control, financial intelligence, specialized criminal investigation, international cooperation, and structural violence prevention, rather than on episodic coercive measures.

Keywords: organized crime, criminal governance, terrorism, regional security

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1. Introduction

Ecuador is undergoing a structural transformation of its security landscape, marked by the convergence of transnational organized crime, extreme violence, and cross-border dynamics. This process does not constitute an isolated or exclusively conjunctural phenomenon; rather, it is embedded in a broader Latin American regional trend in which criminal organizations have evolved into configurations capable of influencing social and political life. This transformation is facilitated by neopatrimonial schemes, in which the private use of public office fosters a functional interdependence that enables criminal structures to establish local orders in the face of the limited institutional presence of the State (Alda-Mejías, 2021).

Specialized literature in security, criminology, and criminal governance has conceptualized this mutation through categories such as transnational organized crime, criminal governance, and, in recent works, neo-organized crime¹ (Hernández & Hernández, 2024). In this article, the term is employed in a heuristic sense, without any claim to consolidate it as an established theoretical category, with the purpose of apprehending the complexity of contemporary criminal structures beyond classical drug trafficking or local gangs. Neo-crime is characterized by its entrepreneurial logic, its diversification of illicit portfolios (drug trafficking, extortion, illegal mining, arms trafficking, contract killings, and money laundering), its articulation in transnational networks, and its capacity to operate simultaneously in urban, port, prison, and border spaces (Feldmann & Luna, 2022; Shelley, 2014). Unlike criminal organizations of the past, these structures do not rely exclusively on rigid hierarchical leaderships but combine hierarchy with flexible networks, thereby increasing their resilience to state action.

In this context, one of the most relevant features of neo-organized crime is the instrumental use of repertoires of violence associated with contemporary terrorism as a mechanism of social control, strategic communication, and territorial discipline. Far from responding to a classical ideological motivation, extreme violence—including the use of explosives, car bombs, selective attacks, and indiscriminate threats—is integrated into the criminal repertoire as a functional tactic aimed at generating collective fear, inhibiting citizen cooperation with the State, and pressuring institutional decisions in matters of security and justice (Farber, 2025; Makarenko, 2004; Phillips, 2018). This functional convergence between organized crime and terrorism has been recognized even in the realm of international law and global security, which has noted that both phenomena share methods, resources, and destabilizing effects on democratic governability (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2019).

1 Organized neo-crime employs extreme violence and terror tactics to obtain criminal, economic, and territorial power. It does not pursue ideological aims and generates severe social consequences, such as the increase in homicides and insecurity.

The Ecuadorian case is particularly illustrative of this convergence. In recent years, the country has experienced an accelerated deterioration of internal security, manifested in the rise of lethal violence, the partial collapse of the prison system, the proliferation of firearms and explosives, and its strategic positioning as a logistical platform for transnational drug trafficking, especially toward European and North American markets (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024; National Police of Ecuador, 2024). These dynamics have been aggravated by the fragmentation of internal criminal organizations that operate with open visibility and by the growing influence of transnational actors that remain in the shadows, generating violent territorial disputes and a scenario of structural insecurity.

Likewise, in Amazonian border spaces, the convergence of illicit economies, state absence, and armed violence has fostered the presence and expansion of non-state armed actors of predominantly criminal orientation, such as the Comandos de la Frontera. These groups not only control strategic routes and illegal economies but also regulate the everyday life of entire communities through coercive norms, exemplary punishments, and mechanisms of social control, thereby configuring local orders parallel to state authority (García-Pinzón & Mantilla, 2021; Williams et al., 2025).

Within this framework, the present article proposes to analyze the impact of the convergence between transnational organized crime and contemporary terrorism in Latin America, with particular emphasis on the Ecuadorian case. The research problem examines whether the State's strategic architecture in response to this phenomenon evidences a pragmatic and proportional adaptation to the complexity of neo-crime, or whether it remains anchored in utopian, reactive, and fragmented responses. To this end, a qualitative-documentary approach of analytical-interpretive scope is adopted, integrating specialized academic literature, reports from international organizations, official statistics, and verifiable documentary sources, with the purpose of contributing to the debate on security, criminal governance, and the limits of the state response to hybrid threats in contexts of high organized criminality.

2. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative-documentary approach of analytical-interpretive scope, oriented toward examining the functional convergence between transnational organized crime and the instrumental use of terror in Latin America, with emphasis on the Ecuadorian case. The methodological strategy combined structured bibliographic review, documentary analysis, and interpretive examination of recent cases of high public and institutional relevance, with the purpose of strengthening the conceptual framework and the empirical base of the manuscript through pertinent academic and documentary sources.

The bibliographic corpus was constructed through structured searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCO. A total of 681 records were identified (Scopus, $n = 321$; Web of Science, $n = 185$; EBSCO, $n = 175$). After a conservative screening of exact duplicates by DOI and title, the corpus consisted of 488 unique records. Given that the study does not correspond to a systematic literature review, a PRISMA protocol was not applied; instead, an intentional selection by theoretical-empirical relevance was employed. From this universe, a core sample of 29 works of direct utility for the four analytical axes of the manuscript was prioritized: (i) convergence between transnational organized crime and contemporary terrorism; (ii) empirical indicators of the deterioration of security in Ecuador; (iii) criminal governance and the actions of non-state armed actors; and (iv) critical evaluation of state responses.

Complementarily, the study incorporated reports from international organizations, official statistics, and relevant institutional documents for the analysis of the Ecuadorian case, particularly regarding homicides, seizures, armed violence, non-state armed actors, and state responses. Likewise, for the analysis of recent events of high public visibility, verifiable journalistic sources and concurrent institutional documents were incorporated, employing them with a contextual and contrastive function, without assigning them autonomous evidentiary status when they lacked additional documentary support. This criterion sought to safeguard the traceability of the empirical information and to avoid unsupported inferences drawn from isolated secondary sources.

Analytically, the review was organized around the four axes previously described. The treatment of the material was interpretive in character, oriented toward identifying recurrent patterns, conceptual convergences, and tensions among specialized literature, available empirical evidence, and institutional discourse.

Finally, it should be noted that the study relies on secondary sources of varying empirical density, that the bibliographic screening prioritized thematic relevance over exhaustiveness, and that some recent events of the Ecuadorian case depend on public information still subject to updating. These limitations are discussed in greater detail in the corresponding section.

3. Convergence between Transnational Organized Crime and Contemporary Terrorism: Conceptual Clarifications

The convergence between transnational organized crime and contemporary terrorism² can be understood as a process of functional approximation and strategic adaptation between phenomena that, although analytically distinguishable, may share repertoires of violence, logistical resources, financial mechanisms, and forms of territorial control. In this sense, the classical literature has emphasized

² Contemporary terrorism is manifested through the use of terror as a means, instrument, and tactic. It employs violence, intimidation, and new technologies such as drones to generate fear, destabilize institutions, and achieve objectives. Intelligence sources indicate that in Ecuador and the region it is manifested primarily through convergence with organized crime, involving attacks with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), threats, and extreme violence aimed at controlling territories and illicit economies.

that the relationship between the two should not be reduced to an organic fusion or to an automatic conceptual equivalence, but rather to a continuum of interaction ranging from limited instrumental linkages to more complex forms of cooperation, transformation, or operational overlap (Makarenko, 2004; Paoli & Fijnaut, 2022; Kleinschmidt & Palma, 2020). This distinction is important because it makes it possible to avoid excessively broad classifications while simultaneously recognizing that certain criminal actors adopt tactics, languages, and practices of intimidation that exceed conventional criminality.

From this perspective, convergence does not imply that criminal organizations necessarily pursue ideological aims comparable to those of classical terrorism. What the evidence suggests, rather, is that certain criminal groups incorporate repertoires of high-visibility violence with strong psychological impact when these prove functional for disciplining territories, inhibiting cooperation with the State, intimidating competitors, or influencing political, judicial, and police decisions. In Latin America, this pattern has been observed in cases where public violence, open threats, attacks with explosives, and other forms of coercive communication fulfill a function of criminal ordering rather than of ideological mobilization (Bevilacqua et al., 2024; Johnson & Gillooly, 2023; Johnson, 2019; Phillips, 2018). The threat, in these contexts, operates not only as physical violence but also as a message of authority and social regulation.

More recent discussion has shifted the focus from violence alone toward criminal governance. This literature shows that numerous criminal structures do not limit themselves to exploiting illicit rents but establish rules, administer disputes, delimit acceptable behaviors, and produce local orders that may coexist with, compete with, or become intertwined with state authority. In the Latin American case, this type of arrangement has been described as one of the most relevant transformations in the relationship among crime, politics, and violence, insofar as it compromises state legitimacy, fundamental rights, and the effective force of the rule of law (Badillo-Sarmiento & Trejos-Rosero, 2025; Blattman et al., 2025; Feldmann & Luna, 2022). From this angle, the crime–terror convergence acquires a broader dimension: it is not limited to the use of violent tactics but is inserted into processes of social, territorial, and symbolic control with direct effects on governability.

In Latin America, the literature also warns that these dynamics are not uniform. Patterns of convergence vary according to the density of illicit economies, the strength or fragmentation of the state apparatus, the relationship between armed actors and public authorities, and the type of territoriality in dispute. Comparative studies of non-state violent actors in the region have questioned the more expansive versions of the convergence hypothesis, noting that not every combination of profit, violence, and territorial control should be interpreted as full hybridization between crime and insurgency or between crime and terrorism (Kleinschmidt & Palma, 2020). Along the same lines, recent research on Tren de Aragua and other regional structures shows that criminal transnationalization can be sustained through franchises, territorial nodes, co-optation, and coercion, without necessarily implying a mutation toward classical insurgent forms (Sampó & Troncoso, 2024). In addition, recent

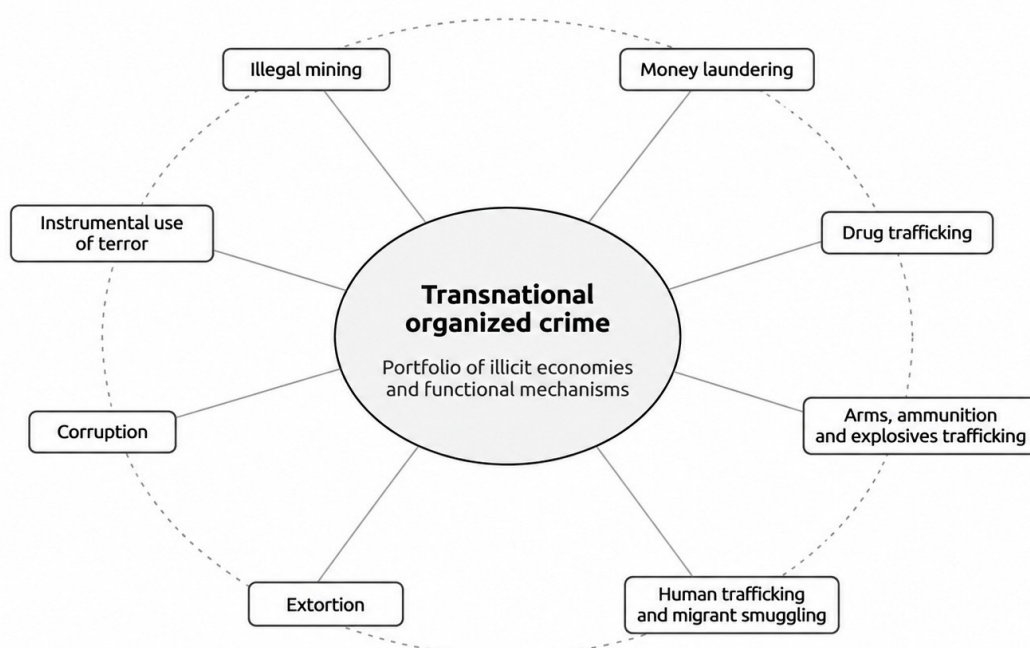
regional reports document that money laundering, migrant trafficking, and other illicit economies may operate as mechanisms of articulation between transnational organized crime and terrorist or hybrid actors in Latin America (United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute [UNICRI], 2024). Consequently, the use of the concept must be analytically careful and empirically graduated.

The expansion of these arrangements is favored by broader processes of illicit globalization, diversification of criminal markets, and sophistication of financing mechanisms. Recent literature on the crime–terror nexus has underscored that convergence does not depend solely on repertoires of violence but also on the transnational circulation of capital, technologies, arms, routes, and tactical knowledge. In particular, illicit financial mechanisms, informal systems of value transfer, and the exploitation of regulatory gaps strengthen the adaptive capacity of organizations that combine criminal economies with high-impact intimidation practices (Farber, 2025; Jupp, 2025; Shelley, 2014). Likewise, cross-border corridors and peripheral areas with weak state presence facilitate the consolidation of criminal nodes capable of operating across multiple jurisdictions and, on occasion, of surpassing the level of inter-state coordination available in the region (Penagos, 2024; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2025).

Within this framework, the porosity of borders, institutional fragmentation, and the unequal capacity of states to produce security contribute to criminal violence adopting increasingly expressive, public, and disciplinary forms. Regional evidence shows that criminal organizations with territorial vocation may resort both to lethal violence and to extra-lethal violence, public threats, and reputational control in order to consolidate obedience, resolve disputes, and fix hierarchies. Such practices have been documented, for example, in studies of criminal governance in Colombian cities and of reputational violence in Mexico, where the open threat constitutes part of the exercise of criminal power rather than a mere externality of the illicit market (Badillo-Sarmiento & Trejos-Rosero, 2025; Johnson & Gillooly, 2023). This finding is especially useful for the present article because it makes it possible to understand extreme violence not only as a problem of public security but as a technology of criminal governance.

From a strategic perspective, these processes pose relevant challenges for security policies. If the convergence between organized crime and terrorism is variable, functional, and territorially situated, responses based exclusively on rigid penal categories or on traditional counter-terrorism schemes prove insufficient. The literature concurs on the need for more comprehensive approaches capable of articulating financial intelligence, territorial control, institutional strengthening, international cooperation, and an understanding of local forms of criminal governance (Farber, 2025; Feldmann & Luna, 2022). In sum, rather than assuming a full identity between organized crime and terrorism, contemporary analysis tends to recognize a functional, selective, and empirically gradable convergence whose expression in Latin America requires flexible, comparative conceptual frameworks attentive to the relationship among violence, territory, and authority.

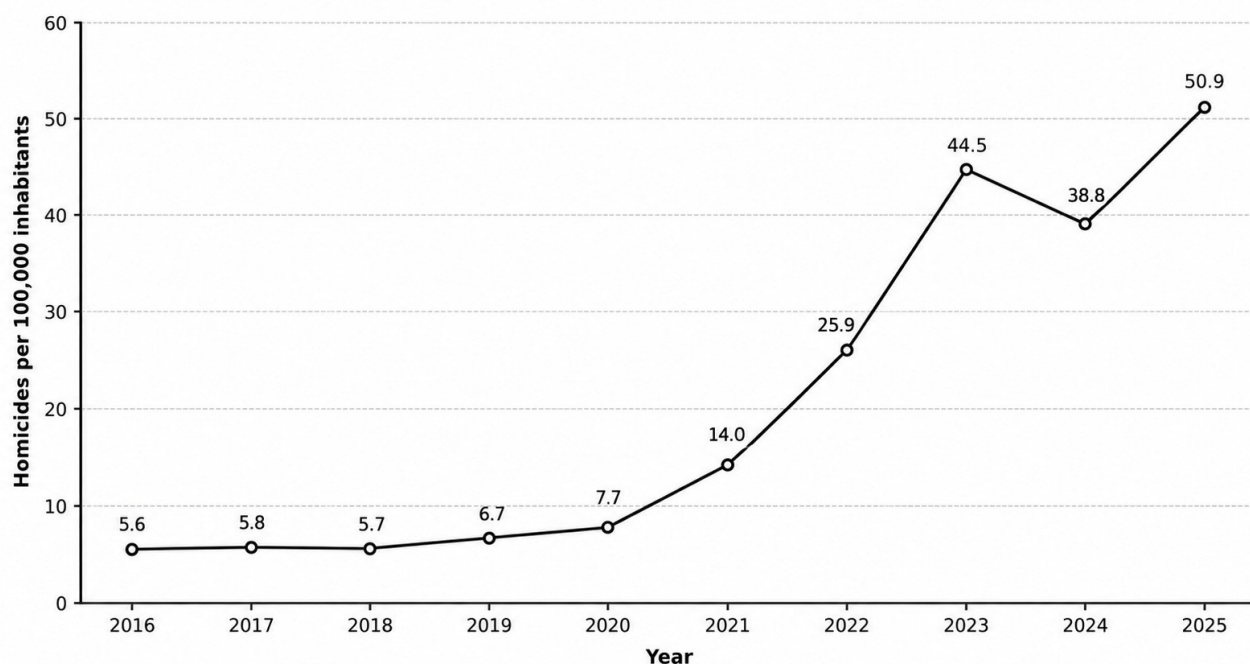
Figure 1. Portfolio of illicit economies and functional mechanisms of transnational organized crime



Note. Own elaboration based on Shelley (2014), Feldmann and Luna (2022) and Farber (2025).

4. The Ecuadorian Case: Indicators and Manifestations of Convergence

Available evidence situates Ecuador as a particularly relevant case for observing the functional convergence among transnational organized criminality, extreme violence, and the weakening of state capacity. The recent series of intentional homicides shows an abrupt deterioration of internal security: the national rate rose from 6.7 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019 to 46.5 in 2023, declined to 38.8 in 2024, and recorded a new increase in 2025, reaching 50.91 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to official records and journalistic series compiled from state sources (Ministry of the Interior of Ecuador, 2024; González, 2026; UNODC, 2024). More than a linear progression, this trajectory suggests a pattern of escalation, partial containment, and reactivation, consistent with adaptive criminal disputes in contexts of intermittent state intervention.

Figure 2. Homicide rate in Ecuador (2016–2025)

Note. Own elaboration based on data from Statista (2026).

This deterioration cannot be read in isolation from the place Ecuador has acquired in regional drug-trafficking routes. Seizures exceeding 220 tons of controlled substances recorded in 2024 confirm the country's logistical centrality within illicit circuits that articulate production, storage, transit, and export toward extra-regional markets. The coexistence of growing interdiction and the persistence of elevated levels of violence indicates that state operational pressure has not dismantled the underlying structures but coexists with processes of criminal recomposition and territorial dispute (National Police of Ecuador, 2024; UNODC, 2024). This phenomenon generates a quantifiable economic impact; according to the Inter-American Development Bank (Perez-Vincent et al., 2024), the direct costs of criminality represented 3.44 percent of regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2022, constituting a macroeconomic constraint on growth and poverty reduction. Within this framework, violence fulfills not only a function of eliminating competitors but also of territorial regulation and public signaling of criminal power. A second relevant empirical feature is the adoption of forms of violence with high symbolic impact. In Ecuador, attacks with explosives, episodes of extreme prison violence, and the public dissemination of armed actions have amplified the intimidatory effect of criminal coercion beyond confrontation between rival organizations. The armed incursion into the TC Televisión channel on 9 January 2024 illustrates how a criminal act can be transformed into a mediatized terror event capable of producing collective fear, a perception of state vulnerability, and broad public resonance (Tusa et al., 2025). In analytical terms, these episodes do not justify an automatic equation between organized crime and terrorism, yet they are consistent with the instrumental use of repertoires of violence intended to communicate power, discipline audiences, and condition institutional responses (Bevilacqua et al., 2024; Makarenko, 2004; Tusa et al., 2025).

To this must be added the organizational and financial dimension of the phenomenon. Reports on the Euro 2024 case and the recent captures of Ecuadorian leaders or individuals linked to the Ecuadorian criminal scene in Spain, Colombia, and other countries suggest three convergent features: financial sophistication, externalization of command, and capacity for recomposition following the neutralization of leaderships. Considered here with an illustrative and contrastive function, and not as autonomous conclusive proof, these cases show that illicit economies do not depend solely on immediate territorial control but also on money-laundering networks, transnational operators, and schemes of extraterritorial coordination. Likewise, the violent reactions that follow high-profile captures reinforce the hypothesis that criminal coercion operates as a mechanism for preserving the illicit market and for exerting pressure on the state system (Shelley, 2014; Felbab-Brown, 2010; Primicias, 2024; National Police of Ecuador, 2025).

Table 1. Illustrative cases of convergence among organized criminality, transnational projection, and strategic coercion

Case / Proceeding	Structure	Vector of Convergence	Relevant Finding	Source Document
Euro 2024 case	Money-laundering network linked to Jezdimir Srdan	Transnational financial sophistication	The case documents capital movements, corporate structures, and coordination between Ecuador and Europe, showing that criminal capacity does not depend solely on territorial control.	Primicias (12 June 2025)
Recapture of José Adolfo Macías Villamar (“Fito”)	Los Choneros	Centrality of leadership and state pressure on high-value commanders	The recapture evidences the symbolic and operational weight of leaderships in security policy and in the public communication of state control.	Primicias (25 June 2025)
Capture of William Joffre Alcívar Bautista (“Comandante Willy”)	Los Tiguerones	Extraterritorial command	The detention in Spain, involving the use of false documentation, supports the hypothesis of externalization of command and operational refuge outside Ecuador.	Primicias (23 October 2024)
Capture of Wilmer Geovanny Chavarría Barré (“Pipo”)	Los Lobos	Organizational resilience and documentary fraud	The simulation of death and the capture in Málaga make it possible to observe strategies of international evasion, identity substitution, and continuity of criminal command.	Primicias (17 November 2025)

Note. Only cases with direct analytical utility for examining financial sophistication, externalization of command, organizational resilience, and strategic coercion in the Ecuadorian case are included. The links refer to the principal source document used in each row.

Taken together, these indicators make it possible to sustain that the Ecuadorian case presents features consistent with a functional convergence between transnational organized crime and the instrumental use of terror. The combination of elevated lethal violence, intensification of anti-drug

interdiction, public visibility of high-impact attacks, prison crisis, and transnational projection of criminal actors suggests a transformation of the security problem: from a scheme centered on conventional organized criminality toward another in which violence also fulfills functions of governance, social intimidation, and dispute over territorial authority. In this sense, the Ecuadorian case does not demonstrate a full identity between crime and terrorism, yet it does provide relevant evidence of the ways in which contemporary criminal violence can acquire political and social effects comparable to those analyzed by the literature on criminal governance and hybrid threats (Badillo-Sarmiento & Trejos-Rosero, 2025; Feldmann & Luna, 2022).

5. Comandos de la Frontera as a Non-State Armed Actor of Criminal Orientation

The Comandos de la Frontera may be understood, for analytical purposes, as a non-state armed actor of predominantly criminal orientation, arising in a post-insurgent environment³ and linked to the reconfiguration of the Colombian conflict following the peace agreements. Its trajectory does not fully conform to the model of classical insurgency, insofar as its actions appear oriented primarily toward the control of illicit economies, strategic corridors, and mechanisms of territorial regulation rather than toward open dispute of state power through a defined ideological program. This characterization is consistent with recent literature on hybrid armed actors in Latin America, which warns of the need to distinguish among organizational continuity, criminal functionality, and the persistence of armed repertoires without automatically assuming a full insurgent identity or uncritically transferring categories of armed conflict to territorially situated criminal configurations (Badrán, 2024; Durán-Martínez, 2023; Kleinschmidt & Palma, 2020; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2025).

Its relevance for the Ecuadorian case derives from its insertion in Amazonian border spaces where low institutional density, transnational circulation of illicit rents, and high dependence on riverine and terrestrial corridors converge. In these environments, diverse sources have described forms of control that combine armed coercion, regulation of economic activities, and instrumental linkages with local structures—features that the literature associates with schemes of criminal governance rather than with mere occasional armed presence. In this sense, the analytical interest of the group resides not only in its capacity for violence but in its aptitude to operate as a *de facto* authority in peripheral territories, administering access, disciplining conduct, and protecting illicit activities (Blattman et al., 2025; Feldmann & Luna, 2022; García-Pinzón & Mantilla, 2021; Penagos, 2024; Williams et al., 2025).

3 Post-insurgency, primarily in Colombia, describes the transformation and persistence of armed structures following demobilization processes and peace agreements. It is manifested mainly in guerrilla dissident groups and residual formations that maintain territorial control, armed violence, and linkages with illicit economies.

Available evidence further suggests that the expansion of the Comandos de la Frontera in Ecuador should not be interpreted solely as a mechanical prolongation of the Colombian conflict but as part of a process of cross-border adaptation to logistical opportunities, control vacuums, and local alliances. Reports on detentions and operations in 2024 indicate a structured presence of the group in Ecuadorian territory, supported by logistical operators, intermediate commanders, and support networks functional to the transport of drugs, arms, and financial resources. Considered with the caution proper to public documentary sources, these antecedents are consistent with a pattern of territorial deepening and with an organizational logic that combines limited armed visibility and sustained capacity for criminal coordination (García-Pinzón & Mantilla, 2020; Penagos, 2024; Primicias, 2024; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2025).

A particularly significant element is that the coercion attributed to the group does not appear oriented exclusively toward permanent confrontation with the State but toward the preservation of illicit corridors, extractive enclaves, and zones of influence. Under this logic, violence functions as a mechanism for the protection of markets and as a technology of territorial government. The ambush in which eleven Ecuadorian soldiers died in Alto Punino, attributed by national authorities to structures linked to the Comandos de la Frontera—despite the group's denial of authorship—constituted a turning point by evidencing the capacity of a non-state armed actor to inflict high-intensity lethal damage on state forces in an environment of difficult control. More than an isolated event, the episode suggests the existence of tactical capacities, knowledge of the terrain, and a disposition to employ high-impact violence in order to defend strategic positions and deter state intervention (Primicias, 2025; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2025).

Table 2. Empirical indicators of territorial insertion and cross-border projection of the Comandos de la Frontera in Ecuador

Empirical Indicator	Documented Manifestation	Analytical Variable	Relevance for the Ecuadorian Case	Source Document
Structured presence in Ecuador	Indictment of 17 alleged members in 2025 for organized crime, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and money laundering.	Operational insertion in national territory	Suggests a non-episodic presence compatible with local support, financing, and criminal logistics networks.	Primicias (16 April 2025)
Logistics network of alias “Chavalo”	Judicial and journalistic coverage links the network to the movement of drugs from Sucumbios toward Central America and Europe.	Local–cross-border articulation	Makes it possible to observe the role of intermediate operators and Amazonian corridors in the connection among border, ports, and external markets.	Primicias (13 September 2024)
Alto Punino	Ambush against a military patrol with 11 fatalities; authorities attributed it to the Comandos de la Frontera, although the group denied responsibility.	Capacity for high-intensity armed violence	Indicates capacity for lethal confrontation against state forces in a corridor linked to illegal mining and border illicit economies.	Primicias (9 May 2025)
Capture and transfer of Roberto Carlos Álvarez Vera, alias Gerente	Detention in Abu Dhabi and subsequent transfer to Ecuador; authorities identify him as the group’s leader in the country.	Extra-regional projection and separation between nodes of coercion and nodes of protection/management	Reinforces the hypothesis of articulation among Amazonian anchorage, extraterritorial coordination, and protection of leadership.	Primicias (29 December 2025)

Note. The table summarizes verifiable indicators of territorial insertion, cross-border articulation, and extra-regional projection of the Comandos de la Frontera in Ecuador. The attribution of Alto Punino is formulated prudently and in accordance with available public evidence.

To this is added a relevant organizational feature: the extraterritorial projection of part of its leadership and of its coordination circuits. Reports on captures outside the Andean region suggest that, like other contemporary criminal structures, the group can spatially separate spaces of direct violence from spaces of financial and logistical management. This pattern does not by itself convert the Comandos de la Frontera into a globally integrated organization, yet it does reinforce the hypothesis that it operates under a transnational rationality, with the capacity to articulate local nodes of coercion and external nodes of protection, coordination, or money laundering (UNODC, 2019; Shelley, 2014). Taken together, these elements make it possible to sustain that its importance for the Ecuadorian case resides less in a supposed “guerrilla reappearance” than in the consolidation of a form of cross-border armed criminality that is adaptable and territorially situated, whose analysis is central to understanding the limits of conventional security responses.

6. State Strategies in the Face of the Hybrid Threat: Between Pragmatism and Utopia

The disjunction between pragmatism and utopia should not be understood here as an abstract opposition, but as a criterion for evaluating the adequacy between the design of state responses and the effective nature of the threat. In the Ecuadorian case, that adequacy depends less on the discursive

intensity of the measures than on their capacity to interrupt illicit financial circuits, reduce the autonomy of prison centers, sustain transnational cooperation, and diminish the social conditions that facilitate criminal recruitment. Regional literature suggests that responses centered exclusively on coercion, exceptionality, and punitive expansion may produce immediate effects of visibility, yet tend to be insufficient and even counterproductive when they fail to alter the institutional and territorial bases of criminal governance (Badrán, 2024; Feldmann & Luna, 2022; Magaloni et al., 2020).

*Financial intelligence*⁴. Among the available tools, financial intelligence constitutes probably the most clearly pragmatic strategy, insofar as it acts upon the material support of criminal organizations: their money flows, mechanisms of asset concealment, and capacity for reinvestment. Its efficacy, however, depends not only on the formal existence of anti-money-laundering norms but on the articulation among financial intelligence units, prosecutors' offices, registration systems, banking supervision, and international cooperation. In a scenario such as the Ecuadorian one, where criminal structures display externalization of command, use of covert identities, and transnational economic circuits, the gap between normative design and sustained implementation may convert an operatively rational tool into a policy of low practical effectiveness. At that point, the problem is not the lack of pertinence of the strategy but its weak institutionalization (Financial Action Task Force [FATF], 2025; Shelley, 2014).

*Specialized criminal investigation*⁵. Ortiz Luzuriaga, Flores Sánchez, Caicedo Leones, and Ordóñez Guartazaca (2021) maintain that the prevention of money laundering requires an integral system of risk management in which state institutions, the financial system, and obligated subjects participate in a coordinated manner. The authors emphasize that the early identification of suspicious operations, effective supervision, and inter-institutional cooperation are essential elements for preventing resources of illicit origin from entering the formal economy, thereby strengthening the transparency of the financial system and the security of the State.

Consequently, specialized criminal investigation of money laundering transcends the prosecution of an economic crime and becomes a strategic tool for protecting the integral security of Ecuador. It permits an approach that differentiates the pragmatic from the utopian because, unlike traditional investigations, specialized investigation of money laundering requires a multidisciplinary approach that combines several techniques and is not limited to identifying those responsible for the predicate offense; rather, it seeks to dismantle the economic structure that sustains criminal organizations, depriving them of their financial capacity and reducing their influence over public and private institutions, thereby rendering visible the end of the criminal business.

4 Financial intelligence. Strategy oriented toward identifying and disrupting the economic and patrimonial flows of organized crime, whose efficacy depends on solid institutional coordination and international cooperation (FATF, 2025; Shelley, 2014).

5 Specialized criminal investigation. Multidisciplinary approach that seeks to identify and dismantle the economic structures of organized crime through the detection of money laundering, thereby reducing their financial capacity and institutional influence (Ortiz Luzuriaga et al., 2021).

*Prison control*⁶. A second decisive domain is the prison system. As the available evidence for Ecuador and other regional cases shows, prisons have functioned not only as spaces of confinement but as nodes of command, internal discipline, and reproduction of illicit economies (Fondevila & Vilalta-Perdomo, 2024; Sozzo, 2022). Recent research on Latin American prisons suggests that carceral violence and the capacity of organizations for control are not explained solely by overcrowding or material precariousness, but also by the existence of schemes of self-government or criminal government inside the establishments (Sozzo, 2025). This phenomenon is analyzed with greater precision under the category of nodal governance, in which the exercise of power does not originate in an exclusive sovereign center but in a network of interconnected actors that integrates both state officials and criminal structures operating through operational clandestinity (Ferreira, 2025).

*International cooperation*⁷. International cooperation constitutes another central component, given that the structures examined in this work operate in networks that readily overflow national jurisdiction. Exchange of information, judicial assistance, asset tracing, migratory alerts, and operational coordination are indispensable mechanisms against organizations capable of moving persons, capital, and goods among several countries. Nevertheless, regional experience shows that these tools are often limited by institutional asymmetries, divergent national priorities and, in certain cases, by an insufficient reading of hybrid threats. The consequence is cooperation that is usually normatively adequate but operatively fragmentary. In this sense, cooperation does not constitute a utopian strategy by definition; it becomes utopian when it fails to translate into continuity, interoperability, and shared recognition of the problem (FATF, 2025; Pont, 2025).

*Prevention of vulnerabilities and recruitment*⁸. The structural prevention of recruitment and of the social base of organized crime is often presented as an idealistic strategy in the face of the urgency of violence. That opposition is, however, misleading. Available evidence suggests that youth vulnerability, educational exclusion, territorial precariousness, and the absence of legitimate trajectories of social insertion form part of the environment that facilitates the expansion of criminal organizations in contexts of high violence. In the Ecuadorian case, recent studies have explicitly linked the discussion of public violence and mediatized terror with the need to strengthen durable social responses, especially in education and the inclusion of young people exposed to recruitment by criminal groups. Regional literature on social responses to violence under criminal governance further suggests that this type of strategy produces consistent effects only when it possesses community

6 Prison control. Strategy oriented toward recovering state control of prisons and neutralizing their use as command centers and sites of criminal reproduction, thereby limiting self-government and the governance exercised by criminal organizations (Sozzo, 2025; Ferreira, 2025).

7 International cooperation. Strategy for confronting transnational criminal networks through information exchange, judicial assistance, and operational coordination, whose efficacy depends on continuity and interoperability among states (FATF, 2025; Pont, 2025).

8 Prevention of vulnerabilities and recruitment. Strategy oriented toward reducing social factors that favor criminal recruitment, through education, youth inclusion, and sustained community strengthening (Arias, 2019; Escotto Quesada, 2015; Tusa et al., 2025).

anchorage, institutional continuity, and the capacity to sustain itself in territories of high conflictivity (Arias, 2019; Escotto Quesada, 2015; Tusa et al., 2025). For this reason, rather than a “utopian” policy, social prevention constitutes a dimension of medium-term pragmatism that rarely receives the political time, financing, or institutional continuity required to produce cumulative effects.

Taken together, the Ecuadorian case suggests that the opposition between pragmatism and utopia is not resolved by choosing a single strategy, but by evaluating the capacity of the State to articulate them in a sustained manner. Financial intelligence, specialized criminal investigation, prison reform, international cooperation, and the prevention of recruitment prove pragmatic only when they are integrated into a continuous institutional response that is territorially differentiated and capable of adapting to a changing threat. When these dimensions operate with systemic asymmetry, episodically, or subordinated to conjunctural crises, the instrumental efficacy of the strategies is nullified, reducing them to an inoperative formalism (Badrán, 2024; Feldmann & Luna, 2022).

7. Discussion

The findings of the present study dialogue with the recent literature on convergence between organized crime and terrorism on at least four planes. In the first place, the Ecuadorian case reinforces yet also nuances the thesis of the continuum between crime and terrorism: the evidence examined does not permit sustaining a structural or ideological fusion between the two phenomena, but it does show a functional and selective convergence in which repertoires of high-impact violence are incorporated by criminal organizations when they prove useful for protecting illicit markets, disciplining territories, intimidating audiences, and conditioning state responses. In this sense, the case confirms that the analytical key does not reside in labeling these actors as “terrorists” in the strict sense, but in understanding under what conditions certain tactics, effects, and rationalities proper to terror are instrumentalized by criminal structures without abandoning their primary orientation toward illicit accumulation (Farber, 2025; Kleinschmidt & Palma, 2020; Phillips, 2018; Makarenko, 2004).

In the second place, the Ecuadorian case expands the literature on criminal governance by showing that violence acts not only as a destructive resource but also as a technology of social and territorial regulation. The combination of elevated lethal violence, disputed prison control, transnational illicit corridors, extractive enclaves, and non-state armed actors with capacity for localized coercion suggests that part of contemporary organized criminality in Ecuador is not limited to exploiting illegal rents but produces situated orders, imposes rules, defines hierarchies, and models behaviors in spaces where state authority is fragmentary, disputed, or intermittent. From this perspective, the principal analytical displacement of the manuscript consists in showing that the problem is not solely one of public security but also of authority, governance, and the production of obedience in contexts of the factual pluralization of power (Badillo-Sarmiento & Trejos-Rosero, 2025; Blattman et al., 2025; Feldmann & Luna, 2022).

In the third place, the results permit proposing an interpretive hypothesis that, while exploratory, offers relevant explanatory yield and departs from more conventional readings. The most dangerous organized neo-criminality does not appear to be necessarily that which attempts to substitute the State frontally in an insurgent key, but rather that which learns to operate in strategic relation with a fragmented, reactive, or selectively coercive statehood. In this reading, the threat is expressed not only in the capacity to challenge the State but also in the capacity to adapt to it, exploit its discontinuities, reorder illicit markets after cycles of intervention, and convert institutional crises into opportunities for organizational recomposition. This hypothesis is consistent with works that show, on the one hand, that convergence tends to be less intense and more graduated than maximalist versions of the debate suggest and, on the other, that state presence does not always displace criminal governance but, under certain conditions, may coexist with it or even reconfigure its incentives (Blattman et al., 2025; Feldmann & Luna, 2022; Kleinschmidt & Palma, 2020; Magaloni et al., 2020).

In the fourth place, the analysis of state responses permits a critical discussion of the apparent opposition between pragmatism and utopia. The Ecuadorian case suggests that this dichotomy is not resolved by the simple choice between coercion and prevention, nor between militarization and social policies, but by the capacity of the State to articulate heterogeneous instruments in a sustained institutional sequence. Regional literature supports the idea that fragmented, episodic, or exclusively punitive interventions may produce immediate effects of visibility yet do not necessarily alter the structures of criminal governance; on occasion they even intensify violence or reinforce the adaptability of the groups. For this reason, the contribution of the article does not consist in mechanically opposing security and rights, nor prevention and control, but in sustaining that state efficacy in the face of hybrid threats depends on coordination among financial intelligence, specialized criminal investigation, prison control, transnational cooperation, effective territorial presence, and durable social strategies for the reduction of vulnerabilities (Arias, 2019; Badrán, 2024; FATF, 2025; Pont, 2025; Tusa et al., 2025).

From that base, the article contributes a broader implication for the Latin American debate: the necessity of shifting the focus from the question of the “nature” of the actors toward the question of their effective capacities to produce order, fear, transnational coordination, and political conditioning. In other words, the category of organized neo-criminality acquires value not as a closed label but as a heuristic tool for examining criminal configurations that combine entrepreneurial rationality, organizational flexibility, communicative coercion, and a vocation for territorial regulation.

This rereading avoids both conceptual inflation—which confuses all criminal violence with terrorism—and classical penal reductionism, which underestimates the political and social dimension of contemporary forms of organized criminality. At that point, the Ecuadorian case should not be read as an isolated anomaly but as a particularly visible regional laboratory of transformations that will probably continue to expand in environments marked by porous borders, transnational illicit circuits, and differentiated state weakness (Farber, 2025; Johnson & Gillooly, 2023; UNICRI, 2024; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2025).

As limitations, the study must be read in an analytical and interpretive key. It relies on secondary sources of varying empirical density, incorporates recent events still subject to documentary updating, and employs the notion of “organized neo-crime” in a heuristic sense, not as a closed theoretical category. Consequently, the inferences proposed do not pretend to establish definitive causal equivalences between organized criminality and terrorism, but to offer a conceptually graduated interpretation of an observable functional convergence. With a view to future research, it would be especially valuable to contrast this hypothesis through mixed designs, primary territorial data, subnational comparative analyses, and longitudinal studies of the relationship among state intervention, criminal recomposition, and coercive governance.

8. Conclusion

The Ecuadorian case shows that contemporary criminal violence does not fully conform either to the classical categories of organized delinquency or to those of terrorism in the strict sense, but expresses a functional convergence in which criminal actors instrumentalize repertoires of terror in order to secure territorial control, protect illicit economies, and condition the state response. Within this framework, the principal analytical and political challenge does not reside in the nominal classification of the phenomenon, but in understanding its effective capacity to erode state authority, produce coercive governance, and destabilize democratic environments. From this perspective, Ecuador should be understood less as an anomaly than as a particularly visible manifestation of broader regional transformations, which reinforces the need for conceptually precise and institutionally integrated approaches in the face of increasingly hybrid, adaptive, and transnational forms of organized criminality.

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