Coercive Brokerage: The Paramilitary-Organized Crime Nexus in Borderlands and Frontiers

Working Paper I

Patrick Meehan[1] and
Jonathan Goodhand[2]

1. SOAS University of London
2. SOAS University of London

All correspondence to: pm42@soas.ac.uk and jg27@soas.ac.uk

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About the authors

Patrick Meehan is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Development Studies at SOAS University of London. He also holds a position of Assistant Professor in Global Sustainable Development at the University of Warwick. His research explores the political economy of violence, conflict and development, with a primary focus on Myanmar's borderlands with China and Thailand.

Jonathan Goodhand is a Professor of Conflict and Development Studies, within the Department of Development Studies at SOAS University of London. His research focuses on the political economy of conflict, illicit economies and post-war transitions with a particular focus on borderlands.

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Summary

This research paper advances a conceptual framework for analysing the nexus between paramilitaries, illicit economies and organised crime in borderland and frontier regions. We challenge two dominant policy narratives around paramilitaries: first, the idea that these organisations are symptomatic of state breakdown and flourish in marginal spaces suffering from 'governance deficits'. Second, the idea that paramilitaries can primarily be understood as apolitical, predatory and self-enriching actors, driven by economic motives, and operating outside formal political systems.

In critiquing these narratives, we develop an alternative approach that studies how paramilitaries become embedded in enduring systems of rule in borderlands shaped by protracted conflict and illicit economies. At the centre of our approach is the concept of **'coercive brokerage'** which provides a lens for exploring how paramilitaries play a crucial role in shaping power relations by mediating between different scales, jurisdictions and policy domains.

Brokerage can be defined as the capacity to mediate the transmission of power across divides – or synapses – between different networks or power structures, and facilitates connections outside formal institutions. In conflict-affected frontier spaces, the use of violence – actual or threatened – enables brokers to fulfil their connective function and creates a privileged space for distinct forms of 'coercive brokerage'. Coercive brokers have an ambiguous relationship with the state; they derive power from mediating the state's influence, rather than acting as state proxies. By fulfilling these roles as intermediaries, coercive brokers become embedded in political and market systems in frontier regions and beyond. As we argue below, over time, coercive brokers become important *political actors* who deal with collective action problems by cementing alliances and political coalitions that connect political centres with frontier regions, and who pursue political interests and agendas.

Not all paramilitaries become coercive brokers who end up assuming significant political roles. We aim to explore why some paramilitary figures and groups become powerful coercive brokers and others do not. We also examine why coercive brokerage seems to be a particular feature of frontier and borderland contexts. And finally, we aim to better understand variation in the dynamics of coercive brokerage – at the national and subnational levels.

This paper is the first of a three-part series exploring the nexus between paramilitaries, illicit economies and organised crime. This first paper conceptualises coercive brokerage and outlines how this concept advances the growing body of recent literature on militias and paramilitaries. The second paper then works with the concept of coercive brokerage to present comparative analysis of the paramilitary-organised crime nexus in three contexts: Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. These case studies draw upon data and analysis generated by a four-year Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) project, Drugs & (Dis)order (https://drugs-and-disorder.org/). The third paper outlines a set of policy implications based on the key findings from across the case studies.

Together, the three papers explore four interconnected questions and lines of enquiry:

1. **What is the relationship between coercive brokers, public authority and frontier governance?** We explore how, and with what effects paramilitaries relate to and become embedded in forms of state and non/para/anti-state forms of rule in the margins.

2. **How, and with what effects, do paramilitaries become involved with illicit economies and organised crime?** We are interested in the pathways through which paramilitaries enter, extend and consolidate their roles in exploiting and regulating illicit (and licit) markets.

3. **What is the relationship between paramilitaries, organised crime and politics?** Rather than viewing illicit economies/criminal activities as incompatible with – or in opposition to – politics, we look at examples where the former have provided a springboard into the latter. We aim to study the pathways through which engagement in illicit activities may (or may not) lead to particular forms, or ways of 'doing', politics.

4. **What policies or policy combinations can more effectively address the phenomenon of coercive brokerage in conflict-affected borderlands?** This is a significant policy challenge given the fact that some of the world's poorest and most marginalised communities live in regions shaped by paramilitary rule, whilst the criminal activities that sustain these groups have complex diffusion and spill-over effects, internationally and globally. The nexus between paramilitaries and organised crime represents an urgent development and security challenge that contemporary responses fail to adequately address.

1. Introduction

This research paper explores the connections and entanglements between paramilitaries, illicit economies and organised crime in conflict-affected borderlands and frontier regions.[1]

We challenge two dominant policy narratives around paramilitaries: first, the idea that these organisations are symptomatic of state breakdown and they flourish in marginal spaces suffering from 'governance deficits'. Second, the idea that paramilitaries can primarily be understood as apolitical, predatory and self-enriching actors, driven by economic motives, and operating outside formal political systems. In critiquing these narratives, we advance an alternative approach that seeks to understand how paramilitaries become embedded in enduring systems of rule in borderlands, shaped by protracted conflict and illicit economies. In such contexts, they may become pivotal players as violent intermediaries or **'coercive brokers'** (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019, p. 16).

We define coercive brokers as paramilitary organisations that operate in borderland and frontier regions, and whose identity and roles are defined by their positionality in occupying key synapses, or points of friction, connecting the international, national and local levels; the centre and periphery; state and society. Coercive brokers are network specialists, operating in contexts of volatility and instability. They are not, by definition, anti-state, which differentiates them from warlords or rebel groups, but they have an ambiguous and fluid relationship with the state. On the one hand, they are connected to and derive much of their power from their relationship with the state; on the other, they derive power from mediating the state's influence, rather than acting as state proxies.

Our framing of paramilitaries as coercive brokers is inspired by the seminal work on the history, sociology and political economy of state formation and statebuilding that demonstrates how expanding states and markets negotiate, broker, and manage 'unruly' peripheries (Blok, 1974; Hopkins, 2020; Mann, 2012; Wolf, 1956). We bring this into conversation with the political geography and political economy literatures on frontiers, brokerage, and illicit economies (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018; Tsing, 2005; Li, 2005; Eilenberg, 2014), as well as recent work on militias and paramilitaries (Ahram, 2020; Staniland, 2021; Jentzsch et al., 2015; Üngör, 2020; Goodhand & Hakimi, 2013; Pope, 2022; Meehan & Dan, 2023).

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[1] Throughout this paper we work with the concepts of borderlands and frontiers. Borderlands are classically understood as regions that straddle an international border (Baud & van Schendel, 1997). The presence of the borderline generates forms of adaptation – 'border effects' – politically, economically, and socially, which gives the borderland its unique character. Frontiers can be seen as zones of transition or fuzzy spaces between different forms of authority and ways of living. They are also ideological projects, spaces where state power is territorialised, with specific characteristics of violence and disorder, and associated with particular civilisational narratives and discourses. There is a rich body of recent writing on commodity frontiers, such as 'frontier constellations' (Eilenberg, 2014), or 'relational resource frontiers' (Barney, 2009), which shows that frontiers, far from withering away, continue to be central to processes of statebuilding, market expansion and capitalist crises, to which violence is often central (Peluso & Lund, 2011). Although these terms have different genealogies and meanings in many contexts – including the case studies presented in the paper – frontiers and borderlands are overlapping.

Drawing upon this work, we advance the following core arguments:

First, we conceive frontier regions less as marginal zones waiting to be pacified by states and incorporated into markets, than spaces of innovation and improvisation. They are spaces where new modes of frontier governance and development are field-tested by, and negotiated between, central states and peripheral actors.

Second, these new forms of regulation and accumulation do not remain 'quarantined' in the periphery; they have diffusion or boomerang effects, shaping broader processes of statebuilding and development in metropolitan centres. In this way the margins play a constitutive role in shaping the centre, by entering the DNA of states and markets.

Third, coercive brokerage plays a crucial role in this centre-periphery dynamic. Rather than seeing paramilitary coercive brokerage as a transitional phase enabling states to extend their control over unruly peripheries – after which the services of brokers can be dispensed with – we see it more as a structural relation, or a steady state, that is central to how 'fragile states' and markets function in contexts shaped by protracted conflict and illicit economies.

Fourth, coercive brokers, though frequently portrayed as predatory and profit-oriented, are understood here as fundamentally *political* actors, who assume political roles and may be shaped as much by ideology and political ambitions as by economic interests and the monopolisation of rents.

The paper is divided into two sections: Section 1 maps out some of the key debates in the relevant literature on paramilitaries, states, violence and organised crime. It draws attention to the growing interest in militias and paramilitaries – the so-called 'militia turn' – and assesses the strengths and limitations of existing scholarship, focusing particularly on understandings of the relationship between paramilitaries and crime. Section 2 then develops the concept of coercive brokerage as a lens for understanding how paramilitaries shape states and markets in borderlands and frontiers, and their relationships with illegal activities, organised crime and politics.

2. The changing nature of 'para-state' violence: literature and debates

Paramilitaries have been an enduring feature in many countries across the world. Historical research highlights the centrality of 'irregular armed forces' – retainers, militias, paramilitaries, mercenaries, privateers, warlords and vigilantes – to processes of state formation (Blok, 1974; Davis & Pereira, 2003; Gallant, 1999; Mann, 2012; Prak, 2015). There is also an extensive body of work that highlights the role these kinds of organisations played in the history of colonialism and colonial policing, as well as counter-insurgency and anti-communist strategies deployed by national governments and colonial powers throughout the Cold War (Anderson, 2012; Bell, 2013; Dalrymple, 2019; Eichenberg, 2010; Hopkins, 2020; Jones, 2012; Mann, 2004; Krishnan, 2018; Thomson, 2018). However, much of the work on paramilitarism has adopted, at least implicitly, a teleological view of this phenomenon. Paramilitaries were seen as a temporary phenomenon or staging post that would be dismantled as states consolidated and built up a Weberian monopoly over the means of coercion. They were typically viewed as auxiliaries of the state and received limited analytical attention.

The 1990s brought renewed interest in paramilitaries, especially in security studies as part of efforts to understand why the end of the Cold War had failed to deliver a prolonged peace dividend. The proponents of the 'new wars' thesis claimed that the period after the Cold War saw a significant change in the nature of armed conflict and violence (Kaldor, 1999). Although these claims have been heavily debated and challenged, the concept led to a renewed focus on the role played by irregular armed groups such as paramilitaries, local militias, private security firms, warlords, mercenaries and jihadists in modern warfare.

The impacts of globalisation and neoliberalism on the state were also viewed as having significant implications for military and security forces, and policing. Scholars have argued that neoliberalism eroded the state's capacity to exert control over its territory and reduced its ability to establish large territorial bureaucracies (Leander, 2004). Structural adjustment policies, which demanded radical cuts to state budgets, further limited the resources available to states to establish and maintain strong armed forces capable of monopolising the means of coercion. This, in turn, created a situation where states became increasingly reliant on paramilitary forces to provide security and manage instability. Research also highlighted that the proliferation of paramilitary forces was rooted in neoliberal policies that have resulted in vast social inequalities and increased competition for scarce resources. As states struggled to respond to these challenges and political elites sought to preserve their power in the face of growing resistance to rising inequality, paramilitaries became an expedient and cost-effective way to manage volatility and instability (Kaldor, 1999). Numerous studies focused on how these organisations enabled states to outsource, and claim deniability for, the most

egregious forms of violence in a global context where human rights abuses are increasingly scrutinised (Tajima, 2008; Jamieson & McEvoy, 2005; Mandel, 2002).

Although much of this work focused analytical attention on irregular armed groups, it was often underpinned by some problematic assumptions. First, from an institutionalist perspective, these groups were viewed through the lens of state weakness/state failure (Chauvet & Collier, 2008; Ghani & Lockhart, 2009; Newman, 2007; Rotberg, 2004). They were seen as symptomatic of governance deficits created by the state's inability to secure a monopoly on violence – particularly prevalent in marginal zones at the edges of state control. This overlooked the presence of paramilitaries in contexts where states had strong capacity (see below). By equating these organisations with state breakdown, this perspective also overlooked the role that they played in the construction of new systems of rule and political orders.

Second, by focusing on the relationship between paramilitaries and the state, most analysis has operated within a framework of methodological nationalism. This approach overlooks the transnational dimensions shaping paramilitaries and how these organisations, especially those operating in borderland regions, may be beholden to, and influenced by, state authorities from more than one country.

Third, much of the scholarship and work by think tanks, government agencies and international organisations presented paramilitaries as primarily driven by economic self-interest, and so had little focus on the political roles and agendas of these organisations. This reflected a wider tendency in political science to draw a sharp distinction between politics and criminality and meant there was little empirical analysis or theorisation of contexts where paramilitaries involved in serious organised crime were also embedded in political systems and advanced distinct political interests.

Fourth, there was limited work focusing on the relationship between paramilitaries and capitalism. The economic dimensions of paramilitaries were largely only recognised in terms of 'development deficits' (how they thrived in frontier regions that had not enjoyed the fruits of development) and 'market distortions' (how their involvement in illicit markets distorted wider processes of development and licit markets). Therefore, as Hristov notes, there was a tendency to 'erase the capitalist character' of paramilitary activities, and a denial of the role that these organisations played in establishing and entrenching capitalist social orders and the centrality of violence to these processes (Hristov, 2009, p. 48).

Out of these characterisations of paramilitaries flowed a set of policymaking assumptions and imperatives about the need to:

1 build state capacities to reduce the governance deficits that were seen as enabling the proliferation of paramilitaries, for example, security sector reform;

2 strengthen national and transnational law enforcement agencies to tackle paramilitary criminal activities and violence; and

3 extend market institutions to promote economic development, bolster opportunities in the formal economy and remove economic incentives to join paramilitaries (Wehrey, 2018; World Bank, 2011).

2.1. The 'militia turn': new approaches to understanding paramilitarism

Over the past decade, there has been significant renewed interest in the study of paramilitaries (Ahram, 2011; Aliyev, 2022 Carey & Mitchell, 2017; Carey et al., 2013; Denyer Willis, 2015; Eck, 2015; Giustozzi, 2007; Hristov, 2009; Hristov et al., 2021; Jentzsch et al., 2015; Sprague-Silgado, 2018; Staniland, 2012; Staniland, 2015; Stanton, 2015; Souza et al., 2022). In part, this was motivated by the high-profile presence of paramilitaries in various contexts, notably the deployment of Sunni militias as part of the occupation in Iraq (Clayton & Thomson, 2014), the arming of local defence forces in Afghanistan (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2013), the Janjaweed militias in the Darfur region of Sudan (Flint, 2009), the proliferation of militias across part of the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of the Arab Spring (Fraihat, 2016; Gilbert, 2013), the scale of paramilitarism across Latin America and its links to the global drug trade (Grajales, 2013; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Barón, 2005; Pearce, 2010), and the rise of citizen militias in the US (Crothers, 2019; Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2022; Jackson, 2022).

This research on militias spans a diverse group of organisations across different contexts. Definitions of militia and paramilitaries vary, often quite radically. For the purposes of this study, we define paramilitaries as follows:

Paramilitaries
This paper defines paramilitaries as armed groups that are separate from, but connected to, the official armed forces or police. Paramilitaries can take on different forms and they vary in terms of their size, level of organisation, longevity, and objectives. But they share three common features. First, the capacity to deploy 'big' violence – this distinguishes them from other armed groups that lack the capacity to deploy large-scale armed force, such as local vigilante groups or self-defence forces. Second, their 'irregular' status, as organisations that function outside formal state structures and military chains of command, whilst being closely linked to, and sometimes reliant on, the state – this distinguishes them from anti-state rebel groups and movements. But we have chosen not to use the term pro-government militias, as this misses the frequent ambiguity in government-paramilitary relationships, over time and across contexts. Third, their role as armed political organisations. This political role – even if neither consistent, coherent, nor explicitly stated – differentiates paramilitaries from criminal groups such as drug cartels and organised crime. As explored below, the boundaries between 'political' and 'criminal' organisations are fuzzy and fluid, often characterised by a great deal of overlap and hybridity. However, keeping this distinction in mind is important.

Paramilitaries continued

Although not a defining feature of paramilitaries, we focus in this study on organisations that operate in frontier and borderland regions. Frontiers are spaces where public authority is contested, the means of violence fragmented and there exists a plurality of would-be statebuilders. The costs of governing such regions directly are high – often too high – for the state, and consequently frontier governance frequently involves outsourcing the means of violence and other basic state functions to paramilitary forces. This form of mediated rule produces a ragged geography of state, para-state and non/anti-state spaces. Paramilitary formation is emblematic of the role of frontier zones as sites of innovation and laboratories of change, and these experiments in frontier governance are rarely sequestered to the frontiers – they have significant 'boomerang effects', shaping the wider polity and economy in very fundamental ways. Examples include government-backed militias in Afghanistan that were deployed as anti-Taliban counter-insurgency forces, Colombian paramilitaries that were used to target leftist guerrillas (some of whose leaders moved into formal politics at the national level), and army-sanctioned militias in Myanmar that have acted as counter-insurgency forces and become key players in the country's illicit drug economy.

The terms used for these organisations vary across different contexts. For example, in Colombia 'paramilitary' is the dominant nomenclature; in Myanmar and Afghanistan the term 'militia' is most commonly used to describe similar phenomena.

Scholars in the fields of conflict and security studies have increasingly focused on para-state actors in recognition of the growth of this phenomenon. For example, data generated by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) reveals that more political violence was committed by militias in 2020 than any other armed group, including state forces. Numerous studies have also highlighted the role of paramilitaries in major cities as well as rural or marginal spaces (Rozema, 2008; Pope, 2022); far from being confined to contexts of state weakness, they are also widespread in middle-income and developed countries (Carey & Mitchell, 2017; Magid & Schon, 2018, pp. 802-803).

The activities of paramilitaries in 'high-capacity states' (Tilly, 2007) challenged prevailing narratives that viewed these organisations as both a symptom and cause of state weakness. This came at a time when discourses of 'state fragility' and 'failed states' were being increasingly challenged (Woodward, 2017). A growing body of work instead focused on the kinds of 'informal sovereignties' (Barker, 2016), 'hybrid political orders' (Boege et al., 2008), and 'multi-layered governance' (Kasfir et al., 2017) that underpinned states that were neither fragile nor failing, nor on the path towards a Weberian ideal. Much of the literature drew attention to the fact that many states, far from being monopolists, shared 'violence rights' – 'the rights of certain people and organizations to exercise violence against individuals or groups' (Cramer, 2015, p. 3) – with a range of non-state/para-state actors (Ahram, 2011). This scholarship has sought to integrate the study of para-state armed actors into state theory and to understand their role in the construction of enduring political orders (Carey & Mitchell, 2017, p. 128). For example, there has been an important shift away from equating state formation with 'violence monopolisation' and instead a focus on systems of 'violence

management' that often involve a proliferation of informal armed actors linked to the state (Staniland, 2012).

Furthermore, the recent wave of scholarship on paramilitaries has developed more nuanced understandings of the interests and activities of these organisations and the social relations surrounding them. This has partly been inspired by the insights generated from the literature on 'rebel rule' or 'rebel governance' that highlighted the heterogeneity, fragmentation, and diverse sets of interests and activities of rebel groups (Arjona et al., 2015; Arjona, 2016; Brenner, 2019; Mampilly, 2017; Weinstein, 2006). As Jentzsch et al. (2015, p. 762) have argued, 'although research on variations in wartime governance has made important inroads recently, the militarization of local governance through militias remains largely absent' (p. 762). Their calls to focus greater attention on forms of 'militia governance' reflects the growing role of paramilitary groups in shaping the lives of significant populations around the world.

Reflecting this trend, there is a small but growing body of research that explores the role of paramilitary organisations in providing public services and establishing systems of governance that in some cases operate 'with remarkable autonomy' (Jentzsch et al., 2015, p. 758. See also: Schubiger, 2013a; Schubiger, 2013b).

The 'militia turn' in conflict studies is reflected in several new datasets, notably the Pro-Government Militia Database (PGMD) (Carey & Mitchell, 2011; Carey et al., 2022; see also: Magid & Schon, 2018). These databases underpin a growing number of large-scale, cross-country, comparative quantitative studies of 'pro-government militias' and their impacts on violence targeted at civilians and human rights abuses (Mitchell et al., 2014; Koren, 2017), conflict duration (Aliyev, 2020), and conflict recurrence (Steinert et al., 2019); as well as how these trends vary according to certain militia characteristics (such as the nature of their links to the state, ethnic identities, and membership/recruitment).

There is also a small but important body of work on the relationship between paramilitaries and capitalism (Hristov, 2009; Hristov et al., 2021; Mudhoffir, 2017). This work focuses on how paramilitaries have become structural phenomena, embedded within contemporary global capitalism, protecting elite interests within a highly unequal and exploitative economic system. Many of these authors argue that the prevalence of paramilitaries today is rooted in global political-economic shifts that followed the end of the Cold War. Whereas during the Cold War, these organisations were predominantly deployed by right-wing governments to suppress political opposition, their importance today lies in the role that they play in deepening market relations, integrating local and national economies into the global economic system, and managing the political tensions and social conflicts that these processes create.

The starting point for this work is its focus on the role of violence in capitalism's emergence and expansion. Paramilitary violence is typically viewed as a threat to security, stability and economic growth, but this ignores the role that violence plays in 'creating, facilitating or restoring conditions for capital accumulation' (Hristov et al., 2021). Violence is necessary to 'open up' spaces for investment and expand market relations, by facilitating land dispossession, displacement of populations, labour exploitation, and suppression of resistance. It is also essential for policing the vast social inequalities that global capitalism creates. For example, Sprague-Silgado's (2018) study

of Haiti highlights how the country's integration into the global economy has served the interests of transnational corporations and a small national elite but has created large, impoverished and structurally marginalised populations 'whose social reproduction is not required by transnational capital' (Sprague-Silgado, 2018, p. 747). In this context, earlier forms of paramilitarism, which had been deployed by the Duvalier regime to crush opposition and solidify the regime, have been reproduced at various times to secure the interests of transnational capital. Former models of institutionalised paramilitarism that enabled the Duvalier regime to reach down into rural and urban communities to suppress opposition have been adapted to provide more malleable, flexible and less conspicuous forces that can be called upon periodically 'as a vehicle of class rule and social control' (Sprague-Silgado, 2018, p. 750).

As Sprague-Silgado's study also highlights, although paramilitarism is mobilised by elites to secure their interests (especially during emergency periods), paramilitaries can be difficult to manage and contain. Such groups often go on to use the 'violence rights' and impunity they enjoy for other goals such as score-settling, criminality, and intimidation. However, these activities should not detract from the structural conditions that spawn paramilitaries. Indeed, as Hristov and Bushra (2022, p. 24) argue, the attention given to categorising para-state armed forces and constructing binaries between politics and criminality, and between state-sanctioned and non-sanctioned violence, 'has given rise to debates around the minor distinctions between paramilitary groups that do not take the fluidity and transferability of violence and constant mutation of such groups into account, focusing excessively on details that are of little importance or value to appreciating the broader phenomenon of paramilitary violence and its implications for the structures of inequality under neoliberalism.'

2.2. At the frontiers of research on paramilitarism: continued challenges and questions

Recent literature has deepened understandings of paramilitaries and highlighted the significance of this phenomenon, but conceptual limitations remain. One of the most significant challenges continues to be how to conceptualise the state-paramilitary relationship. Recent work provides a valuable corrective to the state weakness/absence perspective, demonstrating that paramilitaries can be part of a state strategy, in which 'governments frequently settle for less than a monopoly of violence' (Carey & Mitchell 2017, p. 128). But the literature continues to struggle with terminology, with the dominant term, 'pro-government militias', implying clear distinctions made between 'pro-' and 'anti-government militias'. This binary definition fails to capture the composite identities of paramilitaries, the configurations of interests within their ranks, and their fluid relationships with the state across space and time. The case studies presented in Paper 2 of this three-part series explore this complexity. The 'quantitative turn' in militia studies and the creation of large databases in which complex organisations are classified according to fixed definitions brings this issue into sharper focus. Researchers have tried to grapple with such tensions by developing such counter-intuitive (not to say convoluted) terms as 'Pro-government Anti-government Armed Groups' and 'Pro-government "Government Challengers"' (Aliyev, 2022).

These challenges are compounded by the fact that the state is neither monolithic, nor pursues an invariant and uniform 'state strategy'. As Üngör (2020, p.12) argues:

> […]whereas one arm of the government can suppress certain militias, another can expend resources to covertly or overtly support militias. Tactical operations are often run by different agencies, institutions, and levels of the state, which should not be homogenized but aggregated and problematized. The result is that a state can be at war with itself, or successive governments can deal differently with the (nominally same) paramilitary group.

In Colombia, for example, the war against drugs and the counter-insurgent war against the guerrillas (which were both 'state strategies') resulted in quite contradictory approaches to paramilitaries and how state agencies engaged with them (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2022).

Improved understanding of paramilitaries requires an approach that captures the fluidity and complexity of their relationships with state actors and is attuned to shifts in socio-spatial relations and their temporal dimensions. In particular, there is a need to develop a more nuanced and comparative understanding of the relationships between paramilitaries, space, territory and illicit economies. A more explicitly spatial analysis of paramilitary groups can help improve understanding of violence, public authority and development at the margins of the state.

Finally, the relationship between paramilitaries and organised crime remains poorly conceptualised, linked in part to the tendency to treat criminality and politics as separate fields of study. This distinction obstructs analysis of how paramilitaries involved in organised crime may also pursue interests, exert influence, and have effects that are deeply political. This does not mean that all paramilitaries involved in (violent) serious organised crime have clear political interests and agendas, and nor does it accept at face value the political rhetoric espoused by some organisations to legitimise criminal operations that are primarily driven by profit. But there is a need to question the idea that 'more crime' automatically means 'less politics'; this misunderstands the nexus between paramilitaries, criminality and politics, and can lead to misguided responses to serious organised crime (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2022). In this paper, we aim to build on a small but important body of literature that has sought to integrate criminality into the study of politics (Barnes, 2017; Denyer Willis, 2015; Lessing & Denyer Willis, 2019; Gutiérrez-Sanin, 2022; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Gutiérrez 2022; Lessing, 2021; Menocal, 2022; Pearce, 2022) and to apply this approach to conceptualising the relationship between paramilitaries and organised crime.

3. Coercive brokerage: analysing the paramilitary-organised crime nexus in borderlands and frontiers

In this section we build upon recent literature to examine the inter-relationships between paramilitaries and criminal activities in borderland and frontier regions and their political dynamics. We do this by focusing on:

First, the ways paramilitaries shape how states and markets function and the role borderlands and frontiers play in constituting distinct political and economic orders whose effects travel well beyond the margins.

Second, paramilitaries' role as intermediaries or brokers, which provides a lens for exploring their fluid and adaptive roles and identities, and the polycentric and pluralistic systems they operate within.

Third, how an understanding of brokerage leads to new insights about paramilitaries' relationships with illegal activities, serious organised crime and politics, with important implications for policymaking.

3.1. The centrality of the margins: states, markets, frontiers

In many parts of the world, violence, chronic poverty, public health emergencies, and criminality are concentrated in borderland and frontier regions at the margins of nation states. These are regions shaped by competing visions of development, peace, security and political legitimacy, and where state authority is weakly embedded and strongly challenged. Even in countries that are relatively stable and are ostensibly defined as at peace, borderlands can be chronically violent places where some of the world's most vulnerable populations continue to live with high levels of instability, insecurity, and human rights abuses. Paramilitaries are often prevalent in frontiers, where their involvement in violence and criminality has made them a particular concern for policymakers (Gutiérrez-Sanin, 2022; Meehan & Dan, 2023).

Dominant policy narratives explain the poverty, unruliness, and criminality of state peripheries as a consequence of their lack of political and economic integration. Peripheral regions that continue to experience violence, poverty and illegality are portrayed as marginalised spaces left behind by the uneven diffusion of capitalism and statebuilding. The antidote to such 'pathologies' of the margins has been to fashion more 'effective' state institutions and market practices so as to better pacify, 'develop' and integrate these regions.

However, to view conflict-affected borderlands and frontiers as marginal, disconnected and ungoverned zones overlooks the pivotal role that these spaces play in shaping states and markets. Indeed, state margins are often regions of intense interconnectivity and dynamic political and economic change which enable processes of rapid accumulation that cannot take place elsewhere (Goodhand, 2013; Harvey, 2005; Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013). They are linked into national and global circuits of commodities, capital and investment; and metropolitan centres may become shaped by, or indeed dependent on, processes of resource extraction, conflict and development in the hinterlands and the licit and illicit flows of capital, commodities, and people that emanate from them.

For example, the conversion of upland borderland spaces of Myanmar, Laos and Indonesia into resource frontiers has created new flows of timber, biofuels, rubber, foodstuffs and hydropower that are central to supporting Asia's rapid industrial development, urbanisation, rising consumption, and food and energy security. Revenues from illegal drugs, border town casinos, and the licit and illicit extraction of jade, gold and rare earths in Myanmar's borderlands have provided vast pools of capital invested in urban development and infrastructure projects.

Far from being marginal, borderlands are often key laboratories of change that shape the trajectory of wider development processes (Goodhand, 2013; Goodhand, 2018; Goodhand, 2021). We argue that such regions should be conceived less as marginal zones waiting to be pacified by states and incorporated into markets, than spaces of innovation and improvisation in which new modes of frontier governance and development are field-tested and negotiated between diverse sets of actors – state agencies, local authorities (often armed organisations), private companies, and local populations. They are regions of unpredictability and 'friction' that embody both opportunities and constraints for states and markets (Tsing, 2005). They are key sites for consolidating state authority and projecting national sovereignty, and offer new opportunities for capital accumulation. However, these frontier regions are also particularly prone to forms of disruption and disorder that undermine the workings of capitalism and central rule (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018, p. 388; Watts, 2018).

This creates an environment in which diverse, experimental, and often coercive forms of governance can take root, shaped by a multiplicity of institutional forms, actors and practices beyond formal state structures. Paramilitaries, in these contexts, frequently take on the role of 'coercive brokers', defined as follows:

Paramilitaries as coercive brokers

Coercive brokers are paramilitary leaders and organisations that operate in borderland and frontier regions, and whose identity and roles are defined by their positionality in occupying key synapses, or points of friction, connecting the international, national and local levels, the centre and periphery, state and society. Coercive brokers are network specialists capable of operating in contexts of volatility and instability. They are not anti-state, which differentiates them from warlords or rebel groups, but there is ambiguity about their relationship to the state since they derive power from mediating the state's influence, rather than acting as state proxies.

Paramilitaries as coercive brokers continued
They occupy a key structural position in frontier and borderland environments, which are defined by fragmented sovereignty and institutional hybridity and where violent intermediation is central to systems of rule and regulation. The nature of frontier spaces creates a need for coercive brokers. However, by fulfilling these roles as intermediaries, coercive brokers become embedded in political and market systems in frontier regions and beyond. As such there is a need to understand coercive brokers as political actors, who deal with collective action problems by cementing alliances and political coalitions that connect political centres with frontier regions. In doing so, they may come to play an increasingly important role in controlling licit and illicit markets. And finally, they are also social actors who can represent the interests, claims and agendas of frontier societies and communities.

Paramilitaries in frontier regions are a structural feature of governance arrangements in these marginal spaces and careful study of this phenomenon reveals important insights, not only about the edges, but about how state and market orders function more broadly in the contemporary era.

3.2. Coercive brokerage: how power operates in contested frontiers

Frontiers, as already noted, are spaces of fragmented sovereignty, institutional hybridity and violence diffusion. Brokerage is a central feature of these friction-laden landscapes, shaping how power and resources are mediated and channelled between different scales, jurisdictions and policy domains.

Drawing upon Meehan and Dan (2023, p.565), we define brokers as individuals or organisations that mediate the transmission of power across divides – or synapses – between different networks or power structures, and facilitate connections outside state institutions. These may be:

- *social synapses*: boundaries between different cultures, belief systems, ethnic affiliations, or languages;

- *sovereignty synapses*: across international borders or between different de facto jurisdictions, such as state jurisdictions and the jurisdictions of armed organisations; and

- *regulatory synapses*: between different sets of regulations and rules; for example, between different bureaucratic scales (national and provincial), between customary and national land laws and the informal dimensions – norms, customs, and codes of conduct – that surround them, and between licit and illicit markets.

Brokers manage and enable the flow of power, resources, and ideas across choke points; they 'get things done' by acting as both gatekeepers and facilitators of valued resources. Through their ability to network across social divides, brokers enable – and rework – deals between communities, companies and state entities, between peripheries and centres within nations and across international borders (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Lindquist, 2015; Sharma, 2016; Stovel & Shaw, 2012).

Brokers are deeply implicated in processes of state and market expansion at the margins of the state because of their ability to navigate the kinds of border and boundary 'synapses' characteristic of these regions. The expansion of markets and state institutions into frontiers and borderlands, far from making brokers redundant, opens up new spaces for intermediation, particularly during moments of rupture, such as transitions from war to peace, commodity booms, or the 'opening up' of borderlands for development through liberalisation of border trade and new investment flows.

In contested and conflict-affected frontiers, distinct forms of 'coercive brokerage' emerge (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2019, p. 16). Violence is embedded in the processes of 'frontier-making' and 'territorialisation' that underpin state-building processes and capitalist expansion (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018, pp. 390–396). The opening up of new spaces for primitive accumulation and the embedding of capitalist social relations and state institutions requires the dissolution of existing 'social orders – property systems, political jurisdictions, rights, and social contracts' (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018, p. 388), followed by the embedding of new forms of authority and territorial administration. State agencies and private companies frequently turn to those with access to the means of violence to facilitate these processes.

First, and foremost, paramilitaries are often deployed as coercive brokers because of their ability to deploy 'big violence', acting as force multipliers and enabling states to fight wars on several fronts. For example, in the case studies of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar that are explored in the second paper in this series, the origins of the paramilitaries lay in their emergence in contexts of asymmetrical warfare, as anti-insurgent forces; a response to the existential military challenges to the state presented by rebel groups such as the Taliban, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), and ethno-nationalist armies, in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar respectively. In these cases, the primary role of paramilitaries was largely a defensive one, linked to holding territory that had been won over by state forces. In the parlance of counter-insurgency doctrine, the latter 'cleared' and the former 'held'. As Gutiérrez-Sanin and Barón (2005, p. 24) note, in relation to paramilitaries in Colombia, they were a 'a police force in the rear guard of the fight against subversion'. In some cases, waves of paramilitary formation have been fuelled by large infusions of international funding and counter-insurgency training, as with US General McChrystal's military 'surge' in Afghanistan and US support for Plan Colombia.

Although coercive brokers were often mobilised in the context of immediate and existential challenges to the state, they frequently become an embedded feature of frontier governance. Paradoxically, franchising out the means of violence may 'save the state' in the short term, but be part of a state-weakening strategy in the long term. Violence mobilisation creates new sets of collective action problems and social impasses, and demobilising specialists in violence becomes increasingly difficult over time. Paramilitaries become more established, reshaping the political topography of the margins, disempowering non-violent forms of brokerage and political negotiation, driving new cycles of militarisation and further fragmenting the means of violence (Meehan & Dan, 2023). The 'violence rights' granted to coercive brokers by state agents open up opportunities to take on additional roles including intimidation, score-settling,

extortion and criminality (Hristov & Bushra, 2022). Exemplary violence is deployed to cow populations, intimidate rivals, increase market share, generate divisions and so increase the need and demand for brokerage. Violence may also be deployed in a more targeted manner for strategic advantage, or in bids for popular support – for example, Colombian paramilitary assassinations of 'criminals' and 'drug traffickers' were, in part, about building their legitimacy as the upholders of a new moral order.

Not all paramilitaries are coercive brokers. For example, some operate under the firm oversight of state agencies (usually the police and the army), reducing their autonomy and scope to act as brokers. But in many frontier contexts the most powerful and influential paramilitaries operate as coercive brokers, linked in part to the aforementioned features of frontier regions which can be understood as 'spaces of encounter between different forms and logics of rule' (Goodhand, 2018, p. 9). In such spaces the reach of formal institutions is fitful, and politics and power are shaped by non-formal relationships and systems of rule involving social ties (such as ethnicity, and kinship), loyalties, friendships, shared history, military alliances and business arrangements (Meehan, 2016, p. 257). External specialists in violence find it difficult to navigate these complex and friction-laden spaces. Coercive brokers, however, command a knowledge of local politics, terrain, and languages, and an ability to interface with local elites, secure access to resources, and maintain stability.

Coercive brokers typically have a dual character; they derive power from their links to the state *and* from their local social embeddedness. Frontier regions are typically highly 'extroverted' spaces where the capacity of organisations to build political and economic power is dependent on maintaining multiple alliances and managing transnational networks of finance, trade and information that extend beyond national borders. Paradoxically, the extent to which paramilitaries remain useful to state actors is often dependent on their ability to maintain networks beyond the state.

Coercive brokerage provides a lens for exploring the tensions that typically surround paramilitaries in frontiers: those organisations that are instrumentalised by state actors and private companies also have their own interests, agency and autonomy. Their power is not solely dependent on their relationships with state forces or private companies who call upon their services. It is also rooted in their ability to maintain relationships with multiple powerful actors often with diverse or conflicting interests (for example, rebel groups, different state agencies, international backers), to operate their own independent trade and patronage networks, and to garner a degree of local support/acquiescence that may be founded – at least partly – on a demonstrated ability to mediate external actors. In such contexts, paramilitaries do not represent the absence of state authority, but nor are they simply an extension of the state.

3.3. Coercive brokerage, illicit economies and organised crime in frontiers

The paramilitary-organised crime nexus is particularly important in borderlands and frontiers. A significant share of the world's illicit wealth is generated in and across these regions. For example, much of the global illicit drug trade, worth some US$420-650 billion per year (Global Financial Integrity, 2017) originates from the borderlands of six

drug-producing countries. Illegal wildlife trafficking, which generates some US$17 billion per year, and illegal logging, which is valued at between US$51-152 billion per year, typically exploit frontier regions that are biodiversity hotspots (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021).

The relationship between paramilitaries and organised crime is often reduced to one of financial calculation (Üngör, 2020, p. 85). This simplifies and obscures the relationship between crime and politics, the motivations of praramilitaries, the pathways into organised crime and the complex sets of linkages between licit and illicit economies. Coercive brokerage provides an alternative lens for better understanding the paramilitary-crime nexus. First, it throws light on why paramilitaries become involved in organised crime. Second, it illuminates how involvement in criminal activities can lead to increasingly significant political roles. Third, it focuses attention on how criminal activities become an arena in which the tensions surrounding brokerage play out.

3.3.1. How paramilitaries become involved in criminal economies

In many contexts, paramilitaries have leveraged their position as coercive brokers to become heavily involved in illicit economies, the proceeds from which further strengthen their 'holding power' and disruptive potential (Khan, 2010). Connections to the state can provide protection, impunity and privileges, such as unrestricted travel on government roads, and legal business opportunities. This may enable paramilitaries to gain access to or take over criminal enterprises, as they become more attractive to investors, compared with competitors such as rebel groups. Paramilitaries, because they have been granted 'violence rights' by the state, can become key adjudicators and regulators within illicit economies, which by their very nature cannot rely on formal contracts, and depend upon the deployment, or threat of, coercion to ensure business runs smoothly.

In order to maintain their role as coercive brokers, paramilitaries must also sustain relationships with powerful actors beyond the state, enabling them to control and facilitate the flow of commodities, capital and people across key synapses or 'chokepoints' – capacities that are also key for establishing criminal networks and trafficking goods across international borders and internal boundaries (such as between territories controlled by different armed organisations). These structural positions can enable paramilitaries to establish criminal enterprises in their own right and/or to become valued local partners to transnational criminal organisations, for example by providing safe spaces for activities like drug production or secure trafficking routes. Growing paramilitary involvement in criminal activities may be part of a 'business strategy' to increase market share, whilst also representing an attempt to close off opportunities to, and weaken the position of, rivals.

Notwithstanding the nexus between paramilitaries and illicit economies in many contexts, it is important not to lose sight, firstly, of the fact that state actors are almost always significant players in illicit markets; the management and facilitation of illicit/illegal flows usually depends on a host of state agents and fixers, from border guards to customs officials, from military commanders to local and national politicians. Secondly, paramilitaries are rarely involved only in the criminal economy, and frequently their 'business portfolio' extends into the licit economy, and this may involve

building deep relationships with the business elite and international actors. For example, Colombian paramilitaries had extensive relationships with, and provided protection services to, cattle ranchers and oil companies. In Afghanistan, paramilitary forces have created trucking and logistics companies that supported NATO troops in their forward operating bases in the provinces.

3.3.2. *Paramilitaries and the criminality-politics nexus*

Paramilitaries' position as coercive brokers can open up opportunities for engagement in criminal activities, and this in turn may lead them to take on political roles and positions. In many ways, this pathway from crime to politics will be unsurprising to historians and political economists who have studied the historical connections between violence, illegality, statebuilding and politics (Blok, 1974; Tilly, 1992; Volkov, 2016). As our analysis so far has shown, and as the case studies presented in the second paper in this series will demonstrate, coercive brokers emerge from and within distinct frontier settings, they represent particular sets of interests and regional coalitions, they command constituencies and make bids for public support; in short, they can be understood as political actors seeking to achieve political goals within the contexts they find themselves in. Violence and crime, rather than being alternatives to politics, may be seen as instruments of politics within an often unruly and violent political marketplace. Of course, this does not mean that all paramilitaries leverage their engagement in organised crime as a springboard for careers in politics, and nor does it mean that that there are no tensions or trade-offs involved in managing criminal and political portfolios – it is necessary to look carefully at the individual trajectories of paramilitary groups over time. However, there is abundant evidence, across different frontier contexts, of paramilitaries simultaneously pursuing careers in crime and politics.

Gutiérrez-Sanin (2022), in his study of paramilitary politics in Colombia, unpacks this relationship, by highlighting four mechanisms through which criminal activities politicised paramilitaries:

- *Escalation*: wealth derived from criminal activities enables paramilitaries to expand their ambitions and political agendas, such as extending areas of territorial control, developing stronger patronage networks, establishing firmer relationships with state actors, and taking on formal political office.

- *Extension*: involvement in certain illegal activities broadens paramilitaries' social base beyond just criminal networks and elites. For example, involvement in illegal drug economies entails engaging with rural populations involved in drug cultivation.

- *Regulation*: As paramilitaries expand and extend their activities, they find themselves tasked with an increasing number of roles such as governing supply chains, policing markets, influencing wealth distribution and providing security. Involvement in criminal activities can thus lead these organisations to play increasingly important roles in regulating activities and territories.

- *Intermediation*: All the above activities make paramilitaries become even more important brokers between centres and margins, and between different local, national and transnational actors, and thus their political role as intermediaries is further strengthened. Paramilitaries can become entrenched in enduring systems of rule, rather than being transient phenomena.

As captured in Figure 1, coercive brokerage involves managing a delicate balance between violence, crime and politics. In frontier regions, access to the means of 'big violence' may be a precondition for being taken seriously and gaining entrance into the political system. Violence, then, is not automatically a disabler of politics; in many contexts it represents the continuation of (a particular kind of) politics by other means. Organisations without coercive power often get crowded out, silenced or marginalised – especially during times when violence worsens. In Colombia, paramilitaries broke into the political system after forming powerful regional coalitions. Some were able to broker strong connections with politicians at the centre – the so-called 'Bogota tie-in' (Gutiérrez-Sanin, 2022) – providing them with protection and privileged access within the national political system. They also targeted local politics, aiming to shape local elections and get pro-paramilitary mayors into office, which in turn helped gain them access to municipal funding.

Coercive power is in a sense fungible – it is currency that can buy political capital and influence. For instance, in the Afghanistan case study in the next paper, a tribal militia leader was able to use his influence to find positions for his sons in parliament and the regional administration. Conversely, in Myanmar, paramilitary politics involves establishing spheres of influence and autonomy at the local level, because pathways to influence at the centre have been blocked. Paramilitary politics is patterned by, and reflects, the vernacular of local politics; in Afghanistan clientelism is shaped by tribal and ethnic networks; in Myanmar the building blocks of paramilitary politics are ethno-nationalist identities and narratives.

Paramilitary politics should not be seen only in narrow instrumentalist terms – as a politics without values. Although – like most political discourses – paramilitary discourses cannot be taken at face value, they reflect particular worldviews, ideologies and moral positions. Colombian paramilitaries, for example, have invested heavily in ideological training and indoctrination of new recruits (Gutiérrez-Sanin & Barón, 2005). They developed a clear and consistent (anti-insurgent) political orientation, reflecting the regional coalitions in which they were embedded (an often uneasy coalition between cattle ranchers, narcos, and the state). They promoted a particular political and moral order (targeting petty criminals, for example), whilst disabling other kinds of politics – for example, intimidating peasant mobilisation and trade unions and assassinating social leaders. As Ballvé (2020) shows, in Uraba, a '*para-politica*' assemblage emerged in those regions 'cleared' of insurgents and pacified, that tied together international, national and regional interests, and involved a system of frontier governance that melded together extreme violence, the co-option of the municipal administration and local elites, and the rolling out of internationally funded development programmes.

Building legitimacy and claiming moral authority can be based on the provision of security and protection and having money to invest in the local area. For example, Myanmar's paramilitaries commonly make religious donations, and invest in roadbuilding, schools, cultural events and buildings. Even if this money comes from illegal activities and if the means of violence is also used by paramilitaries locally, these groups are often able to claim (and get some acceptance) that they are acting as local representatives.

At the same time, the trades-offs between violence, politics and crime cannot be ignored. For instance, as Colombia's paramilitaries became more deeply involved with the narco-economy, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that the US-supported war on terror and the war on drugs were working at cross purposes. Moreover, building coercive power does not translate automatically into greater political influence or legitimacy – paramilitaries which become too powerful and autonomous may end up becoming the target of state efforts to forcibly demobilise them. Furthermore, paramilitaries that perpetrate widespread abuses may undermine their position as legitimate political intermediaries and representatives of borderland societies. Finally, the kinds of illicit activities paramilitaries are involved in can also shape their perceived legitimacy and public support. For example, the methamphetamine trade generates very few benefits for borderland populations in Myanmar; however, providing protection for poppy cultivation enables militias to position themselves as the protectors of the peasantry.

Figure 1: Coercive brokerage
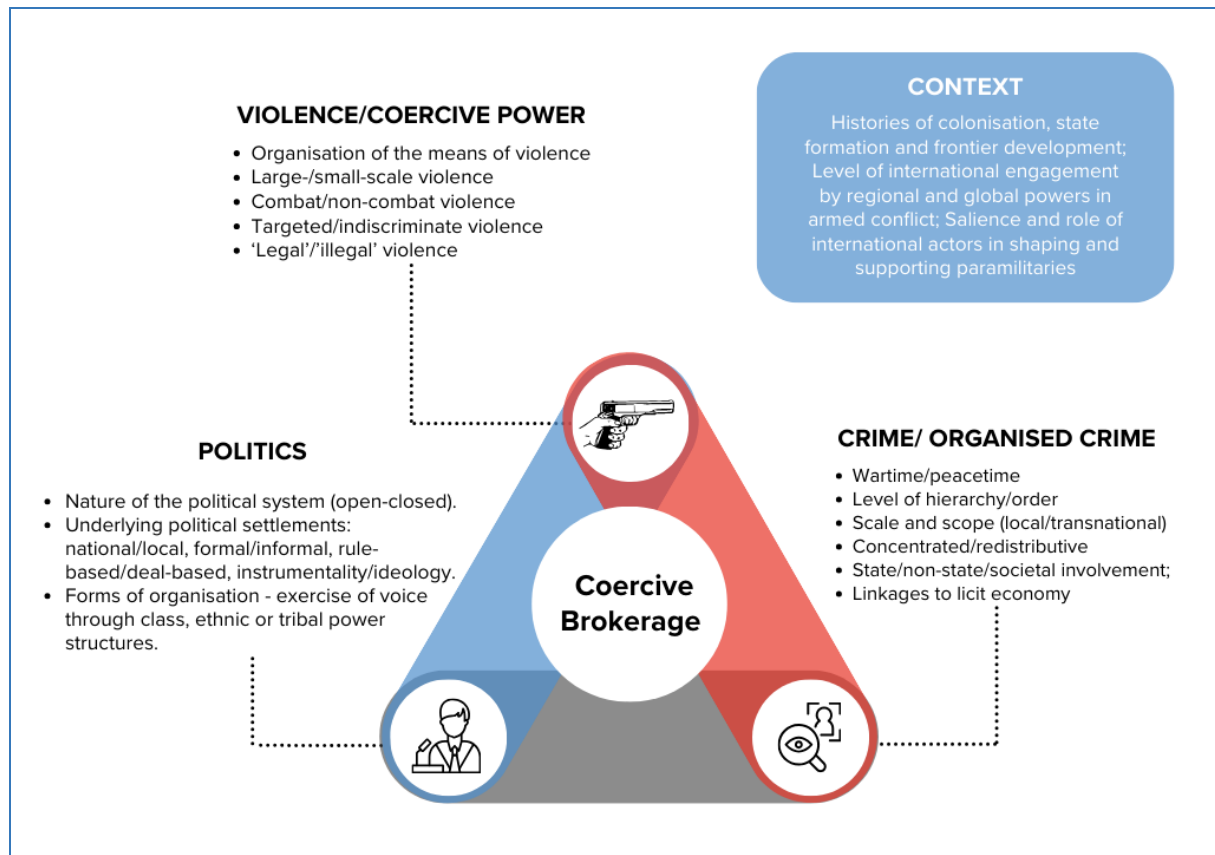
3.3.3.   How criminality exposes the tensions inherent to coercive brokerage

Contradictions and tensions are inherent to coercive brokerage; states and private companies utilise the services of brokers, yet these brokers often leverage their position as intermediaries to pursue sets of interests that are not necessarily aligned with – and may well be contradictory to – those who utilise their 'services'. Criminal activities can become a key arena in which these tensions play out. For example, the decision by state agencies – such as the police, army, border guard forces and judiciary – to grant protection, impunity and opportunities to launder illegal revenues may be an important

mechanism through which these agencies seek to co-opt the services of paramilitaries. This may be especially important in places where criminal activities offer significant opportunities for revenue generation and/or where state agencies are seeking to encourage armed organisations that were formerly autonomous or opposed the state to take on the role of paramilitaries. Facilitating paramilitary involvement in criminality may also provide a means for these organisations to be self-financing, reducing pressures on state coffers and minimising direct connections with state institutions. At the same time, paramilitary involvement in criminal activities may provide a mechanism for state agencies to keep these actors in check since 'informal promises of impunity and protection are always subject to renegotiation' (Meehan & Dan, 2023, p.567). The need to maintain the support of state agencies to avoid the risk of being targeted on criminal charges may limit the scope for paramilitaries to act autonomously and pursue interests and relationships that these agencies are unlikely to sanction.

However, paramilitary involvement in criminal activities may also provide them with greater room for manoeuvre and leverage, providing revenue streams independent from the state to invest in weapons, expand their numbers and finance services. Their involvement in criminal activities may also enable paramilitaries to establish or maintain networks and relationships with powerful actors both within the state and outside of it. It can be unclear who is co-opting whom in contexts where paramilitaries can utilise vast revenues generated from illegal activities to secure the support and protection of powerful people or agencies within the state, as well as funding a large workforce, with roots in the wider community. By empowering themselves in this way, paramilitaries can strengthen their position as key brokers and ensure that their services remain indispensable, thereby reducing the risk that the state will seek to move against them, or that other actors – whether private companies, rebel groups, local populations or international actors – will be able to circumvent them.

The negotiations that surround illicit economies do not resolve the tensions inherent to coercive brokerage; instead, they may increase the economic and political stakes and consequently the potential for violence. These insights have important policy implications for those seeking to address criminality and violence, but in a way that emphasises the need to understand the wider political contexts and systems of intermediation in which these phenomena are embedded.

4. Conclusion

Paramilitaries and organised crime in frontier regions are the products of long-term histories of uneven development and often violent and repressive statebuilding. They are also closely linked to international policies and uneven development processes globally. Frontiers provide a conducive environment for the emergence of illicit economies, given their proximity to international borders, their liminality and/or illegibility, the multitude of violence specialists able to provide protection, and the range of financial services and infrastructures that have been field-tested in high-risk environments. Taken together, this gives frontier regions a 'comparative advantage' in illegality, which is further compounded by a lack of central state oversight, allowing some actors within the state to work with and/or seek to profit from illicit economies, rather than try to police them.

Coercive brokerage provides a lens for studying the co-evolution of states, markets and paramilitaries in these frontier spaces. Although paramilitaries are often deployed for expedient, short-term reasons, over time a steady state or equilibrium of mediated rule emerges. The reasons for this lie partly in the nature of brokerage – brokers have a level of autonomy and agency; they carve out territory and regulate markets and populations. At the same time, maintaining these zones as liminal spaces can also be advantageous, for example by allowing economic activities to remain unregulated. Therefore, it is not just that states create paramilitaries – paramilitaries create, or at least transform, the state. The privatisation of security provision leads to the emergence of increasingly autonomous specialists in violence, and coercive brokerage can become part of the DNA of the state.

This paper has also eschewed simplistic assumptions about politics and criminality being automatically separate and opposed spheres of activity. The boundary between them is fuzzy, contingent, deeply contextualised and constantly changing across time and space. Of course, not all paramilitaries have an interest in politics. However, for some, engagement in illicit activities can be central to their role as coercive brokers and provide a resource base from which to pursue wider political agendas. This is especially apparent in contexts where the means of violence (and thereby having the revenue to purchase weapons and retain troops) is necessary for their political agendas to be taken seriously. However, pathways into politics that involve engagement in illicit activities also entail risks. This includes de-legitimisation (among local populations as well as nationally or internationally) and targeting by the state or international actors. There is a need to avoid lazy and misleading narratives that automatically characterise paramilitaries as spoilers or self-serving actors, motivated by self-enrichment and predation.

Paramilitaries' relationships to the state and organised crime vary over time and space. Many emerged in the context of large-scale violence against the state and were deployed as combatants targeting anti-state groups – but over time they were deployed in post-ceasefire policing, intelligence gathering, holding territory, and even playing social and development roles.

To understand the relationships between paramilitaries, frontier governance and organised crime – and how these relationships vary over space and time – we need to take into account:

a) the nature of the conflict and paramilitary origins;

b) the nature of the state, the armed challengers to the state and the political system within which paramilitaries function;

c) the kind of frontier region, its history of rule and its structural features including its political topography, social landscape and resource profile;

d) the history of paramilitary formation, its leadership, social make-up, capacities and embeddedness; and

e) the synapses or points of friction across which brokerage takes place.

This approach requires detailed comparative case study analysis. The second paper in this series adopts this methodological approach and uses the concept of coercive brokerage to analyse the paramilitary-organised crime nexus in Afghanistan, Colombia, and Myanmar.

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