

Transnational organized crime: an evolving challenge

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White paper: National Academy SBS Decadal Survey of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

19 May 2017

Transnational organized crime is a growing concern to national security, as illicit networks connect with each other and with resources that extend their capabilities. Drug and human trafficking, trade in counterfeit merchandise, cyber-attacks, financial crimes, and illicit harvesting of natural resources are all occurring across geographic and cultural boundaries. These issues in many instances are connecting terrorists with funding streams, enabling human rights violations, endangering health, and affecting political relationships. Opportunities for participation in transnational organized crime increase as the global movement of ideas, information, merchandise and people grows. This complexification is likely to increase as technology and interconnectivity continues to develop.

Humans are the actors in interconnected, networked, illicit activity. Transnational crime is driven by the people within it, and the context in which they find themselves. People have interests and desires, they form relationships, develop tools to meet goals, and adapt to changes. Tenacity and adaptation are part of the human effort to survive. All these human factors shape the threat environment, and are valuable to understand.

Some important components of human activity have been studied extensively. Theoretical models exist regarding the economic rationality of illicit activities. Psychology and Criminology have researched the traits and conditions associated with offending behavior. Legal literature has addressed moral and judicial aspects. This paper recommends two areas of research that appear to have been addressed much less. One is the relationship development and connectivity at the group level, the second is the perspective of participants at the individual level.

Networks and Relationships

Transnational criminal networks function through webs of relationships and accesses to needed resources. They are opportunistic, agile, and manipulative. They can create favorable conditions for their activities by bribing officials, finding contacts for useful services, or developing dual roles in business or governance. Shelley (2014) describes networks of relationships between criminals, officials, and terrorists. These relationships enable criminal and terrorist acts to occur, including within the US. Chayes (2015) demonstrates the dangers organized illicit relationships pose to security when they are part of patronage networks within governance structures. These dangers can contribute to conflict when the relationships form criminalized power structures (Dziedzic, 2016). Relationships matter, and they change over time. The signs of these connections can be subtle; they can be overlooked. Yet they matter to security interests in the US and around the world. More study of the changes, evolutions, and relationship dynamics of transnational criminal networks would be beneficial to national security interests.

Individual Perspectives

The individual perspectives of participants in transnational crime also have implications for national security. Efforts to limit transnational crime are based on assumptions that the motivations of illicit actors are understood. For example, increases in penalties are anticipated to dissuade violation. Many people are apparently dissuaded, but others are not. Each participant in transnational criminal activities might or might not be aware of the legal penalties of a particular jurisdiction; each participant might or might not believe in a real risk of being caught (see Decker & Townsend Chapman, 2008). Other factors might be at play.

Possibly relevant research has been conducted on conscious and unconscious thought processes. Individuals' underlying (non-conscious) goals and values are important drivers of feelings and behavior (Chartrand & Bargh, 2002). All of a person's life experiences, feelings, reasoning, and hopes come together in making judgments of what to do in any given situation (Beckett & Hager, 2002). These judgments include conscious and un-conscious processes. Research of individual transnational criminal participants' thoughts and feelings, their own perspectives, could be beneficial for developing understanding of their activities. Biographical or narrative studies of the people involved in illicit networks could be quite helpful. National security can benefit from better understanding of the perspectives illicit actors have about their own activities.

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