

When Criminal Networks Become Geopolitical Actors

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Source: AI Generated

Geopolitics has always been treated as a contest among states. Governments, militaries, and formal alliances draw the borders, set the terms of security, and decide how the international order works. Criminal organizations, by contrast, have largely been treated as law-and-order problems. Sometimes, due to the intensity criminal networks are treated as serious non-state actors but ultimately separate from geopolitical framework. That picture no longer holds up. Criminal networks aren't just a law-and-order problem anymore. Across conflict zones and borderlands, criminal networks have built up money, territorial control, and cross-border connections that let them shape decisions once reserved for states alone. Under the right conditions, they can control

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territory, bankroll armed conflict, manipulate migration flows, disrupt trade routes the whole world depends on, and even push governments into changing their foreign and security policy. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime has pointed out that organized crime can hollow out state capacity, keep conflicts running, and blur the line between criminal enterprises and insurgents, terrorists, and armed groups.²

Drug-trafficking organizations, armed groups, insurgencies and hybrid criminal-political networks can generate revenue, control territory, regulate movement, penetrate political institutions and exploit weaknesses in state authority. In some cases, they can even become instruments of statecraft, used by governments to pursue objectives that would be difficult or costly to pursue openly.

Criminal networks can perform “system-level functions” as structurally integrated actors within contemporary geopolitics rather than merely representing a marginal irritant to be policed at the edges of the international system.³ This shift requires a broader understanding of who can exercise geopolitical power and how that power is produced.

Yet an important distinction must be made. Not every criminal organization is a geopolitical actor. A drug-trafficking gang that operates across several countries may be highly transnational without possessing meaningful geopolitical influence. The transformation occurs when a criminal network acquires capabilities or becomes embedded within political structures that allow it to affect the strategic interests and behavior of states.

This transformation can occur from the bottom up, when criminal or hybrid armed actors accumulate sufficient revenue, territorial control or coercive capacity that states are forced to manage them as strategic actors. But it can also occur from the top down, when states deliberately instrumentalize criminal actors to pursue foreign or domestic policy objectives. The latter phenomenon has increasingly been described as geocriminality, a term coined by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in a May 2024 report to describe the

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Research Brief on Transnational Organized Crime: Special Points of Interest* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 2025), https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/44658/1/SPOI_Organized_Crime_2025.pdf

³ Magda Long, “Criminality as a Modality of Power in Contemporary Geopolitics,” *RUSI Journal* 171, no. 4 (June 5, 2026), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2026.2681441#d1e140>

deliberate, state-led instrumentalization of criminal actors abroad to achieve goals that states may be unwilling or unable to pursue openly.⁴

Understanding these two pathways- criminal actors becoming geopolitical actors in their own right, and states turning criminal networks into instruments of geopolitical competition is essential to understanding why organized crime is becoming an increasingly important feature of international security.

From Criminal Networks to Geopolitical Actors: How They Shape Geopolitics

Criminal networks do not become geopolitical actors simply because they are powerful or operate across borders. The change happens when their activities begin to affect the decisions and interests of states, communities and international organizations. In other words, a criminal network becomes geopolitically important when its money, weapons, territory, networks or access to important routes give it influence beyond ordinary criminal activity.

The first source of this influence is money. Drug trafficking, arms smuggling, extortion and illegal taxation can provide armed groups with large amounts of money. This money can then be used to buy weapons, recruit fighters and build political support. The KLA in Kosovo used money from heroin trafficking to support its armed struggle, while Khun Sa used profits from the opium trade to maintain an army of around 20,000 fighters.⁵ In this case, criminal income was no longer only about making money. It helped create military and political power.

Control of territory can take this process further. When criminal or armed groups control an area, they may collect taxes, regulate movement, provide security and settle disputes. They can therefore begin to perform some functions normally carried out by the state. Somali Pirates, clan elders and

⁴ Martin Thorley, "Of Kingdoms and Crooks: The Rise of Geocriminality," *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, March 17, 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-rise-of-geocriminality/>

⁵ "The Golden Triangle: The Remote Borderland Where Myanmar, Laos and Thailand Meet Once Produced More Than Half the World's Heroin—Not through Cartels or Kingpins, but through a Patchwork of Armed Groups," *SpaceDaily*, <https://spacedaily.com/d-the-golden-triangle-the-remote-borderland-where-myanmar-laos-and-thailand-meet-once-produced-more-than-half-the-worlds-heroin-not-through-cartels-or-kingpins-but-through-a-patc/>

armed groups developed protection and governance arrangements along parts of the Somali coast.⁶ Mexican cartels have similarly been described as operating like a "state within a state" in some areas, where criminal groups have gained significant influence over local communities and institutions.⁷ This creates a serious challenge to state authority because the question is no longer simply whether criminals are breaking the law. It becomes a question of who actually controls territory and people.



Source: BBC

Control over trade routes and strategic infrastructure can create another form of geopolitical power. Criminal networks often operate around ports, border crossings, drug corridors and shipping routes. These routes connect them to the wider international economy. Somali pirates demonstrated this clearly by attacking international shipping in the Indian Ocean. Their activities

⁶ Anja Shortland and Federico Varese, "State-Building, Informal Governance and Organised Crime: The Case of Somali Piracy," *Political Studies* (2015): 811–831, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12227>

⁷ Enrique Fernández, "Are Mexican Cartels a State within a State? The Death of 'El Mencho' Forces Us to Look Beyond Mexican Drug Lords," *Atalayar*, February 23, 2026, <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/are-mexican-cartels-state-within-state/20260223114019223577.html>

disrupted global trade and created a security problem that required a multinational naval response.⁸ The response brought American, Chinese, Indian and European naval forces into the same maritime space. This shows that a criminal group does not need to defeat a state militarily to become geopolitically important. It may simply need to control or threaten something that states and international businesses depend on.

Criminal power can also be used to capture political institutions. In weak states, criminal networks may develop close relationships with politicians, security officials and other powerful individuals. Over time, illegal money can influence elections, public institutions and even the behavior of governments. Guinea-Bissau is an example of this problem, where the cocaine trade has been closely connected to political instability and repeated military coups.⁹ In such situations, the criminal network does not necessarily replace the state. Instead, it can penetrate and influence the state from within.

The relationship can also move in the opposite direction. States may deliberately use criminal networks for political and security purposes. Criminal groups can provide governments with access to illicit markets, covert financial channels and deniable operatives. This gives states a way to carry out certain activities while creating distance between the government and the people actually conducting them.¹⁰ Russia is one example. Since 2022, the Kremlin has been accused of using criminal recruits for sabotage, arson and assassination operations in Europe, allowing the state to maintain distance from those carrying out the attacks.¹¹ Criminal networks have also been linked to sanctions evasion and covert finance involving Russian oligarchs and intelligence operatives.¹²

⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Crime and Instability: Case Studies of Transnational Threats* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010), 50, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Crime_and_instability_2010_final_26march.pdf

⁹ Alagi Yorro Jallow, "Guinea-Bissau: When Soldiers Become Cartels and Uniforms Launder Cocaine, Democracy Itself Is Trafficked," *LamToro News*, November 30, 2025, <https://lamtoronews.com/2025/11/30/guinea%E2%80%91bissau-when-soldiers-become-cartels-and-uniforms-launder-cocaine-democracy-itself-is-trafficked/>

¹⁰ Martin Thorley, "Of Kingdoms and Crooks: The Rise of Geocriminality," *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, March 17, 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-rise-of-geocriminality/>

¹¹ Robert Kremzner, "How Russia Uses Organized Crime for Espionage," *New Lines Institute*, July 22, 2025, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/global-security-mil-priorities/how-russia-uses-organized-crime-for-espionage/>

¹² Kacper Rekawek, Julian Lanchès, Maria Zotova, and Donald Bowser, *Russia's Crime-Terror Nexus: Criminality as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare in Europe* (Bratislava: GLOBSEC and International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, September

This relationship can also change over time. A group that begins as a criminal or armed organization may eventually become a political partner when governments realize that removing it completely is difficult or too costly. Syria's captagon trade provides a more recent example of how criminal economies can become connected to international diplomacy. The Assad government and networks linked to it were accused of using the captagon economy not only to generate revenue but also as a source of political leverage during efforts to regain diplomatic acceptance.¹³



Source: Interpol

The growth of cybercrime and digital criminal networks has made this process even more complicated. Criminal groups no longer need to control large areas of land to create international problems. Ransomware, online fraud, cryptocurrency networks and human trafficking allow them

2025), <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/russias-crime-terror-nexus-criminality-tool-hybrid-warfare-europe>

¹³ Elijah Glantz and George Hancock, "Syria, Captagon and Geopolitics: From Magic Bullet to Placebo," *RUSI Commentary*, June 14, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/syria-captagon-and-geopolitics-magic-bullet-placebo>

to operate across borders through digital and financial systems. INTERPOL describes organized criminal groups as large, billion-dollar enterprises capable of developing long-term strategies and international alliances. Its 2026 assessment also found growing links between financial fraud, organized crime and cybercrime across borders.¹⁴ This means that geopolitical influence can now come from control over digital networks and financial systems, not only from control over territory.

Taken together, these examples show several ways in which criminal networks can shape geopolitics. The UNODC has noted that rebels, insurgents, terrorists and other armed groups often adopt organized-criminal practices, bringing criminal activity and political objectives closer together.¹⁵ The key point, therefore, is that criminal networks do not need to become states to become geopolitical actors. They become geopolitical actors when their capabilities begin to change the behavior of states or affect international security, trade and diplomacy. At that stage, the boundary between crime, politics and security becomes increasingly difficult to separate.

Is Rakhine Becoming a Space for Geocriminality?

Bangladesh's southeastern frontier is becoming an increasingly important space where crime, armed conflict and geopolitical competition converge. The most important change is taking place across the Bangladesh–Myanmar border. For decades, Dhaka largely dealt with Myanmar as a neighboring state, even when relations were difficult. That assumption has become increasingly problematic since the Arakan Army (AA) captured Maungdaw in December 2024 and established control over the Myanmar side of the entire 270-kilometre border.¹⁶ The Myanmar state has since lost effective authority across much of northern Rakhine, while the AA has emerged as the dominant territorial actor. It now performs functions associated with governance, including regulating movement and collecting taxes.

¹⁴ International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), *Global Financial Fraud Threat Assessment* (Lyon: INTERPOL, March 2026), <https://www.interpol.int/News-and-Events/News/2026/INTERPOL-report-warns-of-increasingly-sophisticated-global-financial-fraud-threat>

¹⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Research Brief on Transnational Organized Crime: Special Points of Interest* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 2025), https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/44658/1/SPOI_Organized_Crime_2025.pdf

¹⁶ Jannatul Naym Pieal, "Why Bangladesh Is Fencing Its Border With Myanmar," *The Diplomat*, June 19, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/06/why-bangladesh-is-fencing-its-border-with-myanmar/>

This transformation matters because territorial fragmentation can create the conditions in which geocriminality flourishes. The problem is not simply that the AA is a non-state actor. It is that a large area immediately across Bangladesh's border is increasingly governed by an armed organization operating outside the normal institutions of interstate relations. Formal sovereignty, armed authority, informal taxation, illicit trade and cross-border networks can therefore operate in the same space.

The distinction between the AA and a conventional criminal organization remains important. The AA is primarily an ethnic armed organization with political and territorial objectives, not a drug cartel. But that does not mean it operates separately from the criminal economy developing around the conflict. The United Nations' recent reporting on Myanmar describes a broader conflict economy in which illicit economies and continuing violence reinforce one another.¹⁷



Source: AP News

The AA's control over economic activity makes this distinction particularly important. The group collects taxes on goods moving through territory under its control, while its authority has also

¹⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, A/HRC/59/57 (Geneva: United Nations, June 16, 2025), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/59/57>

begun to affect cross-border commerce. These developments show that the AA is acquiring influence not only over territory but also over economic flows across that territory. When an armed organization can regulate movement, tax trade and influence border commerce, territorial control begins to generate economic power. Once these economic networks intersect with illicit markets, the same territorial authority can potentially facilitate or benefit from activities that extend beyond the group's political objectives.

Bangladesh is already dealing with the consequences of a prolonged displacement crisis on the other side of the border. More than 1.2 million Rohingya refugees remain in Bangladesh, with the vast majority concentrated in Cox's Bazar. This makes the southeastern frontier particularly complex: Bangladesh is simultaneously managing an international border, a large and vulnerable refugee population and the spillover of an armed conflict taking place immediately across the frontier.

Criminal networks have repeatedly exploited this vulnerability. The U.S. State Department has documented the trafficking of Rohingya men, women and children from refugee camps, including forced labor and sexual exploitation within Bangladesh and across borders. It has also reported the movement of Rohingya women and girls towards countries including India, Malaysia and Nepal, as well as allegations that some officials facilitated trafficking through bribery or by allowing traffickers access to camps.¹⁸

The geopolitical significance of this vulnerability becomes clearer when it is connected to conditions inside Rakhine. The Rohingya crisis is not simply a humanitarian problem for Bangladesh; it is also one of its most persistent foreign-policy challenges. Continuing conflict and the absence of stable political authority in Rakhine make safe and sustainable repatriation increasingly difficult. As the AA consolidates territorial control, any future return process will also have to contend with an actor that is not the internationally recognized government of Myanmar but nevertheless exercises substantial authority on the ground.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, "2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bangladesh," *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 24, 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/bangladesh/>

The southeastern frontier thus presents Bangladesh with a problem that cannot be divided neatly into separate categories of insurgency, organized crime, border security and refugee protection. These issues increasingly overlap. The challenge for Dhaka is to recognize this convergence before criminal networks become sufficiently embedded in the conflict economy to acquire independent political or strategic leverage.

Strategic Response for Bangladesh

The central challenge for Bangladesh is therefore not simply to stop drugs, trafficking or smuggling. It is to prevent the development of an ecosystem in which these activities can reinforce armed groups and become instruments of political and strategic influence.

That requires a broader approach to border security. Counter-narcotics operations need to be connected with intelligence on armed groups and trafficking networks. Financial investigations need to follow the movement of money and commodities across the border. Maritime surveillance needs to account for the Naf River and the Bay of Bengal as part of the same trafficking environment. Human trafficking and refugee protection need to be treated as security concerns as well as humanitarian issues.

Most importantly, Bangladesh needs to recognize that the security problem in Rakhine is no longer neatly divided into separate categories of insurgency, organized crime, border management and refugee protection. These problems increasingly overlap. If this convergence is left unchecked, Rakhine could evolve from an unstable conflict zone into a wider ecosystem where criminal networks, armed actors and political interests mutually reinforce one another. For Bangladesh, the priority should therefore be to prevent this space from becoming entrenched as a source of geocriminal leverage before the networks and relationships involved become harder to dismantle. This requires anticipating the convergence of threats rather than responding to each one in isolation.