Weak States and Transnational Crime – Consequences for Stability

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Transnational organised crime has emerged as a threat not only to law and order generally, but also to stability and security on both the national and global level. Weak states are particularly at risk as they are attractive to criminal networks and lack the capacity to counter these. This continues to be the case in e.g. Latin America and, during the past decade, also in West Africa. This brief provides an explanation of how transnational organised crime constitutes a security threat to weak states, an issue which has potential global repercussions.

Causes

Transnational organised crime was first recognised as a security threat to states during the 1990s. The emergence and evolvement of these criminal groups was enabled by the end of the Cold War through the effects of globalisation on e.g. technology, communication and markets.

Weak states and conflict regions are attractive to organised crime groups, as they can take advantage of the governance void, be it territorial, economic or social, and the lack of law and order, and use this to further their own interests. Weak states often have weak institutions and high levels of corruption, which can be both a symptom and cause of organised criminal activity. The incapability of state institutions allows criminal organisations to operate more or less freely and corruption attracts organised crime, as corrupt institutions are highly susceptible to influence. Finally, weak states are more likely than strong states to contain groups that put family, ethnic or local loyalties before loyalty to the state. This is attractive to criminal groups, as their activities demand high levels of loyalty and trust.

It is characteristic for a weak state to be unable to maintain a functioning economic infrastructure, control its territory, provide jobs, social security etc. This creates opportunities for organised crime to step in and fill the void by providing employment, protection and some kind of stability. Once such groups have established local legitimacy, they are difficult to budge. Affiliation with organised crime can be highly enticing as the returns are several-fold higher than in the legitimate economy, if that alternative even exists.

Manifestations

Transnational criminal organisations can be considered rational actors seeking to maximise profit. The transnational aspect gives increased flexibility when searching for and establishing new markets. It also provides high resilience for criminal groups, as they can easily redeploy over borders and take advantage of incompatibilities in legislation and bureaucratic inertia due to the hurdles state sovereignty creates for international police and judicial cooperation in fighting crime. The dominant organisational pattern for transnational organised crime is *loose networks*. This mode of operation further enhances the flexibility of criminal groups and also acts as insurance against counteraction due to the fact that such efforts seldom reach the leadership of the organisation. Another aspect of the network organisation is that it allows for easy and shifting alliances of convenience between different groups.

If deemed necessary, organised crime does not hesitate to challenge states directly by threatening and assassinating judicial, law enforcement and political officials. In extreme cases, confrontations between criminal groups and national security actors (and among criminal groups) have bordered on armed conflict, but these must be viewed as exceptions. Criminal violence is an increasing global problem, as the 2013 *Human Security Report* identifies: the causalities of organised criminal violence have been increasing since the 1990s, bringing major economic, societal and humanitarian costs.

Consequences

The financial assets of successful criminal organisations enable them to outspend and outmanoeuvre weak states,

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not only financially but also by directly challenging state monopoly on the use of force. Furthermore, the influx of illicit cash flows, which is sometimes greater than the state budget of the affected state, is a destabilising factor in itself, as it may easily tip the balance of power away from the state.

The corruption caused and amplified by organised crime leads to the weakening of state institutions, as officials look the other way or are in cahoots with organised crime and thereby fail to meet their responsibilities. This in turn leads to a decrease in state legitimacy, as the state becomes less able to perform its duties to its citizens. In extreme cases this can lead to the loss of state control and a shift in citizen allegiance away from the state and towards other entities, including criminal organisations. Corruption is not only used to 'grease the wheels', but can also lead to criminal actors obtaining partial control over governments and elections when the corruption involves the highest authorities within a state. The intermingling of organised crime and government is highly destabilising and constitutes a threat to the democratic system.

When organised crime takes the role of provider of income and security, this moves public loyalty further from the state towards that main provider. It also permits the growth of an illicit economy in parallel to that of the state, leading to a loss of tax revenues and public control of assets in the economy. This undermines the prospects for economic development, as no or little money is reinvested in the economy. Furthermore, criminal groups can make significant efforts to deny the state control over territory, thereby securing bases, markets and drug production areas. This is most often done through the use of threats and corruption, but also through gaining local legitimacy and the support of the population and, in extreme cases, outright armed confrontation with the state.

Another important factor is that transnational criminal organisations contribute directly to other security threats. Since large-scale state funding of terrorism and separatism was halted by the ending of the Cold War, many such organisations turned to organised crime, often drug trafficking, as a source of income, either by engaging in it directly or through alliances with criminal groups. Furthermore, since it is often in the interests of criminal groups for a state/region to remain weak and chaotic, criminal organisations may provide support for insurgents, allowing armed conflicts to continue. Organised crime is thereby an enabler of armed conflict, which it does not initiate but allows to continue.

The loss of control and legitimacy caused or amplified by organised crime can lead to partial or total state collapse, something that easily spills over to larger regions and has global consequences, as instability can lead to humanitarian disasters, refugee flows and a need for humanitarian intervention. Transnational organised crime is an often overlooked security threat and attention needs to be paid to the debilitating effects it has on society, especially in weak states. Furthermore, the impact of organised crime needs to be taken into account when planning and implementing relief work, humanitarian interventions and peace support operations, both regarding how organised crime affects these actions and how these actions affect organised crime.

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