

TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME
AND THE PACIFIC ISLANDS SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

A CROWDED SPACE

FOREIGN ORGANIZED
CRIME GROUPS IN THE
PACIFIC ISLANDS

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Cover: Chinese suspects in telecom and online fraud cases are brought back to China from Fiji, August 2017. © TPG/Getty Images

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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pacific island countries (PICs) and territories increasingly play host to transnational criminal activities, with direct and indirect implications for Pacific communities and beyond. Ignoring these issues in favour of other diplomatic priorities or economic agendas risks exacerbating local fragility and creating safe havens from which foreign criminals can operate unhindered.

The cocaine, synthetic drugs and heroin trades are what draws organized criminals to the Pacific (for the most part). Traditionally, the Pacific islands have been used as transit points for narcotics originating in Asia and Latin America and destined for high-value consumer markets in Australia and New Zealand. PICs, however, are now also developing their own domestic markets.

In terms of provenance, three groups stand out:

Triads and Asian syndicates: Compared to the other organized crime groups active in the Pacific, Asian syndicates have a wider portfolio of activities, which straddle the licit and illicit. In fact, alongside their engagement in drugs and human trafficking, cyber scams and various financial crimes, some Asian groups, and Chinese triads such as 14K in particular, enjoy connections with senior establishment figures, which they may be able to leverage for political influence.

Central and South American cartels: Mexican and Colombian groups are key actors in the drug trade, especially cocaine and methamphetamines. The Sinaloa cartel in Mexico appears to be the most prominent in the arena, even though it lacks any permanent bases in the Pacific islands. Trafficking methods include the use of planes, yachts, bodily concealment and dropping drugs in the ocean for later retrieval. These groups are also able to rely on North American connections to facilitate illicit flows.

Outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs): OMCGs from Australia and New Zealand are involved in several criminal activities in the region, especially drug trafficking. They have established chapters in the Pacific islands and are able to exploit the presence of criminal deportees there to facilitate the trafficking of narcotics, as well as money laundering, extortion and other illicit activities.

Minor actors: The Pacific has also attracted a diverse range of criminal actors from eastern and south-eastern Europe, the Middle East and other regions. They have been involved in various criminal activities, such as ATM scams and drug shipments. Opportunists from different countries have also collaborated with established criminal groups in the region.

Methodology

There is little to no consolidated information on criminal actors across the Pacific, as this is an understudied area. This is partly the result of the limited number of prosecutions taking place in PICs. Filling this gap is crucial in order to develop a sounder understanding of criminal patterns in the region as well as to build the Global Organized Crime Index.

The information presented in this report is based on more than 100 in-person interviews conducted across the Pacific in 2023 as well as remote interviews with law enforcement, government officials, multilateral organizations, NGOs, journalists and academics. Due to the sensitivity of the issues discussed and the small and close-knit nature of most Pacific communities, the majority of those interviewed for this project have asked to remain anonymous.

In addition to the above, this research has also benefited from the data collection, analytical work and expert consultations that were conducted for the Global Organized Crime Index 2023 in the course of 2022–2023. The Index results show that foreign actors are the most influential type of criminal across the Pacific islands, as illustrated in the figure below, and as such warrant a dedicated study.

Country	Foreign actors	State-embedded actors	Criminal networks	Private sector actors	Mafia-style groups
Tonga	7	5.5	4.5	1.5	1
Solomon Islands	6.5	7	4.5	6.5	1
Papua New Guinea	6.5	8.5	8	6.5	1
Fiji	5.5	3	5	5.5	1
Federated States of Micronesia	5.5	2.5	4.5	1.5	1
Vanuatu	4	3	1.5	1.5	1
Palau	4	2	4	1.5	1
Marshall Islands	3	3	2.5	2	1
Kiribati	3	1.5	4	2	1
Samoa	2.5	2.5	2.5	1	1
Nauru	2.5	3.5	1.5	1	1
Tuvalu	1.5	1.5	1	1.5	1
Average	4.29	3.625	3.625	2.67	1

FIGURE 1 Criminal actors' scores in Pacific island countries.

SOURCE: GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index 2023, <https://ocindex.net>

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
NON-EXISTENT TO LITTLE INFLUENCE			MODERATE INFLUENCE		SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE		SEVERE INFLUENCE		

FIGURE 2 Scoring thresholds.

SOURCE: GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index 2023, <https://ocindex.net>

Lastly, and in addition to a standard review of the existing literature, this report has been informed by open-source intelligence using English and Mandarin sources.



INTRODUCTION

Despite their perceived isolation, PICs and territories are not immune to transnational organized crime. In fact, various well-established organized crime groups are active across the region, many of which are attracted by the prospect of high returns in the drug trade, among other illicit markets. Their activities have intensified over the last few decades (barring a lull during the COVID-19 pandemic) while becoming more diversified and sophisticated.

Despite significant differences in terms of nationalities and 'styles' – from Australian biker gangs to Asian syndicates – analysts have observed 'more and more strange combinations of actors' working together (e.g. joint ventures between Chinese and Middle Eastern groups),¹ adding to the complexity of the Pacific landscape and moving it away from the more traditional dynamic in which criminal actors work in isolation and compete with each other, often along ethnic lines.

This report provides an overview of the most active criminal groups in the Pacific, namely Asian syndicates, Central and South American cartels and OMCGs. Together with the other papers in this series,² it pieces together a truly multi-layered picture that partly reflects the ever more crowded market for *licit* activities in PICs. In fact, the Pacific islands have attracted a growing number of political and commercial partners. The inevitable competition between new entrants and those with long-standing ties has played out in the political, economic and security spheres. The most prominent example has been the growing geopolitical tensions between China and Western countries, with both sides seemingly racing to secure more trade and security agreements and closer diplomatic ties with Pacific leaders than the other, in order to consolidate and expand their areas of political and economic influence. These dynamics have direct and indirect implications for the development and implementation of anti-crime measures and are discussed in more detail in briefs 1 and 4 of this series.

Additionally, and perhaps more concerning, in this competition for influence there is a risk that foreign criminal actors develop hybrid identities that span the criminal, business and political realms. The Palau case presented in the ensuing pages, for example, is a cautionary tale of the vulnerability of PICs to infiltration and foreign influence.

The blurring of the lines between crime, business and politics is even more evident when it comes to certain *legitimate* foreign business operators. Perhaps counterintuitively, in some Pacific islands, foreign companies – rather than criminal groups – are behind most of the illicit activities that take place. As such, fishing, mining and logging companies, as well as a whole host of other businesses, entrepreneurs and investors are the subject of a separate dedicated paper.³



FIGURE 3 Pacific island countries and territories.



TRIADS AND ASIAN SYNDICATES

Whereas the cartels and biker gangs pose serious challenges, their primary (albeit not exclusive) focus on drug trafficking and their usually obvious criminal intent make their treatment slightly more straightforward from an analytical and, one might say, law enforcement perspective. This is certainly the case when compared to the Asian groups that have, in many ways, become the dominant players in the region. Indeed, the 'business portfolio' of Chinese organized crime is more diversified and, often, we are confronted with individuals wearing multiple hats in the criminal and legitimate business worlds, perhaps especially because of their high-level political connections and support. As such, it also becomes impossible to ignore that some of these criminals may have, or promote, agendas that influence the political scene in many Pacific countries. To better illustrate these rather intricate dynamics and networks, after an overview of Asian syndicates' activities, this section will delve into a case study of one of the most notable representatives of this breed of uber-connected criminal actors.

Asian organized crime in the Pacific has been linked to human trafficking, prostitution (including the running of brothels), illegal gambling, cyber scams, money laundering, fraud and drug trafficking.⁴ Examples across the region over the years range from the arrest of a Hong Kong man, alongside five mainland Chinese (and a Montenegrin) for the trafficking of 55 kilograms of cocaine in Papua New Guinea in 2018;⁵ the first ever human trafficking conviction in Tonga, in 2011, which, notably, involved a female Chinese brothel keeper trafficking Chinese women into the kingdom;⁶ the arrest of a Filipino man in Palau for methamphetamine trafficking in 2021;⁷ the 2004 trial of six Hong Kong Chinese for the manufacturing of the synthetic drug in Fiji;⁸ and the deportation of phone and online scammers from Fiji back to China in 2017.⁹

It is, however, the sophisticated operations of Chinese triads that raise the greatest concern. Through interviews in PICs, it was clear that most law enforcement (local and foreign) officials and journalists were convinced of the involvement of the triads in many crimes or suspected it was likely, but due to a lack of investigative resources it was impossible to confirm. The 14K triad is the best known and the only recurring name, while conversations in places such as Palau suggested the presence of one or possibly two other triad groups, as well as a degree of coordination between them, in activities such as drug trafficking, money laundering and online scams.



FIGURE 4 Organized crime in the region shows polycriminality tendencies.

Suspensions of triad involvement in the region are nothing new. One of the earliest incidents hinting at their presence was back in the early 2000s when a number of Chinese men were murdered in Suva, Fiji, in connection with a large amount of money destined to buy shark fins for export to Hong Kong.¹⁰ At present, their main activities appear to include drug trafficking, especially of methamphetamines and their chemical precursors, and the running of digital scams, which involve trafficking Asian nationals who are forced to engage in the scam operations as well as sexual exploitation.¹¹

Mapping the convergence of business, criminal and political connections: the case of ‘Broken Tooth’ in Palau

In 2018, a curious Chinese language article surfaced, reporting on a meeting that October between Wan Kuok-koi (尹國駒), also known as ‘Broken Tooth’, and the then Palauan president Thomas ‘Tommy’ Remengesau Jr. In a tone and register closely matching the official language employed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the report declared that Palau will unconditionally support the establishment of a ‘Hongmen’ special economic zone, before referencing ‘cross-strait reunification’, the Belt and Road Initiative and ‘the rejuvenation of the motherland’. The report also contained images taken at the event.¹²

Born into poverty in Macau in 1955, Wan endured a violent youth before rising to lead the Macau chapter of the 14K triad, the second-largest triad in Hong Kong with an estimated 20 000 members and 30 loosely affiliated subgroups.¹³ He made his fortune in Macau’s corrupt casino industry but his criminal activities eventually caught up with him in 1998 when he was arrested and charged with loan sharking and money laundering for which he would go on to serve 14 years in prison.¹⁴



Wan Kuok-koi (left) meets with then Palauan president, Thomas Remengesau Jr., October 2018. Photo: Tianyu Internet, <https://archive.ph/oEMNo>

Wan appeared to return from prison a changed man, having morphed from well-known gangster into a patriotic businessman. His activities in this period included establishing so-called ‘Hongmen’ groups, alluding to a centuries-old Chinese secret society that has become synonymous with the triads. These included the World Hongmen History and Culture Association in Cambodia, the Hong Kong-based Dongmei Group and the Palau China Hung-Mun Cultural Association.

Later reports suggested that he was in fact still involved in illegal activities.¹⁵ In December 2020, he was sanctioned by the US Treasury for a raft of criminal activity including ‘drug trafficking, illegal gambling, racketeering [and] human trafficking’.¹⁶ The sanctions explicitly mention his activities in Palau. Shortly afterwards, he was sought by Malaysian authorities for fraud.¹⁷ The vice president of Wan’s Hongmen association in Malaysia, Nicky Liow Soon Hee (廖顺喜) also became a target for law enforcement. Liow was implicated in ‘a string of e-commerce apps and cryptocurrency trading platforms under the name “Yunbao”, but he was eventually arrested in April 2021, along with two of his brothers, for links to a Macau criminal syndicate and running a call centre-based investment scam operation’.¹⁸

At the same time the consequences of various criminal enterprises closed in on Wan, he received a special invitation from Beijing. Though Wan’s ‘Hongmen’ activity appears to chime with some of the objectives of the Chinese state, there is little previous conclusive evidence of a direct link between the two. However, Wan received an invitation from the Hailian Working Committee (海联工委) to accept a special award for his ‘patriotic’ work as a businessman. The networks associated with Hailian suggest proximity to the Chinese party-state itself.

Hailian, China and the Philippines

Hailian is led by Zheng Shuai (郑帅), who has been pictured with Wan as well as a range of relatively senior Chinese party-state officials, including from the realms of military and defence. Hailian also hosts representatives from various groups that are part of the united front system, a central element of the CCP’s efforts to manage the interface between Party and non-Party elements, including by influencing foreign actors and institutions.¹⁹ Indeed, the report on Wan’s award stated that the group sits within China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs.²⁰

In terms of Hailian's positioning, it was reported that attendees at the Philippines meeting were urged to 'contribute to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. At that meeting, Zheng Shuai was seen sitting next to his official consultant at Hailian, Lu Bin (吕彬).²¹ Lu Bin is a former officer of the People's Liberation Army National Defence University.²² Such a connection positions the group firmly within the party-state's official realm.

Where two worlds meet

In the opaque landscape that includes overseas criminality and Chinese officialdom, there is rarely any explicit evidence linking the two. For those familiar with China's political landscape, Wan's award constitutes an important piece of evidence where official and criminal world appear to intersect. The award and networks of those on each side should be considered both in terms of the wider picture and the direct role Wan is playing in Palau. Wan accepted the award in person in Beijing from a group that appears to be deeply enmeshed in China's official realm and its engagement overseas. Hailian's decision to make the award suggests indifference towards Wan's widely reported criminality and activity in the region and beyond.

Given Wan's ongoing criminality and in light of these apparent links to China's official realm, his activity in Palau takes on a different hue. Images from the report on the dinner attended by Wan and then president Remengesau show that the Palauan postmaster general, Timothy Sinsak, was also present. A report by investigative journalists in 2022 revealed that both Sinsak and the state governor of Airai, Tmewang Rengulbai, became directors of Wan's Hongmen association when it was first registered in 2019.²³ When we explore the formation of links between Wan and Palau's political elite further, the importance of a pre-existing Chinese network in Palau becomes evident.

Tian Hang and Wang Guodan, two Chinese businesspeople based in the country, reportedly played a significant role in smoothing Wan's access to Palauan elites. Tian is a hotelier who boasts an extensive network in the nation's top political circles, with professional connections to the minister for culture, tourism and development, Ngirai Tmetuchl, and Palau's president from 2009 to 2013, Johnson Toribiong.²⁴ Tian heads the Palau Overseas Chinese Federation and it was his deputy at that organization, Wang Guodan, who introduced Wan to Remengesau.²⁵ The 2022 investigative report mentions that both Tian and Wang were guests at an event in Beijing in 2019 commemorating 70 years of CCP rule. Invitation to such events again ties the network back to the party-state's official realm. Another attendee of the same event, for example, was Christine Lee, who would eventually be identified by the British security services as someone engaged in 'political interference activities' for the Chinese state.²⁶ Lee has denied these accusations.

Another member of the Chinese diaspora, Zhang Bauluo, appears to have played a role in Wan's positioning in Palau, though Zhang's links back to Beijing are far less clear than Tian and Wang's, if such a connection exists. While Zhang and Wan have appeared together at public events, their precise relationship remains uncertain. On the Palauan side, Zhang's links run deep. The businessman boasts a strong connection to Remengesau, who made Zhang a 'Representative for the Republic of Palau'.²⁷ Zhang's company reportedly supplied 125 mobile phones that were handed out as gifts at campaign events during Remengesau's successful 2016 re-election bid.²⁸ Meanwhile, a Chinese-language report from Singapore suggests these links extend to the familial, with the former president having become godfather to Zhang's son.²⁹

While some details around the Chinese network that facilitated Wan's entry into Palau remain unknown, their overarching role in opening doors for him is well-evidenced and appears to be a

central feature of his engagement of the country. Considered in the context of Wan's own links to the party-state via Hailian and his acknowledged criminal ties, this episode hints at the lesser understood features of the wider landscape, particularly where the political and criminal intersect.

This case study is a useful illustration of the ways in which the lines that separate criminal, business and political interests can become blurred. It also underscores the complexity of identities and relationships and, as a result, the challenge of pursuing actors who engage in illicit activities while boasting networks that include politically linked actors. Whereas Broken Tooth has become the poster boy for these dynamics in Palau, the Pacific islands are all arguably vulnerable, to varying degrees, to similar infiltration at the hands of such highly connected criminal-business-political actors.



CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICAN CARTELS

The Pacific is an established thoroughfare, as well as an underwater and terrestrial storage area, for drugs trafficked from producers in Asia and the Americas to the lucrative consumer markets of Australia and New Zealand.³⁰ Since the mid-2010s, Australian authorities have seized ever higher volumes of cocaine transiting through the Pacific from the South American coast. Despite the global slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, consumption reached record highs in 2020, indicating the continued influx of narcotics.³¹ Furthermore, islands such as Tonga – long seen solely as transit points – are developing local consumer markets with all the attendant public health implications in the absence of rehabilitation facilities.³²

As alluded to, many different actors are involved in this trade and Latin American cartels are certainly among those who have exploited the surge in demand since the 2010s. According to interviews with law enforcement, the presence of Mexican cartels in the Pacific has grown over the past decade to cater to the demand for cocaine and methamphetamines in Australia. Smuggling methods used by the cartels include private and commercial planes, yachts, bodily concealment and commercial planes, as well as dropping drugs in the ocean for later recovery using GPS trackers. They also appear to prefer sending ‘their own people’ out to oversee the setting up of operations (rather than permanently relocating)³³ to places such as Fiji, Samoa and Tonga.³⁴ The Sinaloa cartel is also believed to use *pangas* (motorized dinghies) to traffic cocaine to the Cook Islands, and then onwards to Fiji.³⁵ On occasion, they will not yet have identified buyers in Australia when the drugs are already en route.³⁶

Everyone with whom the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has discussed this issue mentioned Sinaloa as the most active cartel. However, there appeared to be a consensus that at least two other Mexican groups were involved in the Pacific, although it is often difficult to differentiate them clearly. Indeed, some reports suggested the involvement of the Los Zetas cartel in Fiji in around 2015–2016.³⁷



Methamphetamine seized in Nadi, Fiji, January 2024. The Pacific islands act as transit and storage hubs for drugs en route to Australia and New Zealand. © Fiji Police Force

What was clear was that multiple actors were involved along the supply route, including in North America. The Canadian postal service was flagged as being exploited for drugs headed for the Pacific, especially methamphetamine precursors.³⁸ This should not be a surprise given the emergence of domestic labs in the likes of Fiji, the first of which was discovered in 2004.³⁹

Lastly, Colombians have also developed an interest in the Pacific. Connections first emerged in 2011 when the former speaker of the Tongan parliament was allegedly found to have been bribed to sponsor the entry of drug boss Obeil Antonio Zuluaga Gómez. Gómez aimed to establish a transit hub in the kingdom for Colombian cocaine destined for Australia, according to the Australian Federal Police.⁴⁰ Since then, cocaine packages have washed up on Tongan shores on a number of occasions, including in 2021 when a 14-kilogram package, believed to be from Colombia, was recovered in Vava'u.⁴¹



OUTLAW MOTORCYCLE GANGS

OMCGs from Australia and New Zealand are involved in several criminal activities in the region and are also key actors in the drug trade. To better coordinate the trade, some OMCGs have established chapters in Pacific islands containing a mix of nationalities in their ranks. Some of the most notorious are the Fiji branch of the Rebels (where they are the main OMCG and have two chapters) and the Comancheros, both hailing from Australia, and New Zealand's Head Hunters, who are also present in the Cook Islands. The infamous Hells Angels also transit through Fiji in the course of their illicit activities.⁴² According to law enforcement in Auckland, New Zealand's Mongrel Mobs, who are linked to drugs and violent crime, also have footholds in Fiji, Hawaii and Solomon Islands.⁴³ There is also speculation that some OMCG members might be present in Vanuatu.⁴⁴

As mentioned, foreign groups of all stripes in the Pacific tend to collaborate, often establishing what, at the outset, might look like unlikely partnerships. One example involves Joshua Aziz Rahman, a New Zealand-based Canadian national of Fijian origin who was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment in Suva for the possession of nearly 40 kilograms of cocaine in 2021. Notably, his



Australian and New Zealand outlaw motorcycle gangs are key players in the Pacific island's criminal landscape. © Fairfax Media via Getty Images

father was serving a 20-year sentence in New Zealand for trafficking methamphetamines from Mexico to New Zealand for the Comancheros.⁴⁵ According to local sources in Fiji, they were both linked to the Sinaloa cartel.⁴⁶

There have also been cases involving other (non-biker) gangs. Most notably, members of New Zealand's King Cobra gang were arrested in 2021 for trafficking methamphetamines through Tonga, Malaysia and the US into Auckland's airport and seaports.⁴⁷

Criminal deportees

OMCGs overlap with another crucial social and security issue in the Pacific – criminal deportees. The latter are usually males, under the age of 35, from island countries and territories who have been deported from Australia, New Zealand or the US to their countries of origin, primarily Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia. Many have been arrested and served time (four years on average) for drug offences and gang membership, including involvement with OMCGs (albeit not all deportees are/have been OMCG members). Deportation policies are a contentious and delicate issue, and the target of significant criticism because of the impact on receiving countries. While deportees are not technically *foreign* criminals, it has been estimated that, on average, these men have spent more than 12 years outside their countries of origin, with many having left as children.⁴⁸ As a result, there are significant barriers to integration. This, together with the lack of support available post-deportation, increases the likelihood of deportees falling back into a life of crime, with drug trafficking being the most common criminal activity in which they are involved. What is more, deportees can now benefit from the criminal contacts and know-how acquired abroad.

In conversations with the GI-TOC, Fijian law enforcement suggested that between two and three deportees were arriving each month, including young Fijian males from Australia and New Zealand, and Indo-Fijian males from the US. Some of these have been members of the Hells Angels and the Comancheros. A common practice involves OMCG representatives setting up legitimate businesses with local partners in Fiji, for example importing electrical goods from the US and Canada, while also dabbling in cocaine and methamphetamine smuggling on the side, and trying to 'recruit' sympathetic Immigration and Customs officers. As of April 2023, there were fewer than a dozen of these active cases.⁴⁹ Interestingly, other officials in Fiji indicated that deportees from other countries, namely Tonga and Samoa, regularly tried to make their way into Fiji. As such, executing removals and refusing entry have become routine activities for local authorities.



MINOR ACTORS

Whereas the types and nationalities of criminals discussed above might be the most prevalent across PICs and territories, the Pacific region has also attracted a wider range of criminal actors from different parts of the world.

In the mid-2010s there were several cases involving Eastern and south-eastern European criminals who had travelled to Fiji to run ATM scams, including Bulgarian⁵⁰ and Cypriot⁵¹ nationals. At around the same time, Tonga also experienced similar issues. Although the nationalities of the scammers were not known, bank customers who had had their account details stolen found fraudulent transactions from Indonesia, France, the US, Greece and the Dominican Republic.⁵² According to New Zealand law enforcement, following a lull during the COVID-19 pandemic, European ATM fraudsters have now returned to the Pacific, especially from Bulgaria and Romania, targeting ATMs within tourist hotels.⁵³

Actors based in Eastern Europe and the Middle East are also linked to drug shipments transiting through the Pacific en route to Australia, but it is likely they would never actually set foot in PICs themselves.⁵⁴ Additionally, given that Mexican cartels have been sourcing some drugs precursors from the Middle East, it is easy to assume interactions with local criminal entities.⁵⁵ Given the fact that most of the senior figures in the Australian OMCG world live abroad in places such as Dubai, Turkey, Cyprus and Thailand, it is also plausible that they might facilitate such transnational connections along the narcotics supply chain.⁵⁶

Lastly, opportunists from various countries have been implicated in criminal activities, working in conjunction with established criminal groups. A grisly window into these kinds of partnerships was provided in 2012 when the body of a Slovakian national was discovered on a yacht in Tongan waters that carried cocaine from Ecuador.⁵⁷ A former Australian horse trainer is currently serving a 23-year sentence in Fiji for the smuggling of nearly 13 kilograms of powdered cocaine and tablets of cocaine and methamphetamines (worth more than AU\$20 million, approximately US\$14 million), and for carrying two illegal guns with ammunition in 2018. His luxury yacht had sailed from Florida via Colombia, Panama and French Polynesia on its way to Australia's Gold Coast. A search by Fijian customs at Denarau port resulted in his and his wife's arrest.⁵⁸ Since then, the practice appears to have grown; in 2022, a Parisian court opened the trial of 11 individuals from Spain, Italy, France, Portugal and Panama who had been caught trafficking over a tonne of cocaine through French Polynesia while working for a Colombian cartel.⁵⁹ The defendants, on board of three yachts, had sailed from Panama to Australia.⁶⁰



CONCLUSIONS

The variety of foreign criminal actors now active in the Pacific islands suggests that the region has graduated from a mere transit zone for illicit flows to a nexus of transnational criminal activities involving groups from different corners of the world. In many cases it has been possible to observe the evolution from illicit business transactions to the formation of ‘criminal ecosystems’ – in which a range of services are available to facilitate end-to-end criminality. The ecosystem model is more resilient to law enforcement action compared to the transactional model.

The intensity and sophistication of these actors is, unfortunately, only seldom counterbalanced by effective law enforcement. A limited capacity to respond is compounded by other factors. First is the topography of the region, which is characterized by a myriad of islands and vast exclusive economic zones – both of which are notoriously challenging for police. Second, the blending of political, diplomatic and economic competition playing out in the region might result in anti-crime efforts being deprioritized. This is particularly the case when such efforts may undermine relationships with certain domestic partners, for example in instances involving state-embedded criminal actors.

Another crucial aspect of foreign criminal involvement is the detrimental impact on island populations. The direct repercussions include the establishment of domestic drug consumption markets and islanders becoming the targets of organized crime either as victims or possible recruits (especially given the high levels of youth unemployment throughout the region). The more indirect impact, however, is arguably the most pernicious. By fuelling corruption, and by virtue of political support at the highest level in some cases, criminal actors undermine good governance and exacerbate the fragility of certain Pacific institutions, thereby risking a regional spiral into criminality. As such, even though organized crime trends in the Pacific islands might not be at the forefront of international attention, ignoring these challenges risks severe local consequences as well as the creation of safe havens from which criminal actors can orchestrate operations targeting victims around the world.

Marshall Islands police prepare cocaine washed up on their shores for destruction, December 2020.

© Giff Johnson/AFP via Getty Images





ANNEX

Definitions of criminal actors

The GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index adopts the following definitions of criminal actors:

Foreign actors	Refers to state and/or non-state criminal actors operating outside their home country. This can include not just foreign nationals, but also various diaspora groups that have created roots in the country over multiple generations.
State-embedded actors	Refers to criminal actors that are embedded in, and act from within, the state's apparatus.
Criminal networks	Refers to a loose network of criminal associates engaging in criminal activities. This also includes relatively small groups that do not control territory and are not widely known by a name or with a known leader. Criminal networks are involved in illicit trafficking of commodities but do not have territorial control or any of the other defining features of mafia-style groups. In essence, criminal networks and entrepreneurs are defined by their failure to meet the defining characteristics of mafia-style groups.
Private-sector actors	Refers to profit-seeking individuals and/or entities who own, manage and control a segment of the legal economy, free from state ownership or control, who collaborate and/or cooperate with criminal actors (either as the driving force, wilfully, through coercion or through neglect). This includes, but is not limited to, the laundering of illicit proceeds, acting as informants, and unethical legal representation.
Mafia-style groups	Refers to clearly defined, organized criminal groups. This typology also includes militia and guerrilla groups that are primarily funded by illicit activities. There are four defining features of a mafia-style group: a known name, a defined leadership, territorial control and identifiable membership.



NOTES

- 1 Interview with senior government analyst, Australia, April 2023.
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