

The risks of establishing a diffuse sovereignty in the Amazon: the role of violent non-state actors

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Executive Summary

In recent years, South America has attracted global attention not only for its socio-environmental importance and cultural and economic aspects, but also for the complex challenges related to security and governance. The region faces a multifaceted set of problems, among which Transnational Organized Crime is one of the common challenges for countries in the region. Drug trafficking, in some cases, has subsidized environmental crimes and further integrated into local economies. The expansion of international and internal demands for certain types of drugs has been expanding plantation areas and routes through the interior of the continent, making violence no longer exclusive to large urban centers and reaching the interior of countries and their borders. Thus, criminal organizations have established an integrated network at the transcontinental level. Nonetheless, in terms of regional integration, countries have not yet established effective policies to fight such groups.

In South America, countries are grouped into three major geographical regions: the Southern Cone (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay); the Andes (Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela); and the Amazon (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, French Guiana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela). Marked by common natural characteristics, integration networks and historical ties, these countries are defined by the delimitation of spaces where political, commercial, and cooperation agreements are established.

The Southern Cone and the Andes have networks of twin cities, waterways, highways and railways that interconnect various parts of the region. The historical occupation processes and certain natural characteristics have driven economic and demographic growth that facilitated integration between countries and, internally, between some border areas and their capitals.

The Amazon region differs from the other two in several ways. The population density of the continent's coastal regions has not extended to the borders of the Western Amazon, and the development of a densely integrated urban and road network, capable of connecting national economies and creating poles of development, remains an incomplete process. The extensive hydrographic basin of the Amazon River and its network of navigable waterways is a unique feature of the region, effectively turning rivers into roads. However, problems such as the seasonality of rivers and the lack of an efficient infrastructure pose significant limitations. Furthermore, the hydrographic network has its natural limitations, whether due to the loss

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of navigability and the waterfalls; either because of the whole countries or some important regions within them are not connected to the Amazon basin itself, such as the countries of the Guiana Plateau. In fact, there has never been an economic bloc centered on the countries that constitute the Amazon region. Initiatives such as the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) have had limited scope and political engagement.

The Amazon and its porous borders enable illegal activities. The effective absence of the state in many areas facilitates the actions of armed groups and criminal networks. These groups not only control the production and trafficking of drugs, but also finance and, at times, protect activities such as illegal deforestation, indiscriminate fishing and mining, among other crimes, which impact both the environment and local communities. The convergence of these activities, along with the presence of violent non-state actors, increases the risk of establishing a diffuse sovereignty in the Amazon. This text explores this issue and emphasizes the need for integrated approaches to address these challenges, ensuring the security and sustainability of the region.

Recommendations:

- Promote bilateral and multilateral partnerships between Amazonian countries for integrated assessments;
- Intensify the exchange of intelligence information and joint operational planning in border regions;
- Develop economic alternatives for border populations;
- Encourage ACTO to take a more proactive role in environmental and international security issues related to the Amazon.

Keywords:

Sovereignty; Transnational Organized Crime; Environmental Crimes; Violent Non-State Actors; Amazon.

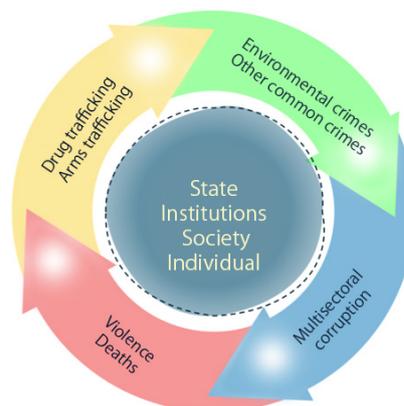
1. Impacts of transnational organized crime in South America

The impacts of Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) in South America, especially in Amazonian countries, are vast and multifaceted. The TOC connects different types of crimes, creating a cycle that underpins a criminal ecosystem that affects states, institutions, societies and individuals (figure 1). Drug trafficking is one of the engines of this cycle, both because it is a highly profitable activity and because of historical reasons, and it is a common activity among various actors.

The association of violent non-state actors with environmental crimes has been increasing in the 21st century (FBSP, 2023). In the Pan-Amazon, which is rich in natural resources and has an insufficient presence of actors responsible for monitoring and enforcement, there are frequent occurrences of environmental crimes such as deforestation and illegal mining, which are sometimes financed and protected by criminal networks. These crimes have impacts on the environment and local communities, as has been clearly demonstrated in the case of mining in the Yanomami indigenous land in Brazil (Rodrigues, 2024); the impacts on the Madre de Dios region in Bolivia (Zapata, 2020); or in the Putamayo-Içá river basin, which covers Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil (Botía, 2017).

Multisectoral corruption facilitates the actions of TOC and infiltrates into governments and institutions, weakening the ability of states to implement adequate security policies. This results in increased violence and intentional homicides, which are tragic consequences of organized crime.

Figure 1: Impacts of Transnational Organized Crime on Nations



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Among the data on intentional homicides in South America released by UNODC (2024), the average homicide rate in the Southern Cone is 7.15 per 100,000 inhabitants when Brazil is included, but falls to 3.03 when Brazil is excluded. The average of the Amazonian countries is 12.89. It is four times lower if we exclude Brazil, or almost 50% lower if we include the country. The outbreak of violence in Ecuador, driven by the fight against organized crime, resulted in 26.99 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2022, followed by Colombia with 25.27 homicides. In third place is Brazil, with 20.61 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (Table 1).

Besides being Amazonian countries, they also share the presence of violent non-state actors who dispute the control of licit and illicit activities, with varied routes and destinations. These disputes can be partially reflected by the intentional homicide data from these countries. The UN data show that the global average of deaths linked to organized crime stands at 22%. In the Americas, this rate rises to 50% of intentional homicides related to organized crime, and 20% to other related crimes; that is, almost 70% of deaths are connected to crimes, rather than to wars, crimes of passion, or political crimes (UNODC, 2023b).

Table 1: Intentional homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants (2012-2022)

Country/ Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Average	
Ecuador	10.97	14.08	10.84	2.15	2.35	1.62	1.72	1.88	14.02	26.99	12.89	
Colombia	33.35	28.59	27.13	26.04	25.43	23.88	23.41	22.49	25.67	25.27		
Brazil	28.18	29.36	28.36	29.59	30.59	26.64	20.81	22.38	21.26	20.61		
Guyana	20.74	19.84	19.73	18.71	15.07	14.13	17.03	19.69	16.28	16.2		
Venezuela		63.03	4.76	106.52	47.98		40.98	29.43	19.31	12.61		
Peru*	11.37	11.39	11.88	12.00	11.49	11.94	11.57	2.14	12.98			
Suriname	1.07	2.11	3.83	5.50	3.74	10.46	1.99	13.55	2.28	11.38		
Bolivia			3.50	3.89	4.27	3.76	3.34	2.76	2.87	2.72		
Uruguay	12.62	13.25	14.78	13.46	13.78	12.28	11.49	18.25	16.03	11.19		3.03 (without Brazil)
Argentina	7.25	7.54	1.77	6.01	1.83	1.77	1.81	1.64	1.35	1.51		7.15 (with Brazil)
Chile	1.22	0.71	0.54	0.99	1.15	1.00	1.31	1.35	0.92	1.48		
Paraguay	1.74	16.61	1.86	1.77	1.80	1.97	1.66	12.39	1.92	0.98		
Legend (deaths per 100,000)		>40	>30	>25	>20	>15	>10	>5	<1			

*For the calculation of the average, the data considered for Peru were from 2021.

Source: Adapted from UNODC (2024).

In 2021, Brazil registered more than 45,000 intentional homicides. The profiles of the victims can also be found on the UNODC data portal, which shows that they are mostly young men between 15 and 44 years old, which is exactly the economically active population (UNODC, 2024). The point is that certain events unintentionally shaped the regional environment, enabling the advancement and shift in stance of violent non-state actors in the Amazon region.

2. The hemispheric context in the 1990s

Between 1991 and 2001, after being freed from the shadow of the Cold War, the world experienced a dynamic and troubled period. The perception of security has changed, and concepts such as human security, environmental security, and societal security have gradually been added to the classic precepts of military, economic, and political security. This creates a hybrid in which different security concerns currently coexist (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, 1998).

The Mexican Jorge Castañeda argued in his book *Utopia Unarmed* (1993) that with the end of the Soviet Union, armed struggle in Latin America was no longer an option. The author could not have been more mistaken: on January 1, 1994, an armed guerrilla movement emerged in his own country, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. In 1998, at its military peak, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, for its acronym in Spanish) conquered the city of Mitú, capital of the department of Vaupés, on the border with Brazil.

At this time, there was already a process of rapprochement with various cartels linked to the production of cocaine that emerged in the previous decade. During Richard Nixon's administration, the US already recognized drugs as a problem, but it was during George Bush's administration that the "War on Drugs" was declared. In 2000, "Plan Colombia" was announced,

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with more than \$1.3 billion planned for military assistance in the fight against drugs (Herz, 2002). Despite the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the War on Terror, the fight against organized crime and drug trafficking continued to be supported by the Americans, not always with satisfactory results. A balloon effect eventually spread coca planting to other countries, under the control of new violent non-state actors (Fernandez and Pazzona, 2015).

Despite government efforts, cocaine production and consumption have increased in recent years, reaching a record of 2,304 tons seized in 2021 (UNODC, 2023a). International events, both directly and indirectly, contributed to this increase. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an increase in the use of both licit and illicit drugs as a form of relief, which is an opportunity for expansion for transnational organized crime (Comolli, 2021). In addition to expanding the existing market in the United States and Europe, cocaine began to be seized in larger volumes in Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

Brazil is one of the export routes for cocaine to the European Union, Eastern Europe and Africa, a dynamic observed since the 1990s (Steiman, 1995; Machado, 2009). In the country, two violent non-state actors of particular interest due to their international reach are the Red Command (CV, for its acronym in Portuguese) and the First Command of the Capital (PCC, for its acronym in Portuguese). By the early 1990s, the CV had already existed for more than a decade. Founded in 1979 inside the Ilha Grande prison in Rio de Janeiro, the group arose from the union of political prisoners with common criminals (Migowski, 2018). Initially, the CV's activities were limited to Rio de Janeiro, with little national influence. However, in the early 21st century, the organization advanced towards Paraguay and reached the Amazon in the following decade. References to these factions can be seen nowadays on the walls of the peripheries of large urban centers in northern Brazil, especially Manaus and Belém, in addition to the structuring of cells of the groups in the region's prisons (Alessi, 2021).

In 1993, the PCC emerged at the Taubaté Custody Center, in São Paulo. Over the following decade, the organization expanded within prisons and urban areas, even orchestrating attacks against security forces in 2006 and 2012 (Feltran, 2018). In the past decade, the PCC has extended its reach to other states, reaching the borders of neighboring countries, notably Paraguay and Bolivia. Subsequently, it reached the Amazon region. Relations between these criminal organizations have already oscillated, from open and violent disputes to peace agreements and forging partnerships (Manso and Dias, 2018). These two criminal organizations are not the only ones in the country, but they are the ones with the greatest capillarity, establishing arrangements of convenience with smaller regional groups and notably with transnational criminal organizations.

3. The Peace Agreement with the FARC and the reorganization of agreements between criminal factions in the Amazon Basin

After decades of civil war that claimed the lives of more than 450,000 people, in September 2016, the Colombian government and the FARC signed a peace agreement. Although the Peace Agreement was rejected by the population in a plebiscite held in October of that year, it was ratified by the Colombian National Congress the following month, in November 2016.

Throughout 2017, two parallel processes were initiated. On the one hand, the FARC leadership became a political party. On the other hand, the process of disarming the former guerrillas began, and they would return to civilian life. However, at the same time that part of the FARC was demobilizing, dissident groups emerged and did not accept the signed peace agreement and announced that they would continue in the armed struggle. This process of dissent, however, was not carried out in a centralized manner: there was no new single leader or centralized command. Different dissident guerrilla groups claimed their autonomy and control of the territory where they operated.

The old FARC hierarchical structure was broken. There is no documented database on this, but it is to be assumed that, with the end of the centralized structure of the organization and the self-financing needs of the dissidents that were emerging, the former FARC's "trade agreements" with different groups of Brazilian organized crime suffered setbacks. The new dissidents independently sought to renegotiate the agreements regarding the products they had in their territories in order to capitalize on them.

Coincidentally, in Brazil, the peace between the PCC and the CV ended in 2017. As an explanation of this rupture, studies point to internal issues about the circulation of drugs in prisons and the fact that the CV lost prominence in some of its factions, as it does not have a centralized structure like the PCC (Manso and Dias, 2018). The conclusion was the burst of massacres between the groups and their allies inside prisons in the northern region. The prison dispute has taken to the streets and rivers of the Amazon region. At stake in these disputes was the control of Colombian cocaine trafficking routes to the North American and European markets (Ferreira and Framento, 2019). This occurs at the same time that dissidence within the FARC emerges, without central control and seeking to restructure their commercial agreements.

An informed observer of the dynamics of drug trafficking in the region could argue that cocaine produced in Colombia is distributed to international trade predominantly through the sea lanes of the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, eliminating the need to transit through the Amazon basin region, which, in fact, is true. However, it is necessary to consider that the FARC dissidents, who dominate regions west of the Andes Mountains and advance towards the Amazon basin, may eventually be deprived of direct access to the Colombian coasts due to the loss of strategic allies and the emergence of rivals. Thus, the topographic characteristics, urban networks and other elements of the region can direct these groups to resort to the rivers that constitute the Amazon basin for the flow of their illicit products.

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Data from the Brazilian Public Security Forum (2023) corroborates this by showing the presence of criminal groups precisely over the river basins forming the Amazon waterway network and the key municipalities in river nodes, in addition to land intersections. We comment on the case of Brazil-Colombia, but the reorganization of the arrangements of convenience between these groups after the FARC agreement and the emergence of dissidences is a broader process, which also affected other borders, such as Ecuador and Venezuela (Millán-Quijano, 2020).

In Ecuador, the increasingly strong entry of different violent non-state actors and the arrival of coca plantations on its northern border (UNODC, 2023a) led the country to an escalation of confrontations and clashes that culminated in the decree of the state of internal war by the current government (BBC News Brasil, 2024). In the background of this process, the Covid-19 pandemic and the increased global demand for the drug heated up the market. In the case of Venezuela, state fragility facilitated the emergence of criminal organizations such as Tren de Aragua, capable of inserting themselves into this ecosystem and redirecting illicit flows, including drugs, weapons, gold and human trafficking in association with groups already established on the continent (Rodrigues, 2024; Insight Crime, 2023).

In summary, the Amazon region is undergoing another of the constant restructurings of coalitions and trade pacts between different groups, as well as clashes over the dominance of routes, resources and markets. This period of territorial division of the Amazon by criminal and violent groups, combined with the characteristics of the region, has the potential to generate zones where state governability is effectively null, resulting in a deficit of sovereignty. This is a challenge that has not yet been directly addressed by the nation states of the region, and that exceeds the capacity to be faced in isolation by each of them.

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4. The risks of diffuse sovereignty in the Amazon

There is an economic logic behind the crime, although it does not apply to all cases: in specific periods of history, political-ideological motivations, socio-cultural or deeper issues can also be a driving force behind violent actions (Fernandes, 2020). The economic perspective on crime essentially seeks to understand how benefits and punishments are behind the choices of individuals and their decision-making. In summary, as Gary Becker (1968) explains, when the prospect of punishment, physical or financial (such as deprivation of liberty or fine), is acceptable in the face of the gains that the individual can obtain through criminal activity, the individual may rationally choose this path. In these cases, the state and its entire apparatus were unable to dissuade the individual from engaging in illicit or criminal activities.

Complementarily, there is a debate around ungoverned spaces, where the state cannot impose its set of rules, further enhancing what Gary Becker calls the lack of punishment. Stanislawski (2006) focused on the varying degrees of control and governance that states or other actors exercise over a given territory, which can be classified as a para-state, a quasi-state or a black spot. He presents the concept of black spots to designate areas within national states that are not effectively controlled by the very states that claim sovereignty over them. This phenomenon is usually associated with the peripheral or impoverished communities within large cities where governance - the ability to impose social rules and enforce compliance through the monopoly of violence - rests not with the state, but with violent non-state actors. Examples of such spaces can be found in Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and scattered throughout the large cities of the Amazonian countries, with different degrees of size and power (Villa and Pimenta, 2019).

One key aspect in these black spot territories controlled by violent non-state actors is the violent imposition of their own code of conduct on the local population. These groups become engines of the local economy by consuming goods from the legal market, employing young people, and offering favors to selected community members. Secondly, this usually occurs in large and medium-sized cities, which are populous, as well as the communities where these black spots are located. This allows part of the population to coexist with these actors and their rules in an almost invisible way. Some may choose not to participate, as long as they adhere to the law of silence and other imposed regulations. But the fact is that it is possible to hide oneself in the crowd. The same does not happen easily in villages, communities, and small towns. It is at this point that we begin to look at the urban and social structure of the Pan-Amazon. It is a place where the presence and dynamics of violent non-state actors can create a phenomenon different from black spots and riskier for state sovereignty in the long run.

Since the 1990s, the Amazon has been an urbanized forest: its population is scattered across small villages, suburban agglomerations, and towns, along the riverbanks, and numerous branches of small side roads, living off forest and river extraction or small-scale agriculture (Becker, 2004). Populations cannot hide when criminals seek these territories for illicit activities. They lack state protection and economic alternatives.

Amazonian countries, especially Brazil, face risks due to the control of territories by violent non-state actors. With an aggravating factor: unlike what happens in black spots, the states will be restricted to islands of governability and relative sovereignty in larger cities and some medium-sized cities. Most of the territory will be subject daily to governance, where part of the economy and a set of laws imposed by violent non-state actors will be in force more effectively than the laws determined by the state. The scope and intensity of this process will vary according to each country or border region. To begin considering solutions, it is necessary to look at the problem as regional, and not just as a local problem.

5. Origin, route and destination: the obvious importance of looking beyond the location

We need to think about origins, routes and destinations, under an economic logic that does not seek to ensure that crime does not pay, but rather that business does not pay.

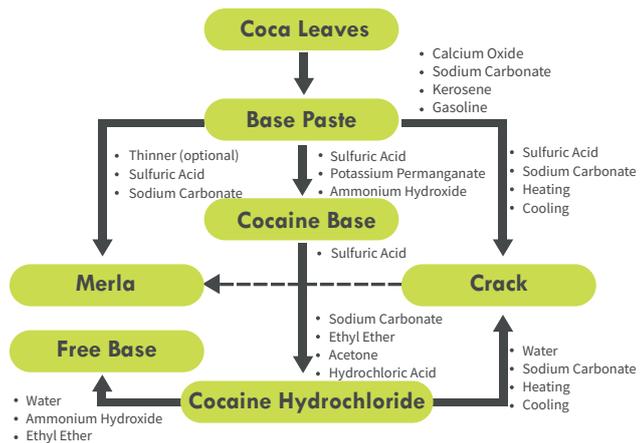
Drug trafficking is a problem that transcends local or national solutions, requiring an approach that considers its complex chain of production, distribution and consumption, which involves multiple countries and globalized demands. We need to think about origins, routes and destinations, under an economic logic that does not seek to ensure that crime does not pay, but rather that business does not pay.

Thinking exclusively about the issue of cocaine, its production chain can induce the establishment of other illicit activities and the use of licit activities, creating a gray area around it. Coca planting, the initial stages of its processing, and then refining are at the origins of this production chain, which, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, is concentrated in three Amazonian countries: Bolivia, Colombia and Peru (UNODC, 2023a).

Studies on the illicit drug economy address how the groups that control the planting territories in these countries seek to regulate production, provide inputs, organize purchases, transportation, security, and even offer loans to farmers. They act as a regulatory agent, who even imposes environmental and labor standards, aiming to create an orderly environment, where they seek to legitimize the monopoly of violence and control of the area (Thomson, Meehan and Goodhand, 2024; Millán-Quijano, 2020; Zapata, 2020; Botía, 2017).

In recent years, there has been an increase in coca planting areas and an increase in cocaine production (UNODC, 2023c). Like any agricultural activity, coca planting requires inputs and human resources. The process of refining coca leaves to obtain cocaine itself requires a series of chemicals (figure 2).

Figure 2. Inputs Required for the Processing of Cocaine (and Derivatives) by Step



Source: Adapted from Vargas (2001).

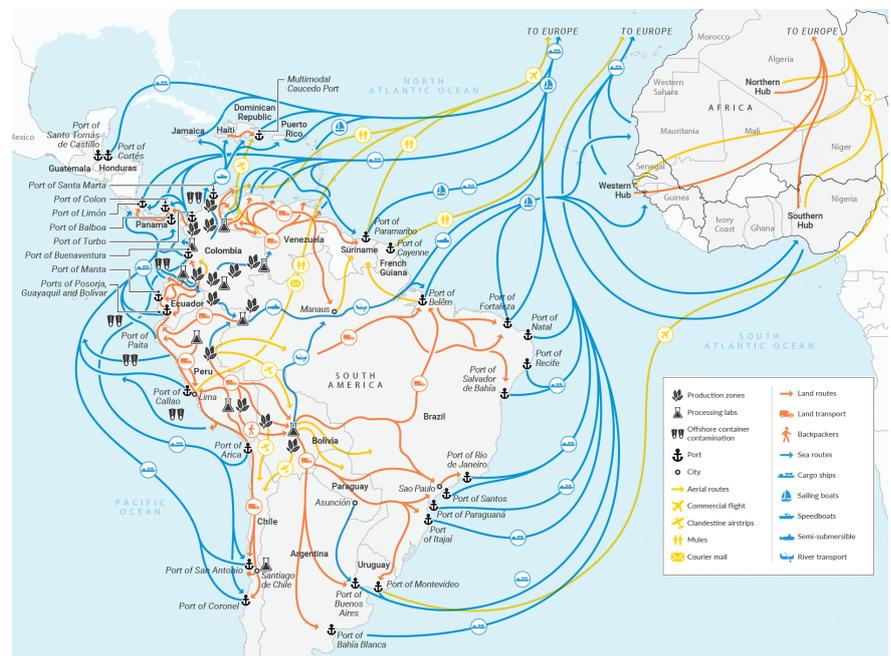
Once processed, the coca base paste or finished cocaine needs to be transported to consumer markets. Drug transportation involves silent and violent activities, from co-opting state agents to homicides of perceived threats. Another point worth clarifying is that such routes are generally multimodal and fractional, requiring the establishment of a network of trusted people, which is as important as the physical locations themselves (Pinho, Rodrigues and Zambon, 2023).

It is necessary to identify the logistical bottlenecks of drug trafficking routes and related crimes, such as environmental crimes. Which regions have a lower density of roads, waterways, or airstrips, where the installation of control bases (land and river), along with the rational destruction of the airstrip, can actually strangle the logistics chain of crime? Therefore, it is necessary to be more efficient, causing greater disruption or making those routes unusable for a longer time, until these actors can establish new ones. The emergence of new routes is inevitable, so this requires evidence-based analysis methods, understanding the interconnected dynamics between origins and destinations, to ensure the flexibility needed for continuous reassessment.

Fragmentation allows operators to adjust their routes quickly in the face of setbacks or the presence of security forces, using everything from small airstrips to large ports. Since the 1990s, Mexican cartels have practiced organizing activities in cells, a common strategy in transnational organized crime.

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Figure 3. Cocaine trafficking routes to Europe



Source: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2021, p.3).

At the other end of the line are the destinations, determined by local or international demand. The latest UNODC report estimates that 22 million adults use cocaine, representing about 0.4% of the global population (UNODC, 2023a). In the United States and some European countries, cocaine use has been framed as a public health problem for decades (Adams and Durell, 1984).

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The North American and European markets are the major destinations, followed by Brazil. There is local consumption of cocaine in South America. However, a substantial difference between the South American and foreign markets is the value of cocaine and, consequently, the profit that can be obtained from its commercialization. According to a study by the Colombian National Police, in 2020, the average price per kilo of cocaine hydrochloride in Colombia was around US\$ 1,389.00. In Brazil, the value has already risen to around US\$ 3,000.00. The jump occurs when the drug arrives abroad. In the United States, the value per kilo reached US\$ 32,000.00. In Europe, prices are even higher. In Portugal and Spain, two countries that serve as entry points for the drug, the price per kilo was estimated at over US\$ 39,000.00. In countries with greater purchasing power and demand, the value rises: England, US\$ 40,600.00; Italy and Germany, US\$ 42,900.00; Croatia and Austria, above US\$ 45,000.00 (Colombia/National Police, 2020). In addition to these traditional markets, cocaine trafficking has expanded to Africa and Asia. The latter includes the most populous continent and some of the largest economies in the world, such as India, China, Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia, as well as

Australia, in Oceania. As long as demand is not reduced, the rest of the cultivation, production and distribution chain will continue to look for ways to supply the market.

6. Final remarks

By the nature of their institution, states are destined to live as long as the human race or natural law, or as long as justice itself, which gives them life. Thus, when they are dissolved, not by external violence, but by internal disorder, what lacks is not men, as matter, but rather men as molders and organizers of the state.

Thomas Hobbes, [1651] 2012. p.225

With the resurgence of interstate wars in Europe and possible conflicts in Asia, the threat to national sovereignty is real. However, in this logic, we run the risk of limiting ourselves to looking at national sovereignty only in these terms, where the enemy is an external agent, thus losing the opportunity to see internal weaknesses before it is too late or too costly to recover sovereignty.

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Brazil can offer the stage, but it cannot lead alone in the elaboration of effective strategies against the threat posed by the continuous loss of state control over different regions of the country to transnational organized crime. The consensus that this type of actor represents a threat to the state already exists for other Amazonian countries. While the rigidity and expediency of this conviction may have more or less mild nuances in some countries, it is something taken for granted in others.

Solutions for the Amazon must involve all sides of the border and different expressions of national power. Tactical responses need to be coordinated and cross-functional, but without a lasting political and strategic commitment, repression and regional development initiatives will have little effectiveness.

Historically, military presence has been crucial for the Amazon. Today, it is necessary to strengthen the state's presence at the borders, offering security, education, and development alternatives to prevent populations from associating with criminals.

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Darcy Ribeiro, in a documentary about his work 'The Brazilian People' ('O povo brasileiro', in Portuguese), said that it was necessary to invent the Brazil we want. To invent the Brazil we want - safer and more prosperous - we need to join forces with several other South American countries and invent the continent we want. Or at least, to understand what we don't want in our common future as a region. ■

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