

Maritime Summary Note n°276 – December 2025

« Maritime and port-related challenges in the fight against drug trafficking »

*In 2022, it was estimated that the illegal drug trade represented a **\$250 billion global market**. Drug trafficking routes wrap around virtually the entire planet. Between purchasing raw materials at minimal costs in impoverished nations and reselling processed substances to consumers, traffickers of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, fentanyl, or amphetamines generate monumental profits. Across the Mediterranean and the West Indies, as well as the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, they heavily rely on maritime lanes to transport their commodities. How is the war against drugs organized at sea and within port gateways under the French operational framework?*

Macro-Contextual Baselines and Global Flow Reconfigurations

According to the 2024 World Drug Report compiled by the **UNODC** (*United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*), spanning the 2021–2022 period, global seizures of illicit drugs were heavily dominated by cannabis, which accounted for 59% of the total headcount of logged seizures. Amphetamine-Type Stimulants (ATS) represented 20% of the cumulative worldwide seizures, a matrix overwhelmingly dominated by methamphetamine (16%), followed by amphetamines (2%) and ecstasy/MDMA (1%). Cocaine accounted for 11% of global seizures, with cocaine hydrochloride (the powder form) generating 5% of the total.

The UNODC records a continuous expansion in the number of drug consumers on a planetary scale. In 2024, nearly 315 million individuals—representing 1 out of every 18 people globally—had consumed an illicit drug during the preceding year, marking a 20% increase compared to the baseline a decade prior (a shift predominantly driven by a +58% expansion of the global population). The matrix of drugs available for consumption is widening; consequently, usage characteristics are becoming increasingly complex, and multi-drug use (*la polyconsommation*) has henceforth transitioned into a shared trait across most illicit drug marketplaces.

The global supply of cocaine reached an absolute historical record high in 2022 with the manufacturing of over 2,700 tonnes, a sharp 20% increase compared to the previous year, and a threefold expansion compared to the 2013 and 2014 baselines. Marketplaces are rapidly expanding across Western and Central Europe, a sub-region toward which escalating volumes of cocaine are systematically routed, most distinctively through North Sea container ports. Driven by the immense density of their commercial freight, the hubs of Rotterdam, Antwerp, and Le Havre function as premier global transshipment platforms for cocaine, logging seizure volume surges of +164%, +119%, and +102% respectively between 2017 and 2021.

Nevertheless, nearly every geographic region on Earth is impacted by cocaine trafficking corridors. The primary logistical streams continuously exit the Andean region, bound for alternative nations across the Americas and Western or Central Europe. Over the past decade, cocaine trafficking has aggressively expanded eastward; selected Asian nations have logged massive seizures over recent years, and consumer demand is on a steep rise across several emerging regional marketplaces.

Within the European theater, the primary maritime entry points for cocaine have identically shifted over recent years: Belgium and the Netherlands have permanently supplanted the Iberian Peninsula as the premier macro-hubs for importation. Turkey, Southeastern Europe, and West Africa concurrently play an expanding role as critical transit corridors toward European consumer markets (UNODC, 2023).

Furthermore, data indicates that France increasingly functions as a transit country for cocaine shipments bound for Oceania and Southeast Asia, primarily routed via postal freight and commercial airlines. This tactical utilization of French national territory stems from a deliberate strategy deployed by narcotraffickers

to circumvent customs audits, as France is historically not categorized as a high-risk source country within international narcotics surveillance frameworks (DNRED).

The maritime vector operates as the ultimate key factor within global narcotics trafficking. For transnational criminal syndicates, this mode of transport delivers paramount structural advantages regarding the massive volumes transported coupled with minimized logistics costs, driven by extreme economies of scale. The third operational advantage resides in the acute difficulty faced by law enforcement agencies in detecting cocaine hidden within the titanesque volumes of commercial freight circulating daily through port gateways. This challenge unfolds against a backdrop where concealment techniques are becoming more sophisticated year after year.

Indeed, while hiding narcotics within legitimate commercial cargoes remains a business-as-usual practice, law enforcement agencies are logging an increasing number of seizures involving molded plastic objects (such as tables and chairs) structurally composed of cocaine hydrochloride. The substance is also frequently injected directly into the structural framework of the shipping containers themselves (including the walls, floor timbers, and refrigeration insulation blocks).

However, trafficking patterns do not exclusively focus on massive monolithic shipments. Cartels tend to simultaneously atomize their cocaine deliveries by systematically exploiting the specialized "rip-on / rip-off" method, which structurally consists of placing, with the direct insider complicity of selected port personnel, duffel bags of cocaine containing a few dozen kilograms inside randomly selected commercial containers.

Operational Enforcement Across the High Seas

The oceanic expanses lying outside national jurisdictions and sovereign waters encompass 64% of the global ocean surface. Within this titanesque, lawless space where the prevailing legal order is dictated strictly by the flag state of the merchant vessel (*la loi du pavillon*), the 1988 United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (the Vienna Convention) precisely engineered the supranational legal framework governing the war against narcotrafficking.

Most stringently, its Article 17, titled "Illicit Traffic by Sea," rigidly locks in the restrictive statutory conditions under which the boarding, searching, and inspection of a foreign vessel are legally actionable: it fundamentally mandates that the flag State must formally confirm the ship's registry registration and issue its explicit executive consent.

It is on these international foundations that the high-seas war against narcotics trafficking is operationally structured. Within the French apparatus, this sovereign enforcement is co-executed by the French Navy and French Customs which, pursuant to the landmark Act of July 15, 1994, dispose of concurrent jurisdictional competencies to investigate, intercept, and log statutory infractions *rattachées* to narcotics trafficking at sea.

Tactically, the French Navy acts under the operational command of the Senior Commander of the Armed Forces in the Antilles (FANC) and the Prefect of Martinique, acting as the Government's Interministerial Delegate for State Action at Sea. The naval surface assets permanently deployed across this theater are structured around the surveillance frigates *Germinal* and *Ventôse*, supplemented by the light patrol vessel *La Combattante* and the multi-mission Overseas support ship *D'Entrecasteaux* (d'Urmont d'Urville class). To rapidly counter the high-velocity maneuvers of traffickers, a high-readiness alert vessel is kept on a permanent 24/7 standalone standby, engineered to instantly execute high-intensity, intelligence-led interception operations at a moment's notice. Illustrating this global reach, the French Navy has recently executed high-seas boardings off the West African coastline and flanking the approaches of Madeira, the latter interdiction being successfully masterminded in close tactical collaboration with US, British, Spanish, and Portuguese law enforcement authorities.

Counter-Narcotics Logistics Within the French Domestic Grid

Metropolitan Waterfront Baselines and Shifting Frauds

According to the specialized OFAST, maritime transport operates as the absolute primary gateway for cocaine entering France, masterminding 75.4% of total domestic cocaine seizures in 2022, while the passenger aviation vector generated 17.1% of the logs. Geographically, the Port of Le Havre positions itself as the undisputed premier macro-gateway for smuggling, logging an exponential scaling up of seized volumes: climbing from 3.6 tonnes in 2018 to over 10 tonnes concurrently across the 2021 and 2022 calendar years.

Le Havre—which alone concentrated 78% of all cocaine volumes seized within French ports in 2022—benefits from a massive density of regular liner connections binding the hub directly to South American and Caribbean source ranges. This extreme commercial connectivity renders it exceptionally attractive to transnational criminal syndicates seeking to dynamically diversify their entry points into Europe, notably through resource-pooling strategies designed to split the financial risks of cargo smuggling.

In 2023, the aggressive reinforcement of targeted security protocols and automated scanning architectures inside the Port of Le Havre successfully disrupted cartel logistics, temporarily bottlenecking its utilization by narcotraffickers. During that calendar year, the seaborne vector dropped to account for only 55% of national cocaine seizures, marking a net 16% volume contraction compared to the 2022 baseline.

However, customs intelligence observes that smugglers rapidly adapted by shifting toward the "drop-off" technique. This method consists of systematically jettisoning waterproofed drug packages on the high seas, equipped with GPS tracking beacons, prior to the ship's arrival at the pilot station. This allows cartels to fully bypass the strict shoreside restrictions enforced inside Le Havre, a tactical shift that resulted in multiple beach-cast discoveries of drifting cocaine bundles washed ashore along metropolitan coastlines. Concurrently, the exploitation of secondary regional ports has expanded. Although commanding a freight infrastructure capacity vastly inferior to Le Havre, these boutique secondary gateways suffer from weaker security grids, delivering a significantly higher freedom of movement to criminal networks.

Furthermore, preliminary operational data from 2024 indicates a violent, powerful resurgence in seizure volumes inside the Port of Le Havre, proving that traffickers are aggressively re-utilizing this premier gateway despite the heavy security countermeasures deployed. In this globalized matrix, France's Overseas territories are systematically exploited as high-velocity "rebound zones" (*zones rebonds*) to bounce shipments back toward the metropolitan mainland.

The Caribbean Frontline and Exponential Outre-Mer Surges

The Caribbean Sea has historically operated as an ultra-strategic theater for transnational cocaine trafficking. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, this maritime space functioned as the primary transit highway to supply the North American market, which represented at the time the main commercial destination for cocaine manufactured by Colombian cartels.

Today, France's Overseas territories stand on the absolute frontline of the global narcotrafficking threat¹. They serve concurrently as regional storage hubs, transshipment points, and wholesale trade marketplaces for South American cocaine. The French West Indies (Martinique and Guadeloupe), traditionally codified as maritime transit stepping-stones for cocaine bound for metropolitan France and wider European consumer markets, play a vital geostrategic role through their port infrastructures.

Pursuant to OFAST datasets, maritime port infrastructure seizures executed across the French Antilles reached approximately 1.2 tonnes in 2022. However, the expansion curve has turned completely exponential heading into 2024: during this single calendar year, the French Navy and inter-agency task forces seized a monumental record high of 29 tonnes of cocaine at sea off the Antilles, shattering the 10.5-tonne baseline logged in 2023. To put this acceleration into macroeconomic perspective, across the preceding rolling ten-year timeline (excluding 2024²), the historical average of annual seizures across the Antilles hovered tightly around 5 tonnes per year.

The French West Indies and French Guiana are identically disrupted by a high-velocity, inter-island regional cannabis trafficking network. Inside Guadeloupe, localized cannabis seizures experienced a sharp increase in 2021, logging 724 kilograms intercepted compared to a 443-kilogram baseline in 2020. Simultaneously, total seizures executed across metropolitan French commercial gateways originating from West Indian shipping loops reached a monumental 6.7 tonnes. Consequently, while the Antilles infrastructure facilitates the maritime transshipment of cocaine, French Guiana distinguishes itself through its prominent role in supplying the metropolitan market via the commercial aviation vector.

The Cayenne-Paris air bridge, heavily exploited by body-smugglers transporting concealment payloads *in corpore* and/or within their checked luggage—commonly baptized "**mules**"—has continuously scaled up in intensity over recent years. However, in November 2022, security protocols at Cayenne-Félix Éboué

¹ Trafficking patterns concurrently impact New Caledonia, which functions as a critical maritime transit and transshipment corridor mapped out by international cartels routing narcotics from South America to the high-value consumer marketplaces of Australia.

² In 2024, the MN had a record year with a total of nearly 48 metric tons of seizures (+90% increase in seizures over five years), valued at 1.3 billion euros.

Airport were drastically reinforced, materialized by the strict implementation of the "100% screening" protocol embedded within the national "Mule Plan".

This operational shift went hand in hand with a highly efficient interception curve: indeed, as of January 31, 2024, this systematic screening successfully neutralized over 680 mules and led to the seizure of approximately one tonne of high-purity cocaine. Pursuant to law enforcement intelligence assessments, these draconian measures exerted a powerful structural deterrent effect.

Nevertheless, evidence indicates that transnational syndicates, colliding with this hardened customs response in Cayenne, rapidly engineered strategic diversion loops. Traffickers began prioritizing intra-island flight connections bound for Martinique or Guadeloupe, prior to bouncing from the Antilles toward the metropolitan mainland, thereby exploiting regional air links subject to significantly less systematic anti-fraud audits.

To prevent any structural displacement by narcotraffickers, these 100% screening checkpoints must be permanently sustained in French Guiana and legally extended across Martinique and Guadeloupe. This updated offensive doctrine concurrently mandates intensifying inland law enforcement audits within the Overseas territories themselves (notably multiplying tactical road checkpoints) to bolster local public safety, while drastically accelerating the rollout of high-tech security assets which, long-promised by central authorities, remain chronically delayed (including mobile container scanners, the technical renewal of the aero-maritime surveillance fleet, and advanced baggage-scanning hardware).

Indeed, the available technical and hardware assets remain notoriously insufficient to sustain complex criminal investigations and permanent surveillance. Illustrating this structural deficit, Félix Éboué Airport (French Guiana) was only recently equipped with baseline scanning technologies—specifically heavy X-ray baggage scanners and millimeter-wave body scanners engineered to detect concealed narcotics packages beneath clothing—even though this hub historically operated, and continuously functions, as a primary departure gateway for illicit narcotics bound for Western Europe.

Symmetrically, West Indian airports are still completely denuded of such high-tech scanning systems, a major vulnerability that fuels grave institutional anxieties as cartels relentlessly hunt for porous entry points to export their products. The immediate consequence for these Overseas territories translates into unprecedented, record-high levels of lethal violence. The three ultra-marine departments of Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana systematically log intentional homicide rates by firearm vastly superior to the metropolitan baseline, characterized by an increasingly institutionalized exploitation of military-grade weapons of war smuggled directly from Venezuela.

The New French Legislative Framework and the Battle for Port Integrity

On April 29, 2025, the French National Assembly definitively passed a milestone anti-narcotics bill, crystallizing the legislative transpositions of the landmark Senate commission of inquiry report, titled *"A Necessary Awakening: Escaping the Narcotrafficking Trap."*

Cumulatively, this comprehensive text encodes 35 operational propositions and 145 binding recommendations spanning multiple dimensions: encompassing global international diplomacy, European judicial coordination, criminal court overhauls, intelligence restructuring, and greenfield legal definitions. More specifically, and rattaché directly to the maritime shipping sector, this law heavily hardens the legal arsenal to suppress inside corruption linked to narcotrafficking within sensitive public administrations, maritime port gateways, and airport infrastructures. The Senate report rigorously mandates an optimized, seamless data-sharing cooperation binding commercial shipping lines, terminal operators, and Customs authorities, specifically unlocking real-time access to cargo manifests and container tracking datasets to permanently secure the global logistics supply chain.

Reflecting on these macro-legal overhauls, the National Union of Port Handling strongly asserted that face to the paramount national challenge represented by the war against narcotrafficking, *"it is imperative to deliver a pragmatic and efficient response; this combat demands a greenfield public-private cooperation model built upon a fair, balanced distribution of legal responsibilities and the associated structural capital expenditures."*

The Vulnerability Matrix of European Gateways: The Guayaquil Choke Point

Sea ports contribute to handling 75% of the total volume of the European Union's external trade, while absorbing 31% of its internal commodity loops. By virtue of this extreme economic density, global port networks are profoundly vulnerable to heavy narcotics smuggling and systematic infiltration by high-risk

transnational organized crime syndicates. Criminal networks weaponize commercial port infrastructures to seamlessly arrange the entry into the EU of shipping containers packing massive illicit payloads; consequently, 70% of all narcotics seizures executed by international Customs authorities take place within port terminals.

It is therefore critical to optimize the real-time tracking of global maritime and port flows to harden enforcement audits, notably through the implementation of a binding "Black List" of commercial shipping lines operating as corporate fronts for transnational criminal organizations, paired with the mandatory, 100% automated scanning of all containers pre-profiled as "high-risk"—specifically those exiting South American ranges.

Crucially, the root of the logistical problem resides within the port of origin itself. The Pacific port-city of Guayaquil in Ecuador has dramatically emerged as the premier global macro-gateway for exporting cocaine manufactured within the neighboring Andean strongholds of Colombia and Peru. Transnational organized crime syndicates—fueled by multi-billion-dollar drug windfalls, corporate-partnered with Mexican cartels, and executing operations through heavily weaponized local gangs—are currently challenging the sovereign authority of the Ecuadorian State on a scale never before witnessed in contemporary maritime history.

Ecuador is henceforth locked within a state of "internal armed conflict", endowing the armed forces with sweeping sovereign powers to directly intervene, most dominantly inside the penitentiary complexes which function as the genuine operational command posts for transnational criminal syndicates. Intercepting the crisis directly at the source through the aggressive reinforcement of cross-border cooperation binding the European Union to "exporting nations" (encompassing specialized joint formations, the high-velocity exchange of intelligence and best practices, and the structural coordination of international judicial investigations) asserts itself as one of the paramount strategic tracks to combat a narco-trafficking apparatus that seamlessly plays with international borders.

To date, a mere 2% to 10% of commercial shipping containers arriving at European waterfronts are subjected to physical or automated customs audits. The overriding operational objective targets drastically escalating the volume of these controls by investing heavily in next-generation cargo scanners, while thoroughly guaranteeing the structural resilience of harbor infrastructures.

This technical hardening masterminds:

The deployment of automated surveillance matrices: integrating high-definition video monitoring paired with Artificial Intelligence (AI) predictive software, alongside drone patrol grids.

The implementation of unassailable access controls: embedding biometric badges and expanding Restricted Access Areas (ISPS Code compliance) across the waterfront.

Advanced occupational formations: systematically diffusing a robust "security culture" among port personnel and docker syndicates to neutralize insider threats.

Cybersecurity auditing: sealing port community networks against high-risk cyber-infiltration.

Symmetrically, this offensive strategy mandates an absolute upward harmonization of customs control standards across all European gateways, while actively factoring in the acute vulnerabilities characterising secondary regional ports, which now operate as premier greenfield targets for narco-traffickers.

The Institutional Reaction of the European Union

Commanding an annual throughput of approximately 12 million TEUs distributed across a sprawling 12,000-hectare maritime footprint that remains inherently intricate to secure, the Port of Antwerp-Bruges operates as one of the primary macro-gateways for cocaine entering the European continent. Mirroring severe law enforcement assessments, for every single tonne of cocaine successfully seized inside the Port of Antwerp, nine tonnes mechanically escape customs controls.

The alternative tactical challenge forces an adaptation to the shifting strategies of mafioso cartels, which are increasingly targeting smaller-scale regional gateways—exemplified by the Port of Helsingborg in Sweden or the Port of Le Havre—while actively attempting to corrupt security guards, shoreside logistics personnel, docker syndicates, and even recruiting compromised moles directly inside national customs administrations.

The globalized drug trade constitutes an escalating, high-intensity threat to the internal security of the European Union. Consequently, public and private port operators—spanning from sovereign port authorities and private terminal concessionaires to international ocean carriers and third-party logistics (3PL) conglomerates—play a critical, front-line role in shielding waterfront gateways and protecting the EU.

To structurally confront this crisis, the European Commission officially launched the "European Ports Alliance against Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking" in January 2024. This public-private partnership focuses on executing a sweeping harmonization of physical port security measures, paired with a relentless war against corruption at every structural level. Sixteen of the premier European container gateways were formally represented during the landmark launch assembly (prominently including *Antwerp-Bruges, Flushing, Rotterdam, Hamburg, Algeciras, Marseille, and Le Havre*).

Concurrently, FEPORT (*Federation of European Private Port Companies and Terminals*), which markets and represents private port interests across Europe, is heavily mobilized on the dossier. The federation aggressively demands enhanced legal protection, advanced professional certifications for terminal workforces, and the hardening of maritime cybersecurity frameworks, while stressing that the strategic stakes expand vastly beyond the port fences to encompass the absolute entirety of the global intermodal logistics chain within a unified public-private architecture.

Outside the traditional streams arriving via mega-container ships directly into the great gateways of the Northern Range, traffickers deploy a secondary, highly resilient operational methodology. This alternative pathway consists of shipping massive bulk payloads of cocaine toward West and North African transshipment nodes. Upon reaching these African littoral sectors, the illicit cargo is repackaged and loaded onto low-tonnage coastal crafts, boutique fishing vessels, or yachts, specifically bound for secondary, porous gateways located predominantly across the Spanish Mediterranean coastline.

This sweeping maritime alliance is engineered within a violent regional context where criminal networks systematically resort to extreme lethality, systemic corporate corruption, and armed intimidation in their unyielding quest for multi-billion-dollar windfalls. Cocaine seizures across the European Union have accelerated to historic, unprecedented record highs, shattering the threshold of 300 tonnes seized annually over recent calendar years.

Crucially, wholesale and retail marketplace street prices register zero significant increases—an unassailable economic indicator proving that the volumetric flow of drugs entering the continent continues to expand unchecked. In Belgium alone, law enforcement authorities executed a monumental record-high seizure of 121 tonnes of cocaine inside the Port of Antwerp-Bruges during the 2023 calendar **year**, representing a sharp 10% volume expansion compared to the preceding period.

Consequently, the core strategic objective focuses on accelerating inter-agency law enforcement coordination linking European police forces, sovereign port authorities, and private ocean carriers:

- Mobilizing customs administrations: positioning customs anti-fraud units at the absolute vanguard of the war against global drug trafficking.
- Hardening law enforcement operations inside port terminals: orchestrating high-intensity, synchronized crackdowns in close coordination with Europol, Eurojust, and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO).
- Deploying the Public-Private Partnership Matrix: establishing a permanent cooperative framework designed to maximize risk-awareness among maritime actors, while operationally underwriting port authorities and private ocean carriers in their daily battle against criminal infiltrations and gray-zone dockside compromises.

Ultimately, this integrated public-private alliance is engineered to bolster the structural resilience of European maritime gateways by detecting technical vulnerabilities, pooling operational best practices, and formulating cutting-edge solutions to maximize port safety. It directly targets criminal intimidation, financial corruption, and cartel subversion through the stringent enforcement of international and European security standards, backed by seamless, real-time data cooperation binding law enforcement and customs intelligence to public and private harbor operators.

Crucially, this European harmonization of the war against narcotrafficking concurrently targets instating a level playing field and fair economic competition among competing ports. Because heavy customs audits are structurally time-consuming and liable to induce logistical delays that penalize commercial merchant shipping workflows, a uniform enforcement across the range prevents any single port from weakening its security grid to capture an artificial commercial attractiveness or a faster vessel turnaround time.

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