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Criminal Diplomacy Without Sovereignty: The Afro-Eurasia Criminal Networks and the Implications on International Security

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ABSTRACT

International relations scholarship remains strongly oriented towards states, even though transnational criminal organisations increasingly shape cross-border security, political economies, and forms of governance. This article argues that transnational criminal groups develop cooperation strategies that are functionally analogous to interstate relations. They bargain, exchange information, allocate jurisdictional responsibilities, outsource activities, signal credibility, manage conflict, and exploit territorial and legal differences. The analogy is strategic and relational rather than legal: criminal groups possess neither sovereign equality nor legitimate authority. The argument is developed through a structured comparative synthesis of recent peer-reviewed research on Nigerian confraternities and cyber-fraud networks, East African–Southeast Asian wildlife-trafficking networks, Chinese organised crime, European drug-market cooperation, and the Sinaloa cartel. The evidence indicates that criminal cooperation is not normally a permanent alliance between unitary organisations. It is selective, task-specific, socially embedded, geographically clustered, and often mediated by brokers, diasporic networks, legitimate businesses, and corrupt officials. Digital finance can increase the speed and reach of these relationships, but cryptocurrency is an enabling infrastructure rather than a sufficient explanation for transnational corruption. The article contributes to international relations theory, criminal governance research, and international policing by proposing the concept of criminal diplomacy. It recommends relational network analysis, transgovernmental investigative teams, financial-intelligence cooperation, anti-corruption safeguards and rights-sensitive policing that targets brokers and infrastructures rather than relying exclusively on "kingpin" arrests.

Keywords: transnational organised crime; criminal diplomacy; criminal governance; Afro-Eurasia; Asian organised crime; cartels; corruption; cryptocurrency.

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1. Background

The international system is commonly analysed through states, formal institutions, and legally recognised diplomatic relations. Yet many of the most consequential cross-border interactions are conducted by actors that do not possess territory, sovereignty, or public legitimacy. Organised-crime groups move people, commodities, money, and information across jurisdictions; form alliances with other illicit groups; and use legitimate firms, ports, online platforms, and public officials to stabilise their operations. Peaceful borders can therefore coexist with intensive illicit flows, while regional integration may unintentionally reduce the costs of criminal mobility (Kacowicz, Lacovsky, and Wajner, 2020). Recent criminological research similarly argues that organised crime is simultaneously physical, virtual, and hybrid, and that its geography is socially and politically embedded rather than merely spatial (Cockbain, Estévez-Soto, and Allum, 2025).

A growing body of research illustrates these dynamics across Afro-Eurasia. Studies of Nigerian confraternities and cyber-fraud networks describe flexible organisations operating through Western European hubs, money-mule systems and online relationships (Button et al., 2025; Lusthaus et al., 2025). Research on wildlife trafficking identifies structured flows of goods, information, and money between East Africa and Southeast Asia (Costa, 2022). Work on Chinese organised crime in the Golden Triangle shows diversification into wildlife trafficking and the outsourcing of tasks to local opportunistic groups (van Uhm and Wong, 2021). Network studies of Merseyside organised crime and the Sinaloa cartel further demonstrate that cooperation is patterned by trust, centrality, social embeddedness, and market-specific incentives (Campana and Giovannetti, 2025; Calderoni, Pereda, and Décary-Hétu, 2026).

This article brings this literature into conversation with international relations theory. Its central claim is that transnational criminal groups practise a form of *criminal diplomacy*: they develop recurrent, strategic relationships for bargaining, brokerage, division of labour, conflict management, protection, and jurisdictional arbitrage. These practices resemble interstate relations at the level of strategy and interaction, but not at the level of law, legitimacy, or sovereignty. The article, therefore, does not claim that criminal organisations are equivalent to states, nor that every criminal relationship constitutes a stable alliance. Instead, it asks what international-relations concepts reveal when applied to the relational practices of illicit actors, and what their limits are.

The literature for this article was obtained through targeted searches of publisher platforms and DOI records, including SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, Oxford Academic, Cambridge Core, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and Taylor & Francis. Search terms combined “transnational organised crime”, “criminal networks”, “Nigerian confraternities”, “triads”, “cartels”, “cooperation”, “governance”, “corruption”, “policing”, and “cryptocurrency”, with geographic terms for Africa, Europe, and Asia. The search prioritised articles published between 2020 and 2026 in established peer-reviewed journals.

The inclusion criteria were substantive relevance to cross-border criminal relationships, criminal governance, international security, or policing; publication within the six-year period; and a clearly identifiable empirical or theoretical contribution. The final corpus combines social-network analysis, network ethnography, court-record analysis, police files, interviews, comparative case studies, and systematic review evidence. It is therefore a structured narrative synthesis rather than a statistical meta-analysis. The heterogeneity of the evidence is treated as analytically useful, while its limitations, including English-language bias, reliance on criminal-justice records, uneven geographical coverage, and the risk of reproducing official categories, are made explicit.

2. Methodology: claim, object, and analytical strategy

2.1 Research design

The article uses a theory-building comparative review. It does not present a new dataset or claim to estimate the prevalence of criminal cooperation globally. Instead, it compares mechanisms across cases that vary in geography, market, and organisational form. The purpose is to identify recurring relational processes and assess whether the language of interstate relations helps explain them.

2.2 Claim and object of analysis

Transnational criminal groups develop cooperation strategies functionally analogous to interstate relations: they bargain, signal, broker, outsource, exchange information, manage conflict, and exploit jurisdictional differences. The similarity is strategic and relational, not legal, normative, or institutional. The object is the cross-border relationship or tie, not the criminal organisation treated as a unitary actor. The relevant ties include cooperation between criminal groups, brokers linking jurisdictions, relationships with legitimate businesses, contacts with corrupt officials, and connections to financial or digital intermediaries. This relational focus avoids assuming that labels such as "cartel", "triad," or "mafia" describe internally unified organisations.

The review asks four questions: 1) How are cross-border criminal ties created and maintained? 2) Which mechanisms make cooperation durable or fragile? 3) How do territory, migration, markets, and state institutions shape these relationships?; 4) What forms of international policing follow from a relational rather than purely organisational view?

2.3 Evidence extraction

Each article was coded for various factors, including geographical corridor, criminal market, organizational form, type of cooperation, brokers' roles, evidence of state or corruption interfaces, digital technology usage, and policing implications. The studies employed diverse methods: Costa used social-network analysis; Van Uhm and Wong mixed ethnographic fieldwork with 56 Chinese court judgments; Button conducted 44 interviews across Nigeria, Ghana, India, and the UK; Lusthaus analyzed UK investigations and DOJ cases; Campana and Giovannetti reviewed 5,239 police reports on 134 organized-crime groups in Merseyside; and Calderoni reconstructed a network from Sinaloa cartel trial transcripts. While these methods allow triangulation, caution is advised as police records capture only detected relationships, not the complete scope of cooperation.

2.4 Scope

The article makes a bounded analogy. It does not suggest that criminal groups have diplomatic immunity, stable sovereignty or a public mandate. It also avoids treating "African", "Asian" or "diaspora" communities as criminal categories. Labels such as "triad" may conceal substantial variation between hierarchical organisations, entrepreneurial networks, brokers and loosely connected affiliates. Research on Africa has warned against importing externally produced categories that obscure local political economies and livelihoods (Klantschnig et al., 2023). The evidence is also weighted towards cases that generated investigations, prosecutions or accessible fieldwork. Accordingly, the argument concerns observable cooperation mechanisms, not all forms of illicit interaction.

3. Conceptual framework: criminal diplomacy

3.1 From state diplomacy to relational strategy

Diplomacy is not simply the activity of foreign ministries. In analytical terms, it involves representation, bargaining, signalling, information exchange, coalition-building and the management of conflict under conditions of uncertainty. These practices can be reproduced by non-state actors, even when their objectives are illicit. The concept of criminal diplomacy identifies this functional similarity without conferring state-like legitimacy.

Criminal diplomacy has five core dimensions. First, brokerage connects otherwise separate jurisdictions, markets, and social groups. A broker may introduce suppliers to buyers, arrange transport, recruit money mules, or mediate disputes. Brokerage creates power because it controls access to information and opportunity. Secondly, selective alliance-building allows groups to share risks and capabilities without merging. Cooperation may concern one shipment, one fraud campaign, one money-laundering channel, or one territorial problem. The relationship can end when the task is completed. Thirdly, jurisdictional arbitrage exploits differences between legal systems, policing capacities, migration regimes, and financial regulations. Organisations distribute activities across places where particular tasks are cheapest, safest, or least visible. Fourthly, reputation and signalling help actors decide whom to trust. Violence, past performance, social ties, online status, and demonstrated access to protection can all communicate credibility. These signals are imperfect because criminal actors cannot rely on courts or formal contract enforcement. Fifthly, governance concerns the production of order within illicit markets. Groups establish rules over prices, territory, access, debt, discipline, and dispute resolution. Such rules may be enforced through violence, social obligation, corruption, or control over legitimate institutions. The analogy can be expressed as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Interstate practice and criminal analogue

Interstate practice	Criminal analogue	Evidence in the reviewed literature	Important boundary
Representation and diplomacy	Brokers, lieutenants and cross-border intermediaries	Costa; Lusthaus et al.	Informal, concealed and often coercive
Alliance and coalition	Task-specific cooperation between groups	Campana and Giovannetti	Usually selective and reversible
Jurisdictional arbitrage	Migration hubs, borderlands and offshore financial channels	Lusthaus et al.; van Uhm and Wong	No sovereign equality or lawful jurisdiction
Governance and revenue collection	Market rules, protection, debt enforcement and political access	Pereda and Décary-Hétu; Kupatadze	Authority is private and frequently violent
Signalling and deterrence	Reputation, trust, violence and demonstrated capability	Calderoni et al.; Campana and Giovannetti	No reliable public adjudicator

3.2 Criminal governance and the state–crime nexus

The concept also connects international relations to criminal-governance scholarship. Criminal governance is not limited to territorial domination. It can include control over supply chains, migration routes, digital infrastructures, financial channels, and access to public officials. Pereda and Décary-Hétu's study of the Sinaloa cartel identifies judicial, financial, political, and regulatory forms of governance, showing that organisational resilience depends on more than coercion (Pereda and Décary-Hétu, 2024).

The state–crime boundary is similarly porous. Kupatadze argues that corruption and organised crime can form composite arrangements in which state representatives supervise, organise, or manage criminal activity, rather than merely accepting bribes from an autonomous underworld (Kupatadze, 2023). This is important for international security because the relevant adversary may not be a clearly separable criminal organisation. It may be a relationship joining private actors, public officials, firms, and transnational intermediaries. The analogy to interstate relations is therefore strongest when examining practices of coordination and weakest when examining legal status. Criminal actors can imitate bargaining and diplomacy while lacking the institutional conditions that make interstate agreements comparatively durable. Their agreements depend on trust, reputation, kinship, coercion, and repeated exchange rather than on recognised law.

4. Comparative findings: Africa, Europe and Asia

4.1 Africa–Europe: Nigerian confraternities and cyber-fraud networks

Recent studies of Nigerian criminal networks demonstrate how migration, digital communication, and physical presence interact. Button and colleagues' study of Nigerian confraternities, including Black Axe, draws on 44 interviews conducted with law-enforcement personnel, scam-fighters, consultants, non-governmental organisations, and offenders in Nigeria, Ghana, India, and the United Kingdom. The study describes networks operating across Africa, Europe, and North America in fraud and money laundering, with organisational roles distributed across "zones", regional contacts, and specialist participants (Button et al., 2025).

The important point is not the existence of a single command hierarchy. Rather, cooperation is produced through a combination of social identity, regional organisation, online communication, and access to trusted intermediaries. The network can maintain common practices across countries while leaving considerable autonomy to local actors. This resembles a loose diplomatic system: local representatives retain discretion, but remain connected to a wider organisational identity and common repertoire.

Lusthaus and colleagues reach a similar conclusion through two UK-based case studies of Nigerian cybercrime networks. Their evidence combines police and investigator interviews, UK legal files, open-source material and 15 United States Department of Justice investigations from 2017–2021. The cases show senior coordinators in Nigeria working through lieutenants in London, money mules and connections to Eastern European cybercrime forums (Lusthaus et al., 2025). The networks are cyber-enabled but not purely virtual: migration, local residence, businesses and face-to-face relationships create the trust and infrastructure required for online fraud.

This pattern illustrates three mechanisms of criminal diplomacy. First, representation is delegated to actors who possess local knowledge and access. Secondly, jurisdictional arbitrage separates recruitment, victim targeting, payment collection and laundering across countries. Thirdly, reputation is generated through demonstrated capacity to deliver money, evade detection or provide access to forums and technical expertise. The result is a transnational network that can coordinate without becoming a centralised organisation.

The evidence also cautions against ethnic or diasporic profiling. Nigerian migration and business networks are not intrinsically criminal. They are social infrastructures that can be used by both lawful and unlawful actors. Effective policing must therefore identify roles, transactions and behaviour rather than treating nationality or community membership as a proxy for criminality.

4.2 Africa–Asia: wildlife trafficking, outsourcing, and supply-chain diplomacy

Costa's study provides one of the clearest empirical demonstrations of a cross-continental criminal network. Using social-network analysis and network ethnography, it reconstructs relationships surrounding an East African wildlife trafficker and maps flows of goods, information, and money between East Africa and Southeast Asia (Costa, 2022). The network is not a random collection of offenders. It has differentiated functions, recurrent exchanges, and identifiable pathways through which investigators can follow information and financial flows.

This is a form of supply-chain diplomacy. Actors who do not share nationality, language, or organisational membership cooperate because each controls a strategically valuable segment of the chain. The relationship is sustained by the value of brokerage and by repeated transactions, not by a unified ideology or permanent hierarchy.

Van Uhm and Wong's study of Chinese organised crime in the Golden Triangle reaches a related conclusion. Their research combines ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2019 with analysis of 56 Chinese court judgements from 2010 to 2020. They show how Chinese criminal groups diversified into illegal wildlife trade and outsourced activities to local opportunistic groups in Laos and Myanmar. Borderlands, casinos, special economic zones, drugs, prostitution, and money laundering become interconnected environments in which criminal and legitimate economies overlap (van Uhm and Wong, 2021).

The study is particularly relevant to the Africa–Asia relationship because it describes networks associated with the Xaysavang wildlife-trafficking enterprise and links to South Africa, Mozambique, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Vietnam, and China. These connections should not be read as evidence of a single "Asian cartel" directing African crime. They demonstrate instead how specialised actors cooperate across supply chains: African actors may provide access to wildlife, Asian actors may provide brokerage or market access, and local intermediaries may manage transport, concealment, and corruption.

The strategic analogy with interstate relations is visible in the division of responsibilities. A group can retain control over its home base while negotiating access to another group's territory or market. Outsourcing reduces the need to establish a permanent presence and lowers the visibility of the principal organisation. It also creates a problem of control: principals must monitor agents who possess local autonomy and may defect. This is comparable to the difficulties states face when using proxies, contractors, or allied intermediaries, although criminal actors lack formal treaty structures.

4.3 European cooperation and cartel networks

The Merseyside study by Campana and Giovannetti provides quantitative evidence that cooperation among criminal groups is patterned rather than exceptional. Their network comprises 134 organised crime groups and 5,239 police reports. Sixty-three per cent of groups cooperated with at least one other group, but the possible network remained highly constrained and clustered; groups did not form an open, universal market of alliances (Campana and Giovannetti, 2025). Drug-trafficking groups were particularly structured, and groups were more likely to cooperate with organisations that already possessed their own external connections.

This finding supports the idea of criminal diplomacy as selective coalition-building. Cooperation is valuable when it provides access to territory, skills, suppliers, violence or distribution. However, excessive connectivity increases exposure, betrayal and law-enforcement risk. Criminal groups therefore manage the number and quality of their ties. More central groups may also use violence more frequently, suggesting that brokerage and coercion can reinforce one another.

The Sinaloa literature adds a second dimension: the social foundations of cooperation. Calderoni, Pereda and Décary-Hétu reconstruct a network of 188 actors from trial transcripts and use relational models to examine collaboration. Friendship and meeting ties are more strongly associated with drug-related collaboration than family ties once cartel affiliation is considered (Calderoni, Pereda and Décary-Hétu, 2026). This suggests that criminal diplomacy depends on multiplex relationships: friendship, business, meetings, affiliation and coercion may overlap, but they do not have identical functions.

Paoli and colleagues' analysis is useful as a conceptual warning. Applying a framework of mafia characteristics to Sinaloa, they conclude that the organisation does not fully meet the relevant criteria and is better understood as a large drug-selling enterprise than as a conventional mafia (Paoli et al., 2024). The implication is methodological: researchers should not assume that every large criminal network is a state-like or mafia-like entity. Organisational categories must be derived from observed relationships, governance practices, and market functions.

Wei and Pan's analysis of 861 Chinese court judgements likewise shows that organised crime is territorially and socially embedded. Rural–urban differences affect supply, demand, concealment, and access to local relationships (Wei and Pan, 2025). In combination with the wildlife-trafficking literature, this suggests that Chinese criminal networks should be analysed through their territorial and social connections rather than through a generalised "triad" label.

4.4 What the comparison demonstrates

Cooperation among criminal actors exhibits four key characteristics: it is modular, with specialization in areas like recruitment and distribution; multiplex, supported by various social ties; clustered around hubs such as London and online forums; and contingent, as alliances shift with changes in market conditions and enforcement. This framework mirrors interstate relations in negotiation and influence, yet diverges in its lack of stable sovereignty and accountability, as criminal diplomacy remains clandestine and coercive.

5. Implications for international relations and policing

5.1 Implications for international relations theory

The first implication is ontological. International relations should treat transnational criminal groups as relational actors in the international political economy, without granting them the status of legitimate political communities. Their influence derives from brokerage, mobility, finance, coercion, and institutional penetration rather than formal sovereignty.

The second implication is theoretical. Concepts such as alliance, security dilemma, signalling, proxy relations, and jurisdictional competition can be adapted to illicit networks if their legal assumptions are removed. The relevant question is not whether criminal groups are "states in disguise", but whether similar strategic problems, trust, commitment, information asymmetry, and enforcement produce comparable practices.

The third implication concerns governance. Legrand and Leuprecht show that cross-border enforcement increasingly operates through transgovernmental networks linking agencies rather than relying solely on formal diplomacy (Legrand and Leuprecht, 2021). This creates an important symmetry: criminal groups cooperate through informal networks, while states increasingly respond through police, customs, financial intelligence, and prosecutorial networks.

The fourth implication is normative. Russo and Stambøl's study of 216 EU external crime-control projects shows how European security rationalities are transferred to neighbouring regions through "action at a distance" (Russo and Stambøl, 2022). International policing cooperation can therefore reproduce unequal power relations, export inappropriate categories, or criminalise livelihoods. African counter-organised crime policy should be designed with local institutions and communities, not imposed through externally defined performance metrics (Wiegratz and Stambøl, 2023).

5.2 Implications for international policing

A relational approach to policing emphasizes the need to investigate connections rather than just organizations, urging police to focus on mapping key individuals and roles within networks to better disrupt their capabilities. Establishing permanent transgovernmental teams is crucial for effective investigations across Afro-Eurasia, fostering collaboration among various authorities and ensuring efficient information-sharing for digital evidence preservation. Additionally, targeting the relationships and infrastructure that enable criminal activities, such as recruitment hubs and logistics brokers, is a critical strategy for intervention.

Treat corruption as an organisational relationship. Anti-corruption programmes should examine procurement, ports, customs, migration services, police databases, and financial institutions. Vetting, rotation, beneficial-ownership checks, protected reporting, and independent investigation are more useful than treating corruption as a series of isolated low-level bribes. Use community-sensitive intelligence; for instance, in the diaspora communities, and migrant businesses should not be treated as criminal evidence. Policing should focus on conduct, transactions, and network roles, while ensuring access to interpreters, legal safeguards, and independent oversight. Success should not be judged only by arrests or seizures. Indicators should include disruption of brokerage, reduction of repeat transactions, loss of corrupt access, increased reporting by victims, and the prevention of rapid reconfiguration.

5.3 Digital finance, cryptocurrency, and transnational corruption

Cryptocurrency should be treated as an enabling infrastructure within criminal diplomacy, not as its sole cause. Leuprecht and colleagues' study of virtual money laundering finds that Bitcoin and alternative cryptocurrencies can be used alongside fiat money, particularly during placement and layering, while third-party exchanges and regulatory gaps create additional vulnerabilities (Leuprecht, Jenkins, and Hamilton, 2023). Public ledgers may create traceability, but attribution, off-ramp identification, mixers, cross-border exchanges, and fragmented legal authority complicate enforcement.

A systematic review by Arnone, Scirè, and Bivona examined research published between 2020 and 2024 and identified money laundering, fraud, and extortion as recurring uses, while emphasising regulatory gaps and the need for cross-border cooperation (Arnone, Scirè, and Bivona, 2025). The evidence does not support the claim that cryptocurrency has replaced cash, trade-based laundering, or informal value-transfer systems. It is better understood as one layer in a broader financial ecology. The Nigerian cybercrime literature reports the use of digital financial tools and global money movement, but this evidence is primarily interview-based and should not be interpreted as a complete measure of cryptocurrency use or transaction volume (Button et al., 2025).

The policy implications focus on strengthening controls and improving cooperation in virtual asset services. Key actions include enhancing customer identification and ownership verification, integrating blockchain analysis with traditional financial data, prioritizing investigations of cash-out points and facilitators, harmonizing asset freezing and tracing procedures, ensuring judicial oversight, and holding accountable those who facilitate access to financial systems. Although digital finance can facilitate cross-border settlement, it does not inherently create the necessary trust and cooperation that are essential for effective criminal diplomacy.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that transnational criminal groups develop cooperation strategies functionally analogous to interstate relations. The comparison is strongest at the level of practice: criminal actors bargain, broker, signal, outsource, divide labour, manage conflict, and exploit jurisdictional differences. It is weakest at the level of status: criminal groups lack sovereignty, lawful equality, public legitimacy, and reliable legal enforcement.

The comparative evidence supports three conclusions. First, cooperation is usually selective, modular, and task-specific rather than a permanent alliance between centralised organisations. Secondly, cooperation is socially and territorially embedded: Nigerian networks use migration and European hubs; wildlife-trafficking networks connect African supply with Asian brokerage and markets; Chinese organised crime relies on borderland and local relationships; and cartel cooperation is shaped by friendship, meetings, and organisational affiliation. Thirdly, criminal governance often depends on relationships with legitimate firms and state officials. Corruption is therefore not merely an external nuisance but can be part of the organisational architecture of transnational crime.

For international relations theory, the concept of criminal diplomacy extends relational and network approaches beyond state actors while preserving the distinction between strategic similarity and political legitimacy. For policing, the implication is practical: investigate relationships, brokers, financial infrastructures, and state interfaces rather than relying exclusively on hierarchical models and kingpin arrests. Permanent Afro-Eurasia investigative networks, integrated financial intelligence, corruption safeguards, and rights-sensitive community engagement are essential.

The article’s principal limitation is that it synthesises heterogeneous published evidence rather than testing a common dataset. Future research should construct comparative relational datasets across fraud, wildlife, drug, and cybercrime corridors; combine court and police records with blockchain and financial data; and test whether brokerage, social embeddedness, and jurisdictional arbitrage predict network resilience. Such research would allow international security scholarship to move from metaphor towards systematic explanation.

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