

Transnationality Of Comando Vermelho And Its Narcoterrorist Action

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Abstract:

Background: Transnational organized crime has emerged as a central challenge to contemporary international security, particularly through the expansion of narcotrafficking networks that operate beyond state borders and employ systematic violence as a tool of control. In Brazil, the Comando Vermelho represents one of the most structurally complex criminal organizations, having evolved from a prison-based faction into a transnational actor integrated into international drug markets. This transformation raises critical questions regarding the adequacy of traditional legal and analytical frameworks used to classify criminal organizations, particularly concerning the applicability of the concept of narcoterrorism to the Brazilian context.

Materials and Methods: This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research design grounded in criminological analysis and international security studies. Data were collected through an extensive review of academic literature, institutional reports, and official documents addressing the formation, evolution, and transnational activities of the Comando Vermelho. Qualitative content analysis was applied to identify recurring operational patterns, strategic use of violence, territorial control mechanisms, and transnational connections. A comparative analytical approach was employed to contrast these findings with internationally recognized criteria used to classify narcoterrorist organizations.

Results: The analysis reveals that the Comando Vermelho exhibits key characteristics associated with transnational criminal organizations, including integration into international drug trafficking routes, diversified financial structures, and sustained use of violence to intimidate populations and confront state authority. Comparative assessment indicates significant convergence between the operational practices of the Comando Vermelho and those observed in groups internationally classified as narcoterrorist organizations, particularly regarding the instrumentalization of terror as a means of governance and control.

Conclusion: The findings support the analytical viability of framing the Comando Vermelho within the conceptual boundaries of narcoterrorism, despite existing legal and doctrinal limitations in the Brazilian context. Recognizing this convergence has direct implications for international cooperation, legal harmonization, and the development of more effective strategies to combat transnational organized crime and narcoterrorist threats.

Key Word: Transnational Organized Crime; Narcotrafficking; Narcoterrorism; Comando Vermelho; International Security.

Date of Submission: 21-01-2026

Date of Acceptance: 31-01-2026

I. Introduction

Transnational organized crime has become one of the most significant challenges to contemporary international security, largely driven by the intensification of global flows of people, capital, goods, and information. Globalization has expanded the operational reach of criminal organizations beyond state borders, enabling the formation of complex, flexible, and resilient illicit networks capable of adapting to diverse political and institutional environments^[1,11,19]. Within this context, drug trafficking stands out as a central activity, not only due to its high economic profitability, but also because of its capacity to undermine state authority, corrupt public institutions, finance armed structures, and destabilize entire regions, thus being increasingly recognized as a direct threat to regional and global security^[3,15,17].

In Brazil, the evolution of organized crime followed a distinctive trajectory, deeply connected to the prison system and to historical patterns of urban inequality and social exclusion. The Comando Vermelho (CV) emerged in this context during the second half of the twentieth century, initially as a localized prison-based organization aimed at mutual protection and internal regulation among inmates in the Rio de Janeiro penitentiary system^[2,7,18]. Over time, however, the faction transcended its original carceral and territorial

boundaries, developing a hierarchical structure, consolidating territorial control through systematic violence, and integrating itself into national and international drug trafficking circuits^[10,14].

The progressive expansion of Comando Vermelho's activities beyond Brazilian borders, combined with the strategic use of extreme violence against rival groups, state agents, and civilian populations, raises critical questions within the field of international security studies. Such practices suggest a shift from conventional organized crime toward patterns that resemble those adopted by groups employing terror as a mechanism of power, intimidation, and social control. This dynamic brings forth the central research problem of this study: can Comando Vermelho be analytically and legally framed as a narcoterrorist organization? Furthermore, does its contemporary modus operandi surpass the conceptual boundaries of common crime and traditional drug trafficking, aligning instead with hybrid forms of criminal-terrorist activity?

In light of these questions, the general objective of this article is to analyze the transnational dimension of Comando Vermelho and to assess the feasibility of its classification as a narcoterrorist organization within the theoretical framework of transnational organized crime and international security. Specifically, the study aims to: (i) examine the historical process underlying the formation and expansion of the faction; (ii) identify the structural and operational elements that characterize its transnational activities; and (iii) discuss the implications of such a classification for international cooperation mechanisms, particularly in the areas of law enforcement coordination, financial intelligence, and global strategies to combat organized crime and narcoterrorism.

II. Material And Methods

Study Design

This study is characterized as a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive investigation. This design is suitable for examining complex criminal phenomena that operate across national borders and are marked by organizational opacity, sustained violence, and high adaptive capacity. Given the structural clandestinity of transnational criminal organizations and the absence of comprehensive primary datasets capable of capturing their full scope, the research is based on secondary data analysis combined with theoretical and analytical triangulation, a methodological approach widely adopted in criminology and international security studies.

Research Approach

The analytical framework integrates criminological analysis with international security studies, allowing the Comando Vermelho (CV) to be examined beyond the limits of domestic criminal law. This interdisciplinary perspective enables an assessment of the organization not only as a criminal enterprise but also as an actor capable of producing political, economic, and security effects at the transnational level.

The study is theoretically grounded in concepts related to transnational organized crime, narcotrafficking networks, and narcoterrorism, drawing on international literature that addresses the convergence between illicit economic activities and terror-based strategies used to coerce populations, intimidate state institutions, and challenge governmental authority^[1,14,15].

Data Sources and Collection

Data collection was conducted through a systematic and comprehensive literature review, including national and international academic publications, books, peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and official documents. The sources analyzed encompass both empirical and theoretical contributions relevant to the research objectives.

Emphasis was placed on:

- Academic works addressing the historical formation, organizational structure, and evolution of the Comando Vermelho^[2,7,10,13];
- Studies examining the transnationalization of organized crime and mechanisms of international cooperation in the field of security and law enforcement^[9,11,17,20];
- Institutional reports and official documents related to drug trafficking, money laundering, and terrorist financing issued by Brazilian authorities and international organizations^[6,15].

Selection Criteria of Sources

The selection of sources followed criteria of relevance, methodological rigor, and direct applicability to the research problem. Priority was given to materials produced by recognized academic institutions, governmental bodies, and international organizations, ensuring analytical consistency and reliability. Only sources that directly addressed organized crime, transnational criminal dynamics, narcotrafficking, or terrorism-related practices were included in the final corpus of analysis.

Analytical Method

The study employs qualitative content analysis as its primary analytical method. This approach enables the systematic examination of textual material in order to identify recurring patterns, operational practices, and strategic behaviors associated with the Comando Vermelho. The analysis focused on predefined analytical categories, including:

- The use of violence as a strategic and symbolic instrument;
- Territorial control and governance over local populations;
- Participation in transnational drug trafficking routes;
- Financial structures and money laundering mechanisms;
- Direct and indirect confrontation with state institutions.

In addition, a comparative analytical method was applied. The characteristics identified in the Comando Vermelho's modus operandi were contrasted with internationally recognized criteria used to classify organizations as narcoterrorist groups. These criteria are derived from comparative cases in Latin America and from analytical models employed by international security agencies and academic literature on narcoterrorism and transnational crime^[3,14,12].

III. Result

The analysis of the collected literature and institutional documents reveals that Comando Vermelho has progressively evolved from a locally confined prison-based group into a criminal organization with clear transnational characteristics. The findings indicate that this transformation is closely linked to structural changes in global illicit markets, particularly those associated with drug trafficking and financial crimes, which have expanded the operational reach of criminal organizations beyond national jurisdictions^[1,11,19]. In this context, Comando Vermelho demonstrates patterns of behavior consistent with transnational organized crime, including cross-border logistics, articulation with foreign criminal networks, and strategic adaptation to international enforcement mechanisms^[13,16].

Historical analyses confirm that the origins of Comando Vermelho are rooted in the Brazilian prison system, especially within the Ilha Grande penitentiary complex, where the group initially functioned as a collective mechanism of protection and internal regulation among inmates^[2,7,18]. However, the results show that this original configuration was gradually replaced by a more sophisticated organizational structure, characterized by hierarchical leadership, territorial control through armed force, and centralized coordination of illicit activities, particularly drug trafficking^[10,14]. This organizational maturation enabled the faction to expand its influence beyond urban peripheries and establish connections with international drug supply chains.

Evidence from academic studies and official reports indicates that Comando Vermelho's insertion into transnational drug trafficking routes has been accompanied by systematic practices of money laundering, corruption of public officials, and the use of violence as a strategic instrument^[6,8,16]. These practices are not incidental, but rather constitute an integral part of the organization's operational logic, aimed at ensuring territorial dominance, discouraging state intervention, and maintaining control over local populations. As highlighted in national risk assessments, criminal organizations involved in drug trafficking increasingly rely on complex financial schemes to conceal illicit profits and sustain long-term operations^[6].

A central result of this study concerns the qualitative convergence between Comando Vermelho's modus operandi and behaviors commonly associated with narcoterrorist organizations in other international contexts. The literature indicates that narcoterrorism is characterized not solely by involvement in drug trafficking, but by the deliberate use of extreme violence and intimidation to influence political decisions, weaken state authority, and impose alternative forms of governance over specific territories^[12,17]. In this regard, the findings suggest that Comando Vermelho employs violence not merely as a byproduct of criminal disputes, but as a calculated strategy to produce fear, constrain public action, and signal power to both state institutions and rival groups^[14,16].

Comparative analysis further demonstrates that similar patterns have been observed in transnational criminal organizations operating in regions affected by drug-related violence, particularly in contexts where state presence is fragile or contested^[3,15]. While Comando Vermelho does not pursue an explicit ideological agenda in the traditional sense of terrorist groups, the results indicate that its actions generate effects analogous to those produced by narcoterrorist organizations, including social destabilization, erosion of institutional legitimacy, and the normalization of violence as a tool of control^[12,17].

Finally, the findings highlight that the transnationalization of Comando Vermelho poses significant challenges to international cooperation frameworks. Although existing mechanisms of legal cooperation and joint policing initiatives have expanded in recent decades, the literature points to persistent asymmetries in institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and political priorities among states^[5,9,20]. These limitations constrain

the effectiveness of coordinated responses to criminal organizations whose operations transcend national borders and exploit gaps between domestic and international security regimes.

Evidence from institutional assessments and criminological studies highlights that Comando Vermelho's participation in transnational drug trafficking routes is accompanied by sophisticated mechanisms of money laundering and financial concealment^[6,8,16]. National risk assessments identify drug trafficking as one of the primary predicate offenses linked to money laundering in Brazil, with criminal organizations increasingly relying on cross-border financial structures to obscure illicit proceeds and sustain long-term operations^[6]. These findings reinforce the understanding that financial crimes are not ancillary, but rather constitutive elements of the organization's transnational strategy.

A particularly relevant result concerns the role of violence within Comando Vermelho's operational logic. The analyzed sources indicate that violence is employed not merely as a reactive response to disputes with rival groups, but as a deliberate and strategic instrument aimed at producing fear, discouraging state intervention, and consolidating territorial dominance^[14,16]. This pattern aligns with Michel Misso's observation that contemporary criminal factions in Brazil increasingly adopt practices that blur the boundaries between organized crime and forms of coercive social control^[14]. Such dynamics resonate with international discussions on narcoterrorism, in which violence serves communicative and political functions beyond immediate economic objectives^[12,17].

From a comparative perspective, the results reveal significant convergences between the practices of Comando Vermelho and characteristics commonly attributed to narcoterrorist organizations in other regions. While the faction does not articulate an explicit ideological agenda in the traditional sense associated with terrorist movements, its actions generate effects analogous to those produced by groups that employ terror as a means of governance and power projection^[12]. These effects include the erosion of state authority, the normalization of armed control over civilian populations, and the imposition of parallel norms within territories under criminal influence^[16,17].

The transnational dimension of Comando Vermelho also poses substantial challenges to existing frameworks of international cooperation. Although mechanisms of legal assistance, joint investigations, and transnational policing have expanded over recent decades, the literature points to persistent limitations related to institutional asymmetries, divergent legal systems, and political constraints among states^[5,9,20]. These structural gaps create opportunities for criminal organizations to exploit jurisdictional boundaries and adapt more rapidly than state-based enforcement mechanisms.

To synthesize the principal empirical and analytical findings, Table 1 consolidates the main indicators identified in the literature regarding the transnationalization of Comando Vermelho and its convergence with patterns associated with narcoterrorism.

Table 1: Analytical Indicators of Transnationalization and Narcoterrorist Convergence in Comando Vermelho

Analytical Dimension	Empirical Evidence Identified	Main Sources	Implications for International Security
Transnational Drug Trafficking	Integration into international cocaine supply routes and articulation with foreign criminal networks	[3][13][15]	Expansion of criminal influence beyond national borders
Organizational Structure	Hierarchical coordination and centralized leadership enabling cross-border operations	[10][14]	Increased operational resilience and adaptability
Use of Strategic Violence	Systematic employment of violence to intimidate state agents and civilian populations	[12][14][16]	Production of terror-like effects and erosion of state authority
Money Laundering Practices	Use of complex financial schemes linked to drug trafficking revenues	[6][8]	Sustainability of transnational criminal operations
Territorial Control	Imposition of parallel norms and armed governance in controlled areas	[14][16]	Weakening of institutional legitimacy and public security
International Cooperation Challenges	Exploitation of legal and institutional asymmetries between states	[5][9][20]	Reduced effectiveness of transnational enforcement efforts

Overall, the results indicate that Comando Vermelho exhibits a set of structural, operational, and behavioral characteristics that extend beyond conventional definitions of organized crime. The convergence between transnational drug trafficking, systematic violence, financial crimes, and territorial domination suggests that the faction operates within a gray zone between organized crime and narcoterrorism. These findings provide a robust empirical basis for the subsequent discussion on the legal, conceptual, and strategic implications of classifying Comando Vermelho as a narcoterrorist organization within the framework of international security.

The synthesis presented in Table 1 allows for a clearer visualization of the cumulative evidence identified throughout the analysis and reinforces the central findings of this study. Rather than representing isolated or sporadic phenomena, the indicators observed reveal a consistent pattern of organizational behavior that reflects strategic adaptation to transnational criminal environments. The convergence of hierarchical coordination, cross-border drug trafficking, financial crimes, and systematic violence suggests a level of operational maturity that exceeds the scope of locally oriented criminal group^[1,11,15].

One of the most significant results highlighted by the table is the instrumental role of violence within Comando Vermelho's operational framework. The literature demonstrates that violence is not employed solely as a means of resolving disputes or protecting illicit markets, but as a deliberate strategy aimed at generating fear, shaping social behavior, and constraining the actions of state institutions^[12,14,16]. This finding is particularly relevant, as it aligns with broader theoretical discussions on narcoterrorism, in which terror functions as a communicative tool designed to project power and enforce compliance beyond immediate economic objectives^[12,17].

Additionally, the data indicate that the faction's reliance on transnational financial mechanisms plays a crucial role in sustaining its activities over time. The integration of money laundering practices with international drug trafficking routes enables the organization to mitigate risks associated with domestic enforcement and to preserve the continuity of its operations despite intensified state responses^[6,8]. Such dynamics underscore the importance of financial intelligence and international cooperation as central elements in strategies aimed at disrupting transnational criminal organizations^[5,9,20].

Taken together, these findings support the argument that Comando Vermelho operates within a hybrid space between organized crime and forms of coercive power traditionally associated with terrorist activity. While the absence of an explicit ideological agenda differentiates the faction from classical terrorist groups, the effects produced by its actions namely the erosion of state authority, territorial domination, and the normalization of fear mirror those observed in contexts where narcoterrorism has been formally recognized^[12,17,18]. This analytical convergence provides a solid empirical foundation for the discussion that follows, particularly with regard to the legal and strategic implications of reclassifying Comando Vermelho within international security and counter-narcoterrorism frameworks.

IV. Discussion

The findings of this study allow for a substantive analytical discussion regarding the positioning of Comando Vermelho (CV) within the contemporary landscape of transnational organized crime and its potential classification under the concept of narcoterrorism. By integrating empirical indicators with criminological and international security frameworks, the discussion advances three central axes: comparative analysis with other narcoterrorist organizations, conceptual adequacy to the Brazilian context, and the identification of legal and institutional gaps that limit effective state response.

Comparison between Comando Vermelho and other narcoterrorist groups

When compared to internationally recognized narcoterrorist organizations, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) or certain Mexican drug cartels, Comando Vermelho exhibits a convergent set of operational characteristics, albeit adapted to distinct socio-political conditions. Similar to these groups, CV demonstrates a hybrid structure that combines drug trafficking revenues, territorial control, and systematic violence to ensure organizational sustainability and influence over local populations^[1,15]. Although CV does not articulate an explicit ideological agenda in the classical sense, its practices align with what Bagley defines as functional narcoterrorism, in which economic criminal objectives are pursued through terror-based mechanisms that destabilize state authority^[3].

The comparative dimension also reveals that CV's transnational reach, particularly through cocaine supply chains connected to neighboring South American countries, mirrors patterns observed in other global narcotrafficking networks^[13,17]. According to UNODC data, Brazilian criminal factions increasingly operate as logistical nodes within international drug routes, reinforcing their strategic relevance beyond national borders^[15]. This transnationalization process situates CV within a broader ecosystem of organized crime that relies on cross-border cooperation, financial laundering, and corruption to mitigate enforcement risks^[8,11].

Furthermore, the sustained use of symbolic and physical violence as a tool of governance differentiates CV from conventional criminal organizations. Misso argues that Brazilian criminal factions have evolved into quasi-political actors within marginalized territories, exercising forms of coercive authority that resemble insurgent practices rather than purely economic crime^[14]. This observation reinforces the comparative proximity between CV and groups traditionally classified as narcoterrorist, even in the absence of formal terrorist designation.

Adequacy of the narcoterrorism concept to the Brazilian context

The application of the narcoterrorism concept to the Brazilian case remains a subject of academic and institutional debate. Critics often argue that the absence of ideological motivation disqualifies groups such as CV from terrorist classifications. However, contemporary security studies increasingly emphasize operational effects rather than ideological intent as defining criteria^[4,12]. From this perspective, the systematic production of fear, the challenge to state sovereignty, and the capacity to influence public order emerge as central analytical parameters.

Lemos contends that Brazil suffers from a form of “legal blindness” regarding terrorism, particularly when violent non-state actors do not conform to traditional ideological models^[12]. The results of this study corroborate this argument by demonstrating that CV’s activities generate social, economic, and institutional impacts comparable to those caused by formally recognized terrorist organizations. These impacts include the erosion of state legitimacy in controlled territories, the intimidation of public officials, and the normalization of violence as a regulatory mechanism^[2,18].

Moreover, globalization processes have reshaped the operational environment of organized crime, blurring the boundaries between domestic criminality and international security threats^[1,19]. In global cities such as Rio de Janeiro, criminal factions exploit structural inequalities and transnational flows to consolidate power, making classical legal categories increasingly insufficient^[19]. In this sense, the narcoterrorism framework offers analytical utility by capturing the intersection between illicit economies, violence, and governance deficits.

Legal and institutional gaps

Despite the growing sophistication of criminal organizations, Brazil’s legal and institutional frameworks remain largely reactive and fragmented. The absence of a clear legal definition encompassing narcoterrorist practices limits the ability of law enforcement and judicial authorities to employ specialized investigative tools and international cooperation mechanisms^[5,9]. As highlighted by the Ministry of Justice, effective asset recovery and financial disruption depend on legal harmonization and timely information exchange, both of which are constrained under current classifications^[5].

Financial intelligence reports indicate that money laundering remains a critical vulnerability, enabling CV to reinvest illicit profits into arms acquisition, territorial expansion, and corruption networks^[6,8]. Although COAF has identified high-risk patterns related to organized crime financing, the translation of these findings into coordinated enforcement actions is often delayed by bureaucratic and jurisdictional barriers^[6].

International cooperation represents another structural challenge. Villela demonstrates that transnational policing initiatives involving Brazilian authorities are frequently asymmetrical, with limited operational autonomy and dependence on foreign intelligence agendas^[20]. This imbalance undermines long-term strategic responses and reinforces the need for a domestically grounded, yet internationally integrated, legal framework capable of addressing hybrid criminal threats.

Recent empirical evidence supports the assessment that Comando Vermelho’s activities surpass the boundaries of conventional organized crime. Historical records already documented coordinated attacks against public infrastructure and state institutions in Rio de Janeiro as early as 2002, revealing a calculated strategy aimed at destabilizing public order and exerting pressure on state authority through violence^[21]. More recent investigations describe the establishment of so-called “criminal courts” within territories under factional control, where residents are subjected to coercion, torture, and extrajudicial punishments, indicating the systematic replacement of state functions by illicit governance structures^[22].

This coercive model is not geographically restricted to Rio de Janeiro. In northeastern Brazil, law enforcement investigations identified extortion schemes imposed on small business owners, accompanied by lethal violence against those who refused to comply. These practices demonstrate the faction’s capacity to impose terror-based control over civilian economic activities and to expand its influence beyond its traditional territorial strongholds^[23]. Such dynamics correspond to analytical definitions of narcoterrorism that emphasize the strategic use of violence and intimidation to dominate populations, secure illicit markets, and undermine state sovereignty^[12,14,15].

More recently, Comando Vermelho has been involved in large-scale armed confrontations with state security forces that resemble conflict dynamics typically associated with hybrid or irregular warfare. In late October 2025, Brazilian authorities conducted one of the largest police operations in the history of Rio de Janeiro against faction strongholds in the Complexo do Alemão and Penha, mobilizing approximately 2,500 law enforcement agents. The operation resulted in intense armed clashes, dozens of fatalities, and numerous arrests, highlighting the scale of resistance encountered by state forces^[22,23]. While government authorities framed the operation as a necessary response to territorial expansion, human rights organizations raised concerns regarding the intensity of the violence and its broader implications for public security policy^[22].

The nature of these confrontations illustrates a high level of organizational capacity, including the use of heavy weaponry, fortified positions, and tactical resources that enable the faction to sustain prolonged

engagements with state forces. Reports of drone usage and defensive infrastructure further blur the distinction between criminal activity and insurgent-style resistance, complicating efforts to reestablish state control over contested territories^[21,24].

Taken together, these episodes indicate a qualitative transformation in Comando Vermelho's patterns of violence. The faction increasingly operates through a combination of territorial governance, economic extortion, symbolic intimidation, and sustained armed resistance against state actors. This convergence of criminal enterprise and terror-based strategy reinforces the analytical relevance of conceptualizing Comando Vermelho as a hybrid or narcoterrorist threat, rather than as a purely domestic criminal organization.

V. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the Comando Vermelho has evolved beyond the conventional parameters of domestic organized crime, demonstrating structural, operational, and strategic characteristics consistent with transnational criminal organizations. Its integration into international drug trafficking networks, use of systematic violence as a mechanism of territorial control, and capacity to challenge state authority reveal a level of organization that exceeds the boundaries of ordinary criminal activity.

The analysis further suggests that the convergence between narcotrafficking and terror-based practices employed by the Comando Vermelho supports the analytical viability of its classification within the framework of narcoterrorism. Although this designation is not yet formally recognized in Brazilian legal doctrine, the empirical and comparative evidence examined indicates significant conceptual alignment with internationally recognized narcoterrorist groups.

Finally, the study highlights critical legal and institutional gaps that limit the effectiveness of national and international responses to transnational criminal threats. Addressing these gaps requires the strengthening of international cooperation mechanisms, harmonization of legal frameworks, and the incorporation of security strategies capable of responding to criminal organizations that operate simultaneously as economic enterprises and instruments of coercive power at the transnational level.

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