

NARCOTRAFFICKING AS A THREAT TO HOMELAND SECURITY: AN ANALYSIS OF TARGETED MARITIME INFRASTRUCTURES



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¹ French Senate, *A Necessary Surge: Escaping the Trap of Narcotrafficking - French Senate Report*, n.d., 17.

1. Narcotrafficking: A threat to Homeland Security

1.1 Narcotrafficking through a geopolitical prism

As “the world is currently experiencing a prolonged surge in both supply and demand of cocaine”², criminal activities and economies are flourishing. Narcotrafficking networks are increasingly adaptive and thus better able to exploit vulnerabilities in democratic societies through violence, corruption and infiltration of local economies, thus destabilizing institutions. Narcotrafic must be analyzed first and foremost as a flow of goods that is fully rooted in globalization. A child's toy is produced in Asia and will cross half the globe to arrive under the Christmas tree. Drugs follow the exact same processes; indeed, it's not impossible that these two goods end up in the same container. Certain countries play a central role in this flow, either as producers or as consumers while other countries also have economic or geopolitical interests in supporting or supplying this logistics chain, as shown by Europol most recent report³.

1.1.1 Narcotrafficking and the principles of supply and demand

Cannabis remains by far the most common drug in the world: 219 million people, or 4.3% of the world's adult population, used it in 2021, compared to 192 million in 2018⁴. That's more than all other drugs combined. However, the danger of cannabis, in herbal form as well as resin, increases along with the THC level: that of resin has doubled since 2012, due to a hybridization of hemp varieties operated by traffickers⁵. Heroin use is, by comparison, relatively stagnant although it continues to wreak considerable havoc regarding health and related fields. At the same time, we are witnessing the rise of perhaps an even greater danger: synthetic opioids whose effects are similar to those of heroin. The best known, fentanyl, which is in fact much more lethal than heroin, has caused and is still causing a very real public health epidemic in the United States, with more than 80,000 deaths in 2023⁶. While Europe seems to be spared for the moment, seizures of shipments show that this killer drug is

² United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2023* (S.I.: United Nations, 2023).

³ “The DNA of Organized Crime Is Changing – and so Is the Threat to Europe,” Europol, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/dna-of-organised-crime-changing-and-so-threat-to-europe>.

⁴ *French Senate Report on Narcotrafficking*, n.d.

⁵ *Understanding Europe's Drug Situation in 2024 – Key Developments (European Drug Report 2024)*, n.d.

⁶ National Institute on Drug Abuse, “Drug Overdose Deaths: Facts and Figures,” last modified August 21, 2024, <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>.

beginning to arrive on European soil via the ports of the northern coast. However, the most significant phenomenon of the last ten years is, on a global level, the explosion of cocaine trafficking. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is unequivocal: “The world is currently experiencing a massive and prolonged increase in the supply and demand for cocaine”⁷. France is not immune from this alarming trend. According to Bruno Retailleau, the French Minister of the Interior, 1.1 million French people used cocaine in 2023⁸.

The European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA), the reference on drug usage for the European Union's member states, even reported that European seizures of cocaine now exceed those in the United States⁹. Finally, synthetic drugs are emerging as a "new El Dorado" for traffickers, as they are much easier to produce discreetly since they do not require cultivation areas.

1.1.2 Mapping the flow of cocaine and synthetic drugs: key players and grey states

Increasing in sheer mass, narcotics are transported via a seemingly endless variety of routes, constantly reconfigured according to the repressive actions of states and the workarounds found by traffickers. Thus, West Africa has become a key "bounce-back" zone for transatlantic cocaine trafficking; alarmingly, so too have French overseas territories in the Antilles - Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint-Martin, Guyana - all of which fall victim to the rerouting of traffic originating in Suriname. Simply, as soon as one route closes, another opens: traffickers always seem to find a way to infiltrate a given market.

Traffickers do not ship drugs directly from their countries of production but rather route them to and through states perceived as failed or compliant. For example, among the cocaine seizures made in 2023 by the Belgian federal police, 48% came from Ecuador, 18% from Sierra Leone and 6% from Brazil. It should be noted that, although trapped between the two main producers, Colombia and Peru, Ecuador is not itself a major coca producer but rather hosts, due to institutional weaknesses, South American and Albanian criminal groups.¹⁰ Recently, a large-scale drug trafficking investigation, supported by Europol, led to the dismantling of an Ecuadorian criminal cell involved in supplying wholesale cocaine to the EU

⁷ United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2023*.

⁸ Bruno Retailleau, “Lutte contre le narcobanditisme, la consommation et le trafic de stupéfiants,” speech, February 6, 2025.

⁹ *Understanding Europe's Drug Situation in 2024 – Key Developments (European Drug Report 2024)*.

¹⁰ French Senate, *A Necessary Surge: Escaping the Trap of Narcotrafficking - French Senate Report*, n.d., 68.

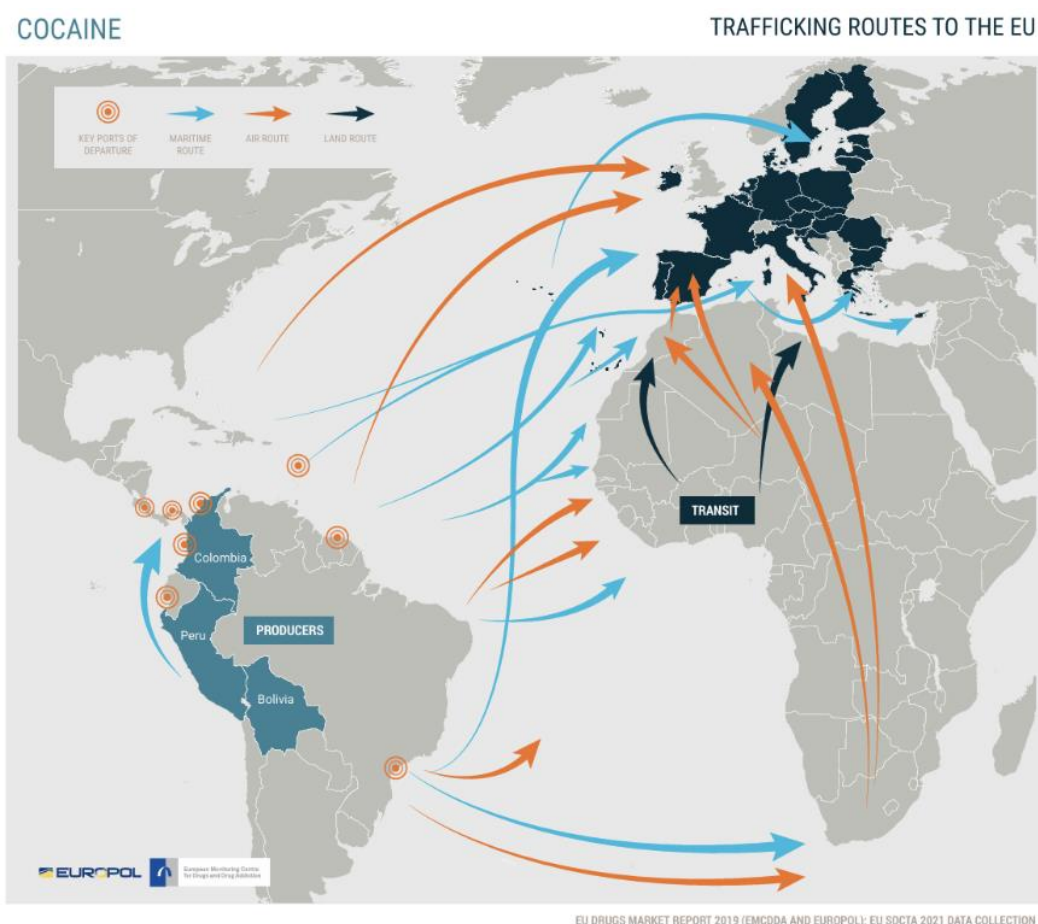
via major ports.¹¹ "Grey states" are not only states that enable this "bounce back" or otherwise facilitate the transport of drugs, as is the case with Morocco and Algeria, for example.

Resulting from lax regulations and less scrupulous approaches to investments possibilities, "grey states" can also facilitate money laundering. This is particularly true for the UAE, with Dubai developing as the new Eldorado for cannabis and cocaine traffickers. Compounding matters, the extradition process in the UAE is extremely difficult, indeed nearly impossible – stories of narcotrafficking leaders escaping extradition are legion¹² - which makes it the ideal base for leading traffickers. As managing traffic remotely has become increasingly possible, major traffickers have taken to settling in uncooperative countries to escape the attention of their home country's justice system. For example, in 2023 French Criminal Economy professor Bertrand Monnet reported on the presence of the Sinaloa Cartel in Dubai, observing how they were able to launder significant amounts of money and operate remotely¹³.

¹¹ "Large Cocaine Bust in Ecuador: 36 Arrested after 73 Tonnes of Drugs Seized," Europol, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/large-cocaine-bust-in-ecuador-36-arrested-after-73-tonnes-of-drugs-seized>.

¹² "Two Major French Drug Traffickers Arrested in Dubai Have Been Released Before Their Extradition," *Le Parisien*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/deux-gros-narcotrafiquants-francais-interpelles-a-dubai-ont-ete-relaches-avant-leur-extradition-11-01-2024-VIGPF2TCSNCCTDZRUY353LSYWA.php>.

¹³ "Dubai Connection, How to Launder Fifty Million Dollars: Web-Series 'Narco Business,'" *Le Monde*, December 1, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2023/12/01/dubai-connexion-comment-blanchir-cinquante-millions-de-dollars-decouvrez-le-troisieme-episode-de-notre-serie-video-narco-business_6203306_3224.html.



Main cocaine trafficking flows in Europe – Europol SOCTA 2021¹⁴

The situation with synthetic drugs is even more complex, as they can be produced anywhere without extracting active ingredients from plants. Relying on a wide variety of chemical precursors, or components, that criminals obtain by circumventing national and international regulations, large-scale production requires sophisticated laboratories that appear, in Europe, to be in the hands of small and interconnected groups. These groups rely on traffickers from host countries for productions outside their Belgian and Dutch bases, as is the case in Poland, for example. Although they are the undisputed leaders in the amphetamine market, European traffickers do not have a monopoly: Southeast Asia, West Africa, Iran, and even Afghanistan - French intelligence services has determined that the Taliban appears to tolerate such traffic, contrary to that of heroin - constitute methamphetamine production areas. China, which previously had minimal influence in the drug trade on the European continent, is emerging as a significant producer of synthetic cannabinoids, a sector experiencing rapid growth.

¹⁴ Europol, *European Union Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (EU SOCTA) 2021*, 48.

The situation with China requires close and careful analysis regarding its key role in the current Fentanyl crisis in the USA as it is the worldwide leader in the production of the key chemicals required to produce synthetic drugs. Moreover, the lack of cooperation with China on the issue of money laundering, and more specifically with Hong Kong, one of its main financial hubs, poses a particularly frustrating hurdle for investigators and the legal system. The role of Chinese networks in money laundering is, however, evident, as has been corroborated by researcher Bertrand Monnet, while during the interview he attended, the money laundering engineers advising the drug trafficker immediately mentioned passing through this territory¹⁵. Since the Chinese state has taken its control, Hong Kong no longer cooperates. In conclusion, drug trafficking shouldn't be seen simply through the prism of criminality but rather as a hybrid threat. Indeed, some countries have no interest in stopping drug flows that target other states, be it for geopolitical or economic reasons. This is also the main argument made by Europol in its last report on serious and organized crime threat assessment (SOCTA) released on March 19, 2025.

1.2 France's increasing vulnerability

Traffickers operate according to a capitalist and ultra-liberal economic logic, always with the desire to conquer and develop markets. Thus, and ironically, the decision of the Colombian cartels to redirect cocaine exports from the United States to Europe could have been made by an economist or business leader seeking to identify international market opportunities. This unleashed capitalism goes along with a non-limited use of violence. Far from being confined to South America, this violence is now affecting Europe. The destabilization capabilities demonstrated there by narcotraffickers are often overwhelming and directly threaten institutions and democracy. Recent events in the Netherlands surrounding the trial of Ridouan Taghi demonstrate the reality of this growing threat.

Taghi, one of the main importers of cocaine into Europe, was tried in the Netherlands in 2021. Charges included the murder of an informant's brother who was not even directly involved in the case; the murder of that informant's lawyer in broad daylight; and the murder of the well-known Dutch journalist Peter R. de Vries, who was also shot in broad daylight in Amsterdam. The Dutch state had to place the former head of government under close protection after threats were deemed credible. In September 2022 in Belgium, Vincent Van Quickenborne,

¹⁵ Bertrand Monnet, interview in *Dubai Connexion, How to Launder 50 Million Dollars*, documentary, published by *Le Monde*, December 1, 2023.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice and the North Sea, was the target of a kidnapping attempt. The Belgian federal prosecutor subsequently announced that the minister was being given increased security. These acts and threats are the working methods of the powerful “Mocro Maffia”, an alliance of criminal groups composed either of Belgian nationals or Dutch nationals of Moroccan origin, which emerged in the 1980s in cannabis trafficking and transitioned to cocaine trafficking in the early 2000s.

1.2.1 “Stateless territories” and expansion into rural and smaller urban areas

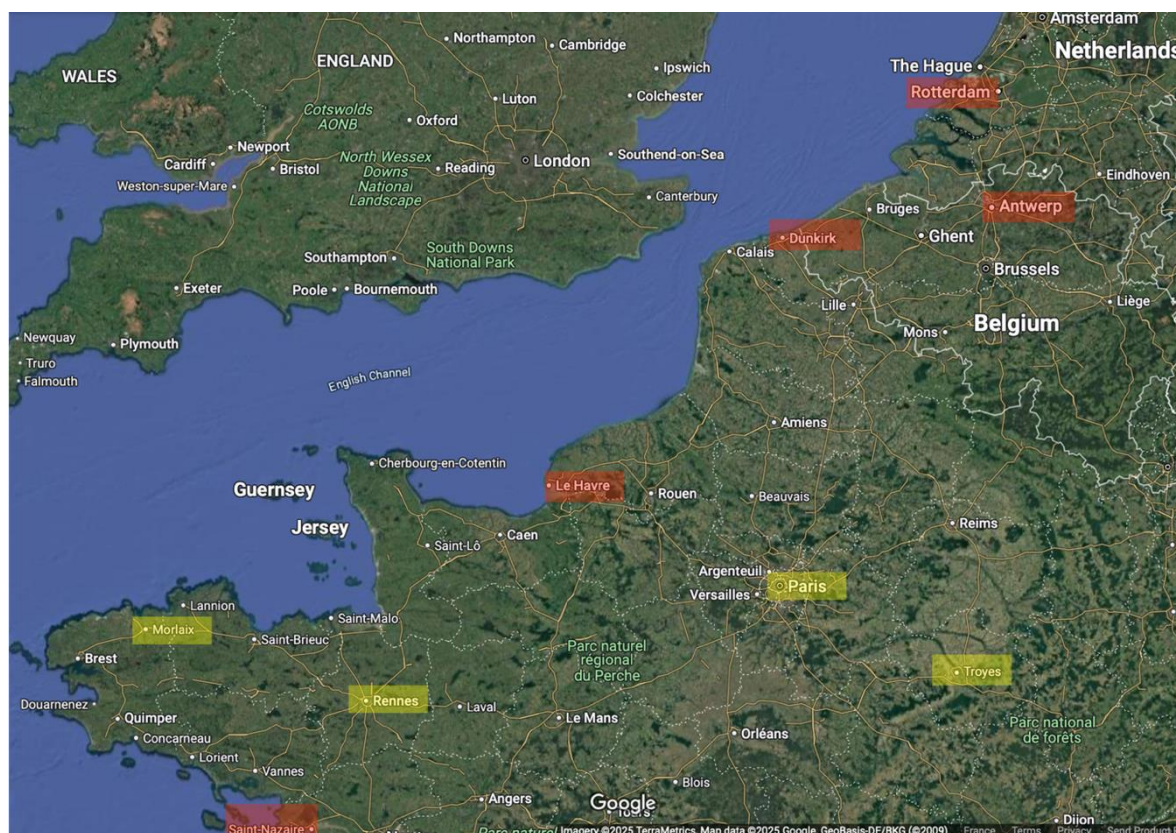
France has not been spared such threats and their related violence. Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) have already settled in, including the previously cited “Mocro Maffia”, already present in the south of France and thought to have branches in the east of the country as well. Trafficking is not only conducted by foreign mafias but also by structured and dangerous groups with French origins. Pursuing all possible money-making, and when opportunities grow scarce in their saturated hometowns, these groups seek quieter, promising markets elsewhere.

Contrary to the popular perception that drug trafficking is confined to major cities, their suburbs and marginalized communities, the reality is that it has spread throughout France. Rather than being restricted to “no-go zones” or “stateless areas” such as the northern districts of Marseille or “crack hill” in Paris, drug trafficking has extended its reach to smaller towns and rural areas by using delivery networks - the “Uberization” of trafficking - and increased violence. This broader base of traffickers underscores the significant impact on all segments of society.

Across the entire national territory, several sensitive neighborhoods in medium-sized towns are the scene of regular confrontations involving the use of weapons previously unseen in such areas. This is notably the case in Belfort, Montbéliard, Verdun, Troyes, Valence, or Morlaix¹⁶. Similarly, kidnappings and attempted homicides have been reported in Angoulême, Poitiers and Rennes. Indeed, offenses related to drug trafficking and particularly severe assaults on individuals are also on the rise in the countryside: the practice of settling scores or

¹⁶ Richard Fausset, “In France, Drug Traffic Spreads to New Territory: Small Towns,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 2025, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/04/world/europe/france-drugs-small-towns.html>.

"*narchomicides*" was once the prerogative of large cities; this counterculture has now spread to smaller municipalities.



Map of main ports of Northern Europe and French cities - Google Maps

Worse still, violence reached a new level on the 14th of May 2024.-.coincidentally, the very day the senate report on drug trafficking was released - after gunmen ambushed a prison convoy in Normandy to break out an inmate, killing two guards and wounding three others. This inmate, Mohammed Amra, had ties to a drug-related gang in the southern port city of Marseille.¹⁷ He was recently caught in Romania after a nine-month manhunt, involving more than three hundred French police agents, supported by Europol. His capture also led to the arrest of twenty-nine people involved in murders-kidnapping and acts of violence.

1.2.2 The impact of trafficking on overseas territories

French overseas territories - especially the Antilles-Guyane - are strategic locations for the transit, trade and storage of products such as cannabis and cocaine. Their particular geographies allow the transportation of large quantities of these drugs aboard containers or

¹⁷ "Mohamed Amra - the Escaped French Prisoner Known as 'The Fly,'" *BBC News*, accessed January 31, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-69012563>.

pleasure boats to Europe. The air route is also used for cocaine transport to France, primarily through couriers known as "mules." In Guadeloupe and Martinique, cocaine seizures have been at very high levels since 2021, with the quantities seized far exceeding those observed since 2017.



Map 2 - French overseas territories

The presence of drug traffickers in these territories also involves associated delinquency marked by high violence and arms trafficking. Consequently, French Guiana, Guadeloupe and Martinique have long been in the top five of areas with the highest crime rates in France - seven homicides per 100 000 inhabitants versus 1:100000 on the mainland - alongside Marseille's department and the two Corsica departments. Justin Pamphile, the mayor of Lorrain and president of the association of mayors of Martinique, acknowledged that, "In addition to drug trafficking, there is also arms trafficking, which, unfortunately, is also flooding our territories. Like in Marseille or elsewhere, we witness shootings and executions almost every weekend."¹⁸

Small overseas territories like Martinique are now seeing a well-established parallel economy whose consequences are both highly visible and pose a direct threat to the stability of French institutions. Indeed, South American criminal networks, highly mobile, are establishing themselves in these area by employing the violent methods long characteristic of South American organized crime. They also introduce war-level weaponry brought directly from Venezuela. This development is coupled with the occurrence of occasional insurrectional

¹⁸ French Senate, *A Necessary Surge: Escaping the Trap of Narcotrafficking - Report*, n.d., 119.

movements, raising fears of the lasting establishment of a mafia system in the Antilles. Indeed, the special court of Fort-de-France has taken up a case involving a police officer in the riots that took place in Guadeloupe in November and December 2021. The investigations revealed the dual objective of these riots: to disrupt the state and sow chaos, with the complicity of a police officer providing information on the targets and the movements of law enforcement.¹⁹ In this regard, the public prosecutor of Pointe-à-Pitre, in Guadeloupe, indicated that the violence was "planned and organized", depicting a system approaching that of a mafia. Another little-known event - the recent riots in Martinique from September to December 2024 - which were officially intended to protest high prices on the island, a universally acknowledged problem - were in fact led by the movement for the protection of Afro-Caribbean peoples and resources (*MPPRAC*), whose leaders have been directly linked to foreign and French narcotraffickers present on the island. The leader of the movement himself, Rodrigue Petitot, served several years in jail for narcotrafficking and had been released only one year prior to these events.

Another phenomenon rarely addressed in the public debate on drug trafficking is the flow of methamphetamines - also known as "ice" - to French Polynesia. While synthetic drugs affect mainland France sparingly, compared to other products, they disproportionately impact the Polynesian territory. The ice sold in French Polynesia mainly comes from clandestine laboratories located in Mexico. It is imported from the west coast of the United States (via direct flights between Los Angeles and Papeete) and resold locally for around € 2,500 per gram, which is 50 to 60 times more expensive than in the United States.²⁰ In this faraway and vast territory where threats and violence between traffickers remain sporadic, two score-settling incidents were reported in 2022, raising further concerns about an increase in violence in locales heretofore "peaceful".

1.2.2 Public corruption concerns

Corruption among public and private agents in France, while still limited compared to some countries more heavily infiltrated by drug traffickers, is a growing concern. Official figures remain low: Tracfin - the French Ministry of the Economy's Intelligence Service - reported

¹⁹ "Riots in Guadeloupe: Planned and Organized Urban Violence, a Policeman Accused," *Europe 1*, January 22, 2022, <https://www.europe1.fr/societe/violences-en-guadeloupe-des-violences-urbaines-planifiees-et-organisees-un-policier-accuse-4089412>.

²⁰ Alice Simon and Alice Valiergue, "Drugs, International Challenges - Methamphetamine in French Polynesia, from a Social Problem to a Public Problem," *French Observatory of Drugs*, June 2022.

only five cases in 2023, yet experts argue this underrepresents the scale of the issue, as the compromising of private or public agents appears necessary for the proper functioning of criminal organizations. Emile Diaz, a former member of the "French Connection" - a famous heroin trafficking network linking Turkey to the USA via France in the mid-20th century - highlighted to the French senate: "Without corruption, there is no trafficking. Trafficking is based on corruption". Similarly, Stéphanie Cherbonnier, former head of OFAST – the Anti-Narcotics Office - described corruption as a "true tool of organized crime, particularly drug traffickers".²¹

Recent cases illustrate this alarming trend, including prison staff aiding drug operations, customs agents facilitating smuggling, and private sector employees compromising logistical systems for large payouts - up to €150,000 in some cases. Criminal organizations exploit vulnerabilities through financial incentives and threats, often targeting public officials and their families. As a result, customs officers, dock workers, and even bailiffs are increasingly exposed to sums that sometimes exceed their entire annual salary. This cycle is often accompanied by threats, first verbal, then physical, escalating to torture and kidnapping. The state and private companies are slow to react and protect exposed employees, meaning that prevention and awareness campaigns are often ineffective.

More troublingly, corruption is spreading into political and institutional spheres. Elected officials, municipal employees, and even legal professionals have been implicated in drug trafficking schemes. Didier Lallement, former Secretary General for the Sea, warned: "The hypothesis that drug traffickers could destabilize our republican foundations seems serious to me."²² This underscores the growing risk of organized crime infiltrating France's institutions, mirroring the destabilizing influence seen in some heavily affected countries. This threat is no longer considered science fiction: the former Minister of the Interior and Overseas Territories, Gérald Darmanin, stated before the Senate that it could be plausible, as demonstrated by South American history, that criminal organizations would one day buy political parties, sponsoring and financing candidates.²³

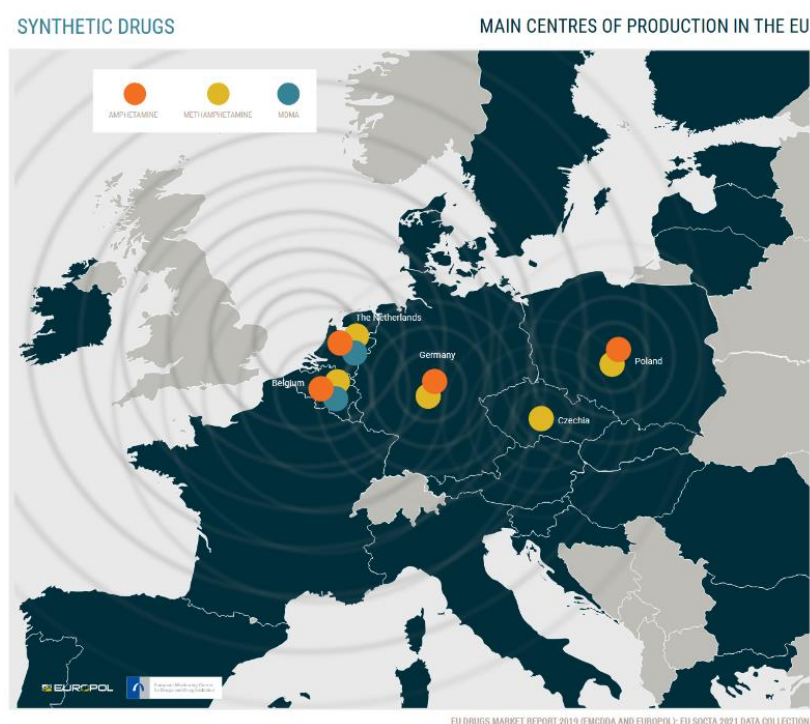
²¹ Office of Narcotics, *State of the Threat Related to Drug Trafficking*, 2023.

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

1.2.4 The risk of a fentanyl crisis in Europe in the near future

The trafficking of these synthetic drugs mentioned above in Europe is spreading rapidly and has several notable characteristics: it largely relies on deliveries via the "darknet" and it has high levels of production, with numerous laboratories located in the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Bulgaria.



Synthetic drug production in the EU – EUROPOL 2019 Report

French authorities have not yet discovered laboratories comparable to those that exist in Mexico or some Asian countries. Production remains outside of France, notably in countries that have chosen to legalize cannabis, such as Belgium and the Netherlands. However, the DEA recently arrested a French trafficker in the USA who was trying to buy huge quantities of fentanyl to take it back to France. The individual had close connections to Marseille's gangs. As "traditional" drugs are growing increasingly obsolete, there's increased concern that new and dangerous drugs like fentanyl are increasingly common in French, this despite assumptions that a majority of French users still prefer natural drugs to pills.

However, this situation could worsen soon given the uncertainties about the availability of heroin, due to the ban on its production instituted by the Taliban in Afghanistan. One worst-case scenario is that consumers might turn to synthetic opioids like fentanyl, with potentially

catastrophic effects on global health, as in the United States and Canada, both of which are facing a public health issue caused by synthetic opioids, mainly fentanyl derivatives.

In contrast, Europe has reported a different situation. Despite potential under-reporting, fentanyl derivatives were associated with 163 deaths in 2022²⁴: these fatalities include both cases from diverted medical use and illicit market sources. Thus, according to General Lecouffe, Europol's Deputy Executive Director of Operations, fentanyl has not “taken off” in Europe or France, even though it may have been tested in these markets by the Mexican cartels. However, in a much less detectable manner, traffickers are also mixing fentanyl and its derivatives, without the user's knowledge, into other drugs like heroin and cocaine, an extremely dangerous practice that can lead to fatal overdoses.²⁵ They are actively seeking to enter the European market with fentanyl, driven by its high profitability as well as geopolitical factors. Indeed, in March 2025, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence published its annual threat assessment, identifying Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) - particularly drug traffickers - as their top priority. This indicates that the new US administration perceives this threat as a hybrid one. Increased pressure on Mexican cartels may lead traffickers to redirect fentanyl shipments to Europe.

Gradually combining fentanyl with other substances, such as cocaine or synthetic drugs, may be a key strategy to generate demand and dependency. This could potentially lead to the widespread distribution of either fentanyl or a newly named derivative aimed at increasing commercial viability and usage across Europe.

Given that the ports of Antwerp, Rotterdam, and Le Havre are under the influence of the "Mocro Maffia," it can be assumed that effective cooperation with the Mexican cartels is unlikely, as these groups typically do not collaborate. Thus, European security authorities should closely examine the eastern and southern routes through the Balkans and Marseille.

²⁴ Understanding Europe's Drug Situation in 2024 – Key Developments (European Drug Report 2024).

²⁵ “Be Careful Scam: Ocfentanyl Sold Instead of Heroin,” *Forum Discussion*, accessed January 31, 2025, https://www.psychoactif.org/forum/2019/07/13/Attention-scam-ocfentanyl-vendu-place-heroine-french-frappe-encore_45589_1.html.

2. Maritime infrastructures as key targets of Transnational Criminal Organizations

As transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) expand their illicit activities, maritime infrastructures emerge as critical vulnerabilities. Ports, shipping lanes, and logistical hubs offer both strategic access points and offer operational concealment for narcotrafficking networks seeking to evade law enforcement. Given the increasing volume of global maritime trade, TCOs exploit these infrastructures to smuggle narcotics on an industrial scale, leveraging corruption, technological blind spots, and legal complexities. For France, with its extensive coastline and strategic maritime connections, the security of these infrastructures is paramount to mitigating the broader threat posed by organized crime. Understanding how TCOs target maritime nodes is essential in designing effective countermeasures that reinforce national and European security frameworks.

2.1. Maritime trafficking routes through Europe.

While any transport means can be used, the sea remains key for narcotraffickers as 80% of world trade volume is seaborne, according to the last review of maritime transport by the United Nations Conference Trade and Development (UNCTAD).²⁶ This was the statement defended by the former French Minister of the Interior, Gérald Darmanin, during his senate hearing in April 2024, where he underlined more broadly that the number of containers on the world's seas has increased by 900% in the past eight years. Who can think that what applies to hi-fi systems, bananas, or melon production would not also apply to drugs, which primarily use maritime routes?

It has been stated succinctly that “drug trafficking is fundamentally about logistics”²⁷ and necessitates transport assets that can seamlessly blend into conventional logistical operations. If the maritime route is still the one most used by traffickers to move drugs to Europe, it is because it offers many advantages. First and foremost, volume. It is much more difficult to fly tons of drugs from South America to Europe than shipping them. Notably, too, the obstacles faced by drug traffickers smuggling drugs into Europe and the United States are not the same. The math is simple: It is more profitable for drug traffickers to send ten 100kg trucks across the US-Mexican border, with the risk of one truck being intercepted, than to send a lone

²⁶ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Review of Maritime Transport 2024*, (UN Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024), https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2024_en.pdf.

²⁷ Florian Manet, *Thalassopolitique du narcotrafic international* (2024), 43.

container full of one ton of cocaine, with the risk of the entire shipment being intercepted. Consequently, drug trafficking by sea, particularly between Europe and South America, has increased dramatically in the last decade.

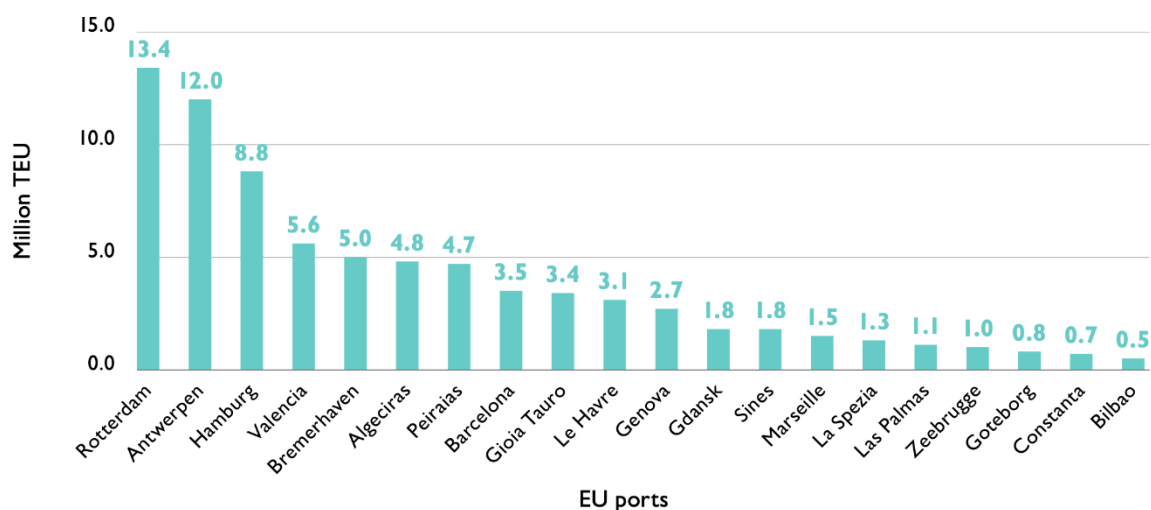


Port Statistics, Eurostat
For most ports: data from 2019; Zeebrugge, Brugge, Dunkerque: data from 2016

The main vector of smuggling remains the container. The loading volume of a container ship makes it easier to hide very large volumes. The container ship capacity is measured in twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU). The typical loads for these ships are a mix of 20-foot (1-TEU) and 40-foot (2-TEU) containers. On average, a container ship will bring around 4500 TEU and this can go up to 22000 TEU²⁸. It's easily seen how it would be more difficult for law

²⁸ Mike Schuler, "22,000 TEUs! ONE Claims New Cargo World Record," *gCaptain*, December 26, 2023.

enforcement to detect and find suspicious cargo. In Europe only 2%²⁹ of the whole amount of containers are checked, a number which increases to 10%³⁰ of those coming from South America.



Top 20 EU ports and volume (in million TEUs) of containers handled in 2021 *EUROPOL 2023 Report*

2.2 Identifying key maritime infrastructures and vulnerabilities

2.2.1 Ports and maritime infrastructure

With 70% of Europe's goods traffic moving by sea, European and French ports are at the heart of drug trafficking between South America and Europe.³¹ Estimates suggest that between 800 and 1,000 tons of cocaine pass through European ports every year³². This “white tsunami” exerts immense pressure on both private and public sectors operating within these areas. European ports therefore face a growing number of threats.

A direct consequence of the rise of drug trafficking is the development of organized crime in the impacted areas. The main French ports, such as Le Havre, Marseille and Dunkirk, are primary targets for drug traffickers linked to the “Mocro Maffia”. This trade fuels violence in the ports and neighboring areas, including “kidnappings, sequestrations, settling of scores,”

²⁹ European Commission – EU Science Hub, *Monitoring Container Traffic and Analysing Risk*.

³⁰ Europol, *Report of Meeting with Security Steering Committee of the Ports of Antwerp, Hamburg/Bremerhaven, and Rotterdam*, The Hague, January 25, 2023.

³¹ Florian Manet, *Thalassopolitique du narcotrafic international* (2024), 74.

³² Ibid.

and even “intimidation tactics,” as described by Bruno Dieudonné, the former prosecutor of Le Havre in charge of narcotics cases³³. Kidnappings have been on the rise in Le Havre, as have chases between traffickers involving gunfire exchanges in the middle of the city. In response to this increasingly worrisome issue, the government has been ramping up its measures in recent months, with announcements from both the Ministers of the Interior and Justice.

Another consequence is the spread of corruption within port facilities, where dockworkers are the first target of traffickers. As of the end of 2019, twenty-plus dockworkers were indicted for corruption³⁴. Dockworkers can also fall victim to the networks' violent actions; the Le Havre prosecutor counted more than twenty violent kidnappings in 2021, with geo-locating beacons regularly found on dockworkers' vehicles. The murder of a dockworker on June 12, 2020, committed after the victim had testified to the Le Havre judicial police regarding the pressure he had been under to take part in cocaine shipments, left a deep impression on the sector. As recently as January 2025, two people working in the Le Havre port were arrested after having been suspected of taking part in the traffic of hundreds of kilos of cocaine.

Increased security in French ports, owing to the arrival of new security gates in recent years, has led narco-traffickers to use new methods of transporting drugs. As a result, new courses of action are being put in place to avoid reliance on port infrastructures alone, simultaneously addressing the limitations of maritime surveillance networks.

2.1.2 Financial systems and digital networks

Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), particularly those involved in narcotrafficking, do not only focus on physical infrastructure but also target financial systems and digital networks to further entrench themselves in our societies and economies. This specific aspect of the study would require an entire thesis of its own; however, it is essential to address some

³³ "INFO Ouest-France. In Le Havre, a Man Kidnapped from His Home," Ouest-France, accessed March 25, 2025, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/normandie/le-havre-76600/info-ouest-france-au-havre-un-homme-enleve-de-force-a-son-domicile-7089067>.

³⁴ "11 People, Including Five Dock Workers, Tried in Lille for Large-Scale Drug Trafficking in Le Havre," Actu.fr, accessed March 25, 2025, https://actu.fr/normandie/le-havre_76351/11-personnes-dont-cinq-dockers-jugees-a-lille-pour-un-vaste-traffic-de-drogue-au-havre_46610137.html.

key points here, as these directly impact maritime infrastructure. As we will see, too, the concept of "infrastructure" should be considered in a broader sense.

TCOs have developed increasingly sophisticated methods to infiltrate financial systems and exploit digital networks. These groups use the darknet, cryptocurrencies, banking institutions, and various intermediaries to launder drug money, finance their operations, and expand their global reach. Europol's latest reports³⁵ emphasize the growing risks associated with these illicit activities, particularly in relation to maritime infrastructure³⁶, a critical node in global narcotics trafficking.

First, darknet marketplaces have become central to the global drug trade, facilitating the anonymous sale of illicit substances, including cocaine, heroin, fentanyl, and synthetic drugs.

Secondly, cryptocurrencies now provide narcotraffickers with a highly efficient means of laundering drug proceeds while avoiding traditional financial oversight. In 2022, Europol detailed³⁷ how cartels use crypto-mixing services to obscure transaction trails; Monero and Zcash for untraceable transfers; Peer-to-peer (P2P) exchanges to convert drug profits into clean assets. Latin American drug cartels, including the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG (*Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*), have increasingly integrated cryptocurrencies into their money laundering strategies, enabling cross-border drug trade financing without reliance on traditional banks. More recently, reports from various agencies indicate that these cartels no longer even attempt to conceal their transactions, openly using stablecoins like Tether (USDT) to launder nearly 90% of their cash. In France, according to an anonymous source interviewed by the authors, prepaid cards allow individuals to anonymously convert cash into cryptocurrencies, making them a favored tool for narcotraffickers.

Finally, TCOs do not solely rely on cryptocurrencies; they also exploit banks, financial intermediaries, and high-value industries to clean narcotics money. Europol has identified banks, lawyers, notaries, and real estate firms as critical weak points in global anti-money

³⁵ European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, *IOCTA, Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2024* (Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2024), <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2813/442713>.

³⁶ "Europol Joint Report: Criminal Networks in EU Ports – Risk and Challenges for Law Enforcement – Focus on the Misappropriation of Container Reference Codes," n.d.

³⁷ "Cryptocurrencies: Tracing the Evolution of Criminal Finances," Europol, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/cryptocurrencies-tracing-evolution-of-criminal-finances>.

laundering efforts.³⁸ Narcotraffickers employ a variety of sophisticated money laundering techniques to obscure the origins of their illicit profits: shell companies and offshore accounts, where front companies registered in tax havens serve as a façade to disguise drug proceeds; trade-based money laundering (TBML) by manipulating invoices and falsifying trade documents; real estate investments; and cash-intensive businesses, including restaurants, casinos, and car dealerships, to integrate illicit funds into the legal economy.

A major case highlighting this vulnerability was the Danske Bank scandal in 2018, in which €200 billion in suspicious transactions flowed through its Estonian branch, with suspected ties to criminal enterprises, including drug networks.³⁹ In 2018, Europol's operation "Tulipan Blanca"⁴⁰ further exposed how Colombian and Spanish drug syndicates laundered millions through cryptocurrency transactions and banking institutions, reinforcing the growing intersection between narcotrafficking and digital finance.

2.2 How narcotraffickers circumvent defensive strategies of maritime infrastructures

Profound changes in the drug trade have occurred over the past thirty years, all pointing towards an ever-increasing sophistication of methods used by traffickers, whether in producing, transporting and distributing drugs or laundering the resultant proceeds.

Therefore, the use of containers for the transport of drugs has become a highly organized and structured operation. The first difficulty is hiding the drugs. Criminals use a variety of methods to do this, including embedding them in "normal" physical cargo, in materials such as marble or concrete, chemically in textiles or cotton, or in the container itself. Once the cargo arrives at the port, a team will be responsible for extracting it directly from the port or removing the container itself from the port.

At the heart of this process is the computerized container tracking system which is accessible to a wide range of people, be they shipping lines, logistics companies or port authorities. This

³⁸ European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, *IOCTA, Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2024*..

³⁹ Teis Jensen, "Danske Bank's 200 Billion Euro Money Laundering Scandal," *Reuters*, November 19, 2018, sec. Business, <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/danske-banks-200-billion-euro-money-laundering-scandal-idUSKCN1NO10D/>.

⁴⁰ "Illegal Network Used Cryptocurrencies and Credit Cards to Launder More than EUR 8 Million from Drug Trafficking," Europol, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/illegal-network-used-cryptocurrencies-and-credit-cards-to-launder-more-eur-8-million-drug-trafficking>.

information makes it easy to identify which containers are going to the right destination and which are most likely to be inspected. This is vital information for drug traffickers, who will use all means, including corruption and violence, to obtain it.

In addition to container ships, which account for 70% of the volume of all seized narcotics, recent examples show the diversity of naval vectors used by traffickers. In 2019, 18kg of cocaine were detected on the MSC Opera ferry, hidden in potato chip packets. In 2023, a sailing boat was arrested in Australia with 247kg of cocaine hidden in its hold. On November 24, 2019, the discovery of a pocket submarine washed up on the Spanish coast of Galicia was a shock to European anti-drug agencies⁴¹, the submersible having sailed from Brazil more than two weeks prior.

2.2.1 Illicit trafficking at sea: deception, innovation, and cyber threats

To bypass the physical or technological safeguards implemented by customs services, individuals have developed various innovative techniques. First, the "Shell Game" technique consists in employing multiple ships, with stops in intermediate ports in the Caribbean or North Africa and sometimes unloading containers that remain in the same place for several months. This technique, reminiscent of the famous game, is designed to lose track of cargo, thus requiring customs to commit considerable resources to tracking them.

The second technique is the drop-off at-sea, in which the cargo, equipped with GPS receivers, is released near the coastline so that it can be picked up by a smaller boat. In 2023, 36 ballots of cocaine were discovered adrift in French waterways⁴².

Finally, traffickers have begun to resort to cyber-attacks. Moving on from hijacking ships themselves, they are now hacking directly into the IT systems of maritime and port operators, using increasingly sophisticated methods to target images for damage, and commit financial fraud, data theft and sabotage. In 2011, the port of Antwerp was attacked by hackers working on behalf of a drug cartel. Access to the container management system enabled them to

⁴¹ "The First Narco Submarine Ever Seized Off A European Coast Is A Monster," accessed March 25, 2025, <https://www.twz.com/31248/the-first-narco-submarine-ever-seized-off-a-european-coast-is-a-monster>.

⁴² Thomas Saintourens, "Drug Trafficking: The New Routes for Cocaine Deliveries on France's Atlantic Coast," *Le Monde*, February 3, 2024.

recover the boxes containing the contraband goods. More recently, in May 2024, an attack sabotaged the flow of ships, trucks and containers in an Iranian port.

2.2.2 Focus on the misappropriation of container reference codes

In order to limit the number of intermediaries, and therefore the amount of money spent on corruption, drug traffickers use a new process called “cloning”. This technique consists of scanning a container already in the port, one with the same characteristics as the container carrying the drugs: registration number, size, color. As a result, the drugs are not detected and can be easily removed from the port. This technique, in use in Flemish ports - Antwerp and Rotterdam - since 2022, was detected for the first time in 2024 in Le Havre, marking it as the premier French gateway for drug trafficking, with 11 tons of cocaine seized in 2024⁴³. It is estimated that at least 200 tons of cocaine have been trafficked through these ports using this *modus operandi* in the last years.⁴⁴ Relying largely on two factors - a corrupted logistics company employee to provide the reference code and a driver to pick up the container with the reference code - there is no need for physical presence within the port area.

2.2.3 Beyond the docks: A new paradigm to counter narcotrafficking

Effectively combating transnational narcotrafficking requires a fundamental redefinition of what constitutes "infrastructure." While ports, coastlines, and maritime logistics hubs remain primary targets for illicit operations, they represent only one part of a broader, interconnected ecosystem systematically exploited by traffickers. Financial institutions, digital networks, transportation hubs and even human resources - such as dockworkers or logistics personnel - are integral to the operational success of these criminal enterprises and must be considered critical vulnerabilities.

As trafficking methods grow more sophisticated - cyberattacks, financial manipulation, logistical deception, and insider corruption - a comprehensive and integrated response becomes imperative. This calls for a transversal approach involving all pillars of society: public institutions, private sector actors, civil society, homeland security forces, and military

⁴³ Sirpa Gendarmerie Nationale, “Trafic maritime de cocaïne: plus de 2 tonnes saisies par la Section de recherches (S.R) de Rouen au port du Havre,” accessed March 25, 2025, <https://www.gendarmerie.interieur.gouv.fr/gendinfo/criminalite-organisee-et-enquetes/2025/trafic-maritime-de-cocaine-plus-de-2-tonnes-saisies-par-la-section-de-recherches-s.r-de-rouen-au-port-du-havre>.

⁴⁴ “Europol Joint Report Criminal Networks in EU Ports - Risk and Challenges for Law Enforcement - Focus on the Misappropriation of Container Reference Codes,” n.d.

assets when appropriate. At the national level, an interministerial framework is essential to ensure coordination between the Ministries of Interior, Justice, Armed Forces, Transport, and Finance, among others. While admittedly idealistic, only such a whole-of-government, whole-of-society strategy can address the complexity and scale of the threat.

Simultaneously, narcotrafficking is by nature a transnational phenomenon that transcends borders, making international cooperation indispensable. France must continue to work closely with European partners, as well as source and transit countries, to share intelligence, harmonize regulations, and conduct joint operations. Ultimately, reinforcing the resilience of maritime and associated infrastructure - while embracing a broader definition of the term - will be key to disrupting the industrial scale of narcotrafficking and protecting national and European security interests. The final section of this paper will examine these aspects.

3. Strategic outlook: Enhancing infrastructure resilience

3.1 Enhancing infrastructure security

Facing the resurgence of criminality and crime linked to drug trafficking, the fight against this scourge is now being taken up at the highest levels by the French state authorities. As stated on January 28, 2025, by French prosecutor François Molins in an interview with *Le Figaro*, the danger of corruption that accompanies the expansion of drug trafficking threatens the very foundations of our society⁴⁵. To be effective, this fight must be waged both defensively and offensively, by targeting narco-trafficking networks and implementing technological measures within the targeted infrastructures.

3.1.1 Offensive strategies: targeting TCO networks

First and foremost, France needs to adopt a resolutely offensive stance in the face of organized, violent, and determined networks. To achieve this, it seems essential to attack the roots of the problem as well as its effects. One critical component of this offensive strategy involves the continuous infiltration of TCOs, both through cyber and human intelligence operations. The successes achieved through operations against encrypted communication

⁴⁵Elisabeth Pierson, "In France, Narcotrafficking Has Become 'a Threat Perhaps Greater Than Terrorism' Says François Molins," *Le Figaro*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/en-france-le-narcotrafic-est-devenu-une-menace-peut-etre-plus-importante-que-le-terrorisme-estime-francois-molins-20250128>.

platforms like EncroChat and SkyECC demonstrate the immense value of offensive maneuvers⁴⁶. These operations not only disrupted criminal communications but also provided actionable intelligence crucial for identifying, apprehending, and convicting high-ranking leaders within these networks. Continuous infiltration allows authorities to maintain pressure, gather critical insights, anticipate criminal strategies, and dismantle organizational structures from within.

The fight against narco-trafficking is a layered defense and requires many weapons, the first layer of which begins with the importing countries. In its roadmap of October 2023, the European Commission recommends the development of international partnerships. This approach is already bearing fruit: thanks to agreements between the Belgian government and Colombia, drug seizures in the port of Antwerp have fallen significantly, while seizures in Colombian ports have increased.

The fight against corruption is the second layer of this defense against narcotraffic. This approach is twofold. Firstly, it requires raising awareness of those involved in the world of ports, be it shipping companies, dock workers, or customs officers. The aim would be to mobilize the customs community to improve risk assessment and targeted controls, to strengthen coordinated investigations targeting the criminal groups behind drug trafficking, and to set up public-private partnerships to develop and implement concrete actions against criminal infiltration and corruption in ports.

Additionally, French investigations into maritime drug trafficking cases have identified shipping companies that are either completely fictitious or serve as fronts for criminal organizations. The idea of "banning" deficient maritime companies - those that are either fictitious or infiltrated by criminal organizations - should also be considered and managed at the state level. Practically, port infrastructures would refuse the unloading of specified containers, and all merchandise could be seized for investigation.

Finally, money remains at the heart of the problem. Indeed, the financial fight has the greatest effect on drug traffickers. With 90% of financial transactions now taking place in the form of cryptocurrency, the services involved need to be equipped with greater tracking resources.

⁴⁶ Europol. "International Operation Takes Down Another Encrypted Messaging Service Used by Criminals." December 4, 2024. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/international-operation-takes-down-another-encrypted-messaging-service-used-criminals>.

The use of machine learning capabilities would leverage these efforts. The financial aspects of the drug trade, as well as establishment efforts to counter it, are quite complicated indeed and beyond the scope of this article.

3.1.2 Defensive strategies: leveraging advanced technologies

Defending our port infrastructure requires agility in the means employed and deployed, as narcotraffickers are finding new methods themselves. While the increases in manpower announced in 2023 by Thomas Cazenave, former Minister of Public Accounts, are essential and welcome, they are also complicated and challenging to implement. Therefore, concurrently, the adoption of new technologies must be pursued to address the issue at its core.

Indeed, only ten mobile scanners have thus far been supplied to cover all French ports. These essential resources are simply inadequate, as they can only process thirty containers per hour – a number that pales when compared to the 22,000-plus containers unloaded by certain ships. To achieve the objective of "100% control" over containers without clogging logistical circuits, it is necessary to continue, in collaboration with university laboratories and private companies, research projects aimed at developing faster and less intrusive testing methods. For example, one of the projects aims to develop, within a few years, tools capable of detecting particles of narcotics without having to open the container.⁴⁷

The development and use of artificial intelligence to process large amounts of data represents a major hope. The arrival of AI could target high-risk containers, countering the "Shell Game" techniques used by narco-traffickers and ensuring more precise tracking of shipments. To make the French coastline less permeable to drug traffic, the French Navy has equipped itself with a software program for monitoring the maritime situation: ANAIS (Analysis of Maritime Situation Incoherences). This system relies on the AIS, (Automatic Identification System) which is a system used for tracking and monitoring the movement of ships and other vessels in real-time. The main purpose of AIS is to improve maritime safety by allowing vessels to be aware of one another's position, especially in crowded or dangerous waters. Ships are equipped with an AIS transponder that broadcasts information such as the vessel's identification, position, course, speed, and other data. Other ships and shore stations (like

⁴⁷“Automatic Detection of Narcotics | Smiths Detection.” Accessed March 28, 2025.
<https://www.smithsdetection.com/insights/automatic-detection-of-narcotics/>

coastal radar systems) can receive this information, which helps them avoid collisions, navigate safely, and keep track of shipping traffic. AIS is mandatory for larger vessels (over 300 gross tons) engaged in international voyages, and it is also used by fishing vessels, cargo ships, and some recreational boats. It is essentially a radar system but for data exchange between vessels. Thanks to ANAIS, the French Navy is able to perceive any suspicious change of behavior in the middle of the flow of thousands of ships and track the ship until her destination.

To complete this kind of initiative, a densified layout of radars must be set-up quickly, especially in the Caribbean, to prevent or at least slow down the arrival in these territories. These radars are intended to enhance the detection capabilities available to the internal security forces, creating a permanent surveillance and interception network around the islands. The countless beaches, which are particularly conducive to the nighttime unloading of illicit goods, receive insufficient monitoring. Inter-island traffic, as well as traffic originating from South American coasts, is specifically targeted by this detection system. As an example, in Martinique, the priority is to cover the Saint Lucia Channel, both to deter and intercept suspicious vessels.

Finally, legal maneuvers can also help strengthen the resilience of maritime infrastructures. While the container remains the preferred instrument, products are also hidden in boats or aboard pleasure yachts - which is particularly the case for French inter-island transit (Antilles, Polynesia). To address this phenomenon, the implementation of a "clearance" procedure is a tool that deserves to be more widely deployed and further pursued in its application and control: in 2023, the prefect of Martinique established a system requiring the mandatory submission of clearances in the French departments and territories in the Caribbeans. All vessels coming from or going to a foreign country must then automatically declare and submit identification documents to customs authorities. The captain is also required to present the "departure" clearance from the country of origin to the authorities of the country of stopover.

3.1.3 Advanced scanning and auto-tracking for secure transport, finance, and border surveillance.

The automation of logistical and financial flows, combined with the growing digitization of supply chains, offers a strategic lever to counter narcotrafficking. The deployment of connected containers or "smart containers" equipped with GPS sensors, door-opening

detectors, temperature controls and vibration monitoring, enables real-time tracking of maritime freight. These technologies, integrated into port information systems through platforms such as Port Community Systems (PCS) or Cargo Community Systems (CCS), ensure the traceability of cargo and the detection of logistical anomalies. Furthermore, data generated by these devices - when coupled with predictive analytics and compliance monitoring tools - significantly improves risk assessment, allowing authorities to anticipate suspicious diversions or stops in geopolitically sensitive or sanctioned areas.⁴⁸

Simultaneously, the strengthening of detection and interception capabilities depends on regional and international cooperation mechanisms. In the Caribbean, for instance, the treaty of San José allows U.S. Coast Guard personnel to operate within the territorial waters of third-party states, enabling coordinated actions such as hot pursuit of suspect vessels.

On the judicial front, the fight against trade-based money laundering (TBML) requires intelligent cross-referencing of physical and financial flows. The opacity of shell companies and capital transfers through tax havens demand targeted analysis by automated systems, enriched with maritime ownership data, shipping manifests, and commercial transactions. Such integrated surveillance architecture, enhanced by AI, not only disrupts illicit flows but also undermines the shadow economy that sustains maritime criminal networks.

3.2 Enhancing international cooperation

3.2.1 Enhancing the role of MAOC-N and expand European cooperation

Created in 2007, The Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre - Narcotics (MAOC-N) meets the need for coordination between states in the fields of intelligence and operational police action in the Atlantic Ocean. It brings together liaison officers from the seven member countries (France, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Netherlands, Portugal, and the United Kingdom). The United States is represented as an observer member. MAOC-N's remit extends not only to vessels, but also to non-commercial aircraft; thus, and notably, it has no jurisdiction over container ships. Although a very lightweight structure, - with just 28 permanent staff, mainly liaison officers and analysts - France, for example, is represented by a naval officer and, at present, a customs officer - , it has considerable effects in the fight against narcotrafficking.

⁴⁸ Florian Manet, *Thalassopolitique du narcotrafic international* (2024), nd.

MAOC-N notably maintains a list of vessels of interest (VOI) which, at the end of 2023, contained approximately 550 entries.

All the players involved agreed on the effectiveness of cooperation within the MAOC framework, as they have succeeded in sharing what is most difficult to share: national intelligence. Indeed, the quantities of cocaine seized thanks to intelligence sharing and operational cooperation within MAOC-N runs into the tens of tons, with 2023 being a record year with almost 80 tons seized, almost double the previous record year of 2021. Still very recently, the French Navy seized more than six tons of cocaine in the Gulf of Guinea thanks to a MAOC intel⁴⁹. That's why this initiative needs to be strengthened - in terms of human resources, infrastructures, available means - in order to encourage other countries to step in.

3.2.2 A need for a comprehensive national strategy and a new agency for France

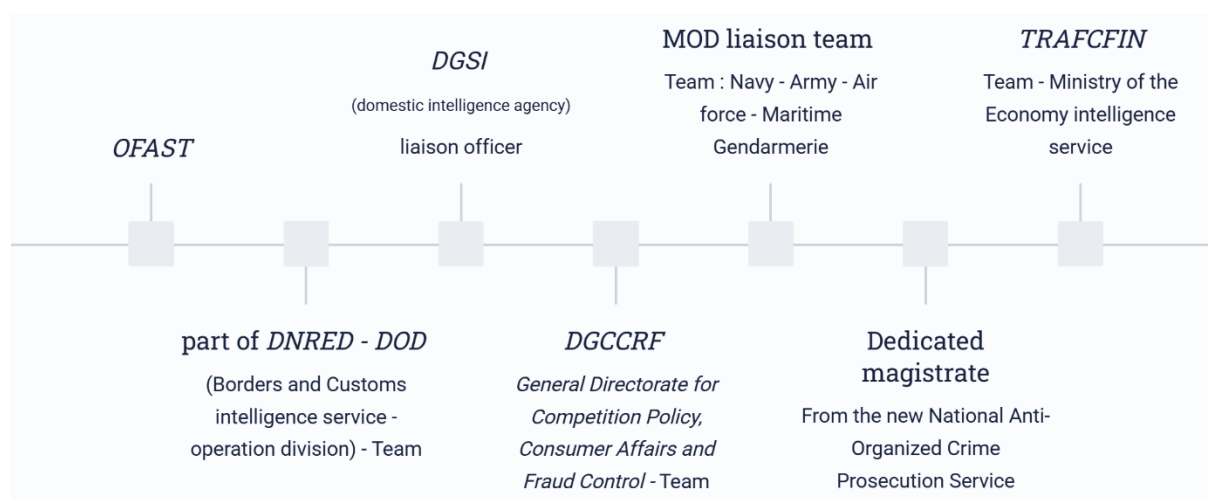
Despite those warnings presented by the situations in Belgium and the Netherlands, the French awareness was slow to develop although one turning point came in 2020 with the creation of OFAST, the French Office for the Fight Against Drugs. This agency, under the authority of the national police, is now at the forefront of the French state's efforts to combat drug traffickers, and it has had significant success. In 2023, OFAST had nearly seven hundred agents, spread across fifteen local branches, with nine detachments - it opened a branch in Le Havre in 2023 to target this high-value port. Despite some successes, the fight against drug trafficking remains an ongoing challenge.

Indeed, although OFAST includes agents from different organizations, - the judicial Police, Customs and Border, Gendarmerie, Ministry of Justice, and even public finance - its institutional positioning as a central service attached to the national directorate of the judicial police is not appropriate. Therefore, there should be proposed, at a minimum, a dual attachment to the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Economy and Finance. This status appears as the only one capable of allowing OFAST to assume its leadership mission and to give it authority over all major stakeholders. Such positioning will also facilitate a convergence of the financial and criminal approaches, which must be implemented

⁴⁹ "Drug Trafficking: Over Six Tons of Cocaine Seized by the French Navy on a Fishing Vessel in the Gulf of Guinea." France Info, March 16, 2025. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/drogue/narcotrafic-plus-de-six-tonnes-de-cocaine-saisies-par-la-marine-francaise-sur-un-navire-de-peche-dans-le-golfe-de-guinee_7133463.html.

simultaneously for effective action against drug trafficking. At the time of writing this thesis, this is the direction France may take.⁵⁰

After this quite practical reform, if the situation doesn't improve significantly, another option for France would be to consider a French entity modeled on the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), directly under the authority of the *SGDSN* - General Secretary for Defense and National Security -, directly accountable to the Prime Minister. This agency could merge existing structures and encompass other units.



Proposed agency under the General Secretary for Defense and National Security - Unit under the command of a state administrator (prefect)

While the OFAST is a powerful tool in the fight against drug trafficking, a specialized agency with broader powers, particularly in terms of federal jurisdiction and interagency coordination, could significantly enhance the country's ability to tackle drug-related issues at every level. A "French DEA" could also strengthen international cooperation and provide more targeted efforts in dismantling transnational drug cartels, working even more closely with EUROPOL and EUROJUST, the two coordination units at the European level for police and justice cases. It could also enhance the use of advanced intelligence technologies to target supply chains, financial networks, and digital platforms. By adopting such an approach, France could bolster its capacity to combat, in a much more militarized way, the evolving and increasingly sophisticated world of drug trafficking.

⁵⁰ Simon Barbarit. "'French-Style DEA,' Status of Informants, New National Prosecutor: What Is in the Drug Trafficking Bill Examined This Tuesday in the Senate?" Public Sénat, January 27, 2025. <https://www.publicsenat.fr/actualites/politique/dea-a-la-francaise-statut-du-repent-nouveau-parquet-national-que-contient-le-texte-sur-le-narcotrafic-examine-cette-semaine-au-senat>.

Last but not least, different experts met with during the writing of this paper, including former French President François Hollande, suggest that Narcotrafficking - or more globally transnational crime - should be elevated as a national strategic priority in the new National Strategic Review (NSR) expected in 2025. In the last French NSR of 2022, "narcotrafficking" or "transnational crime" are not mentioned even once. This would then presuppose recognizing it as a core threat to sovereignty and security, much like terrorism; similarly, studying more closely the links between terrorism and narcotrafficking could also be beneficial in proving this. This elevation would also bolster inter-ministerial and international cooperation in dismantling narcotrafficking networks.

However, treating narcotrafficking as one of the highest threats to homeland security would require changing the way France deals with its strategic management. In France, the separation between foreign policy and national defense policy results in siloed functional chains, hindering integrated approaches to geographical or thematic issues such as narcotrafficking. It is also the administrative bodies, rather than political leaders, that are responsible for devising strategies. This generally leads to very traditional proposals, neither imaginative nor risky. Among our international partners - USA included - the National Security Council (NSC) officials, who come from political backgrounds, have an interministerial coordination role in preparing options and strategies.

For France, the simplest and least ambitious solution would be to reinforce the *SGDSN* - General Secretary for Defense and National Secretary - by setting up a dedicated sub-directorate of some twenty advisors, led by its own deputy director. To strengthen legitimacy, the Secretary General's profile should change to that of a direct advisor to the President of the Republic, with a political profile aligned with the presidential mandate.

A second, more ambitious scenario would ultimately be the creation of a National Security Council with resources managed by the Prime Minister but under the direct command of the president. In this context, this would lead to a reduction of other state entities whose missions would then be redundant, such as the *SGDSN*, which could be refocused on the rest of its planning and territorial protection missions. Thus, the fight against narcotrafficking and TCOs would be managed at the highest level with a strong, long-term strategy.

Conclusion

Narcotrafficking poses a major threat to homeland security and societal stability by exploiting infrastructure vulnerabilities and infiltrating public systems through corruption. The fentanyl crisis in the United States, drug money laundering and the increasing influence of TCOs and local gangs in France illustrate the destabilizing impact of these criminal networks. French ports - including Le Havre, Dunkirk, Saint-Nazaire, and Marseille - are particularly at risk, as drug trafficking networks continue to expand their operations and diversify their methods. If left unchecked, these organizations will further undermine judicial and social institutions, strengthening a parallel economy that threatens national stability.

It is essential to broaden the definition of critical infrastructure to include maritime flows, banking systems, and digital networks, which play a crucial role in narcotraffickers' operations. Controlling ports, logistics platforms, and financial systems is just as vital as securing physical borders. Additionally, the health risks associated with drug consumption, although often overlooked, could significantly strain the French medical system

Traditionally, efforts to combat narcotrafficking have focused on disrupting drug transport and sales. However, a more comprehensive approach is now required, one that considers not only traffickers but also producers and consumers. This aspect would require an entire information campaign in order to tackle the raise in consumption.

Ultimately, financial flows remain the Achilles' heel of drug traffickers. As cryptocurrencies now account for 90% of clandestine transactions, further deregulation of these financial mechanisms would only facilitate illicit activities. Strengthening financial oversight and implementing stricter regulations are therefore crucial in dismantling these networks.

Finally, combating narcotrafficking requires stronger national and international synergies. Closer cooperation between intelligence agencies, law enforcement, and judicial authorities, along with joint operations and increased resource-sharing, is indispensable in countering this transnational threat. This approach, if actually adopted, would result in more than just a new law against narcotrafficking. It would lead to a comprehensive redesign of strategic management in France, inspired by the model of a national security council.

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