

UNODC

“Combatting the narco-sub problem and its effects on the global drugs network”



Main chair: Kuno Deelstra

Deputy chair: Lotus Veltman

Date: 15th of August 2025

Introducing your chairs

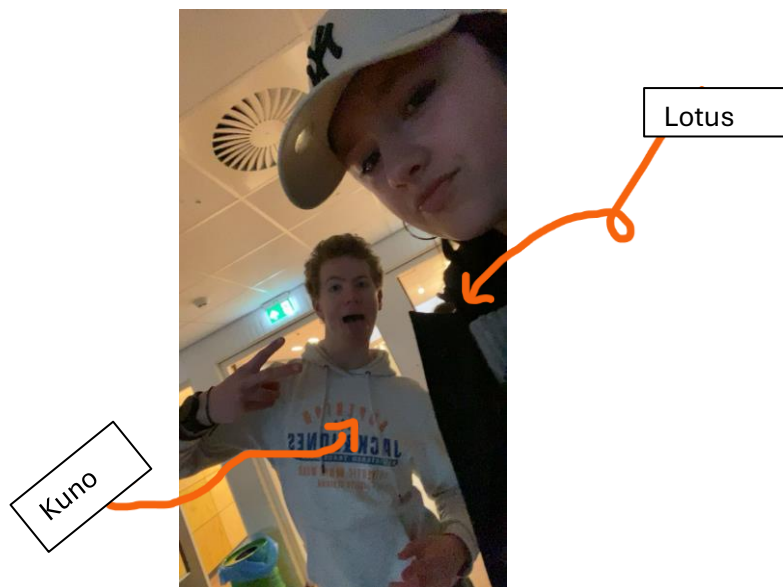
Hii all! My name is Lotus, and I'm absolutely thrilled to be your deputy chair of UNODC at SGAMUN '25! It's a true honour for me to be your chair at this conference together with Kuno, a great friend I've shared some MUN conferences with!

I'm from Amersfoort and have lived there my whole life, usually surrounded by great people, decent coffee, and way too much rain. Outside of school, you'll probably find me playing soccer or at the gym (though half the time I'm figuring it what I'm actually doing there).

I joined my first MUN when I was 12 years old, without really knowing what to expect. Since then, I've attended five conferences, and each one has taught me something new.

For me, this will be the first time chairing, so I am extremely thrilled, as well as nervous to be guiding this weekend. I'm now looking forward to seeing a MUN conference from a different side and helping others get the most out of it too.

Can't wait to meet all of you, hear your ideas, and create a great atmosphere together at SGAMUN '25!



Hi delegates! I'm Kuno, 17 years old and I live near Amersfoort. I'm honored and very excited to be your chair in UNODC this first edition of SGAMUN, together with my good friend Lotus. I study at Farel College and have the honour of serving as one of the Secretaries General of FAMUN 2026. I have done quite a few MUN's in my time, this will be my 3rd time as chair, and love to help others with anything ranging from resolution writing, public speaking and debate. If you as a first-time delegate have any question about anything at all regarding this years' SGAMUN, please don't hesitate to email me at kunodeelstra@gmail.com or call me at +31 6 10623151. I hope that you'll join my wonderful deputy Lotus and me in making UNODC, and SGAMUN as a whole, into a great success. I look forward to meeting you in September!

Table of Contents

INTRODUCING YOUR CHAIRS	2
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC	3
DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS	4
GENERAL OVERVIEW.....	5
<i>Narco-Subs</i>	5
<i>The Global Drugs Network</i>	6
<i>Impact of Drug Trafficking</i>	6
<i>Geopolitical Shifts</i>	7
<i>Conclusion</i>	7
MAJOR PARTIES INVOLVED	8
TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS	10
PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE	12
1. <i>Plan Colombia (1999–2015)</i>	12
2. <i>Operation Martillo (2012–present)</i>	12
3. <i>Ecuador's Coastal Surveillance Programs (2018–present)</i>	13
4. <i>Legal Reforms in Colombia and the U.S. (2010s–2020s)</i>	13
POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS.....	13
<i>Existing Measures</i>	13
FURTHER READING	15
BIBLIOGRAPHY	15

An introduction to the topic

Combatting the narco-sub problem and its effects on the global drugs network.

Narco-submarines, or “**narco-subs**,” are custom-built vessels designed to smuggle drugs, in most cases cocaine, across borders while avoiding detection from control. There are various kinds of submarines built, including **low-profile vessels** and **semi-submersibles**. These two common narco-subs are often constructed in remote jungle regions of countries like Colombia and Ecuador. Their stealth capabilities and long-range potential have made them a critical tool in international drug trafficking.

The global drug network is a billion-dollar criminal industry. Narco-subs allow powerful cartels in Latin America, such as Clan del Golfo and Mexican trafficking groups, to move large quantities of drugs toward markets in the United States and Europe. These operations fund not only drug networks but also corruption, violence, and arms smuggling; turning drug trafficking into a global security issue.

Since the early 2000s, the number and sophistication of narco-subs have grown significantly. Over the years there have been several upgrades such as improved navigation systems and construction techniques, which make them significantly harder to intercept. According to the UNODC and DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), the interceptions of semi-submersibles increased dramatically between 2000 and 2010.

Despite ongoing efforts by the United Nations and national governments, combating the use of narco-subs remains a major challenge. There is no single country which can address this issue alone; international cooperation in maritime security, law enforcement, and intelligence sharing is crucial to avoid further spreading of this problem.

This research report will explore how narco-subs operate, how they influence the global drug market, and what steps the international community can take to combat their growing impact.

Definition of key terms

Narco-submarine

A specially made boat used by drug traffickers that travels mostly underwater to secretly transport illegal drugs.

Semi-submersible

A type of submarine that stays just below the water surface, not fully underwater, making it harder to detect.

Low-profile vessels

A type of submarine or boat designed with a very small structure above the waterline, making it difficult to spot with the naked eye or by radar.

Drug trafficking

The illegal trade, transport, and sale of drugs across regions and countries.

Global drugs network

A worldwide system of criminal groups that produce, move, and sell illegal drugs.

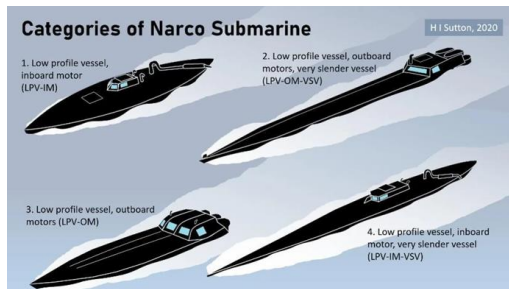
Illicit drug trade

The illegal business of manufacturing and selling drugs.

General overview

Narco-Subs

Narco-submarines, commonly referred to as “narco-subs,” are covert vessels used by drug trafficking organizations to transport large quantities of narcotics, mainly cocaine, across international waters. These submarines are often semi-submersible, travelling just beneath the surface to avoid detection via radar, sonar, visual, or infrared surveillance (e.g. border patrol, army, navy, federal agencies, etc.). The vessels are primarily built in remote jungle regions, such as those in Colombia or Ecuador, where facilities are difficult to identify due to the well-hidden areas in lush or placement in remote areas. narco-subs have evolved from rudimentary crafts into highly sophisticated vessels capable of long-distance ocean voyages.



Furthermore, There are different types of narco-subs, ranging from low-profile vessels with visible superstructures to fully submersible crafts. Their design includes mechanisms to intake air or recharge batteries while submerged. According to the U.S. Foreign Military Studies Office, nearly 80% of drugs smuggled into the United States arrive via maritime routes, and approximately 30% of that volume is transported by narco-subs. Despite significant efforts, the U.S. Coast Guard estimates that only about 11% of these vessels that transit sovereign water are captured.

The Global Drugs Network

The global drugs network consists of transnational criminal organizations engaged in the production, trafficking, and distribution of illicit substances. These groups are highly adaptive, using advanced communication tools, chemical concealment methods, and constantly evolving smuggling techniques to evade enforcement. The illicit drug trade generates hundreds of billions of dollars annually, contributing to widespread violence, corruption, and instability.

The number in the global market has been growing over the years, clearing out the rising and ongoing problem. Production, seizures, and use of cocaine all hit new highs in 2023, making cocaine the world's fastest-growing illicit drug market. Illegal production skyrocketed to 3,708 tons, nearly 34 per cent more than in 2022. Global cocaine seizures reached a record high at 2,275, which is a 68 per cent rise over the years 2019 until 2023. The number of users has increased from 17 million users in 2013, to 25 million users ten years later.

Narco-subs are a key component of this global network. Their ability to covertly transport drugs across oceans allows cartels to maintain supply chains between South America, North America, and Europe, reinforcing their control over international drug markets.

Impact of Drug Trafficking

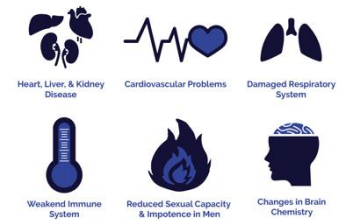
In Europe alone, 38% of organized crime groups are linked to drug trafficking. The impact is far-reaching: in 2021, nearly half a million people died due to drug use disorders, and 28 million years of life were lost. Moreover, only one in twelve people suffering from drug use disorders had access to adequate treatment in 2023. The illicit drug economy also causes major environmental harm, including deforestation, air and

water pollution, and toxic waste from clandestine drug laboratories, issues that are often overlooked in drug policy responses.

Social Impact

Drug trafficking via narco-subjects exacerbates addiction crises by increasing the availability and purity of illicit substances. This leads to rising public health burdens, especially in underserved communities, where healthcare systems are often ill-equipped to respond. The drug trade is also associated with violent crime, recruitment of youth into criminal groups, and erosion of social cohesion.

Some Long-Term Physical Effects of Repeated Substance Use



Economic Impact

The economic consequences are equally severe. Governments face rising costs from healthcare services, law enforcement, and border security, while communities suffer from lost productivity and decreased investment due to instability. Regions involved in trafficking often become reliant on the illicit economy, weakening legitimate economic development.

Global Impact

At a global scale, narco-sub activity undermines maritime security, increases pressure on international cooperation frameworks, and exposes vulnerabilities in current enforcement systems. The adaptability of criminal organizations forces states to divert significant resources to anti-narcotics operations, often at the expense of other priorities.

The report finds that drug use; drug cultivation and trafficking; and the policy responses enacted to address illicit drug economies are all impacting the environment in Europe. Potential consequences of drug cultivation/production can include deforestation and other land-use change as well as air, land and water pollution. The number of dismantled clandestine drug laboratories increased in Europe between 2013 and 2023. This manufacture produces significant amounts of waste and can result in considerable clean-up and ecosystem restoration costs.

Geopolitical shifts

The rise of narco-subjects has contributed to new geopolitical dynamics, especially in coastal and transit countries. Increased drug trafficking activity has triggered militarization of maritime zones, strained diplomatic relations, and revealed drastic gaps in **international legal frameworks**. States with limited naval capabilities are particularly vulnerable, becoming either passive transit zones or active battlegrounds in the war on drugs.

Conclusion

Narco-subjects represent a dangerous evolution in the global drug trade. Their low detectability, large cargo capacity, and cross-border reach have enabled criminal networks to grow stronger, more elusive, and more globally connected. While existing

counter-narcotics efforts have made progress, they remain insufficient in addressing the growing scale and sophistication of maritime drug trafficking.

Addressing this issue requires multilateral coordination, technological innovation, legal reform, and a renewed focus on both supply and demand reduction. Combating narco sub use is not solely a regional concern, it is a global imperative for health, security, and stability.

Major parties involved

A broad range of international actors is involved in addressing the issue of narco-submarine trafficking. These parties play different roles, ranging from drug production and distribution to law enforcement and policy development. Their cooperation is essential in combatting the global drug trade facilitated by narco-subs.



Drug Cartels

Criminal organizations, primarily based in Latin American countries such as Colombia and Mexico, are the main operators of narco-submarines. These cartels design, construct, and deploy semi-submersible and submersible vessels to covertly transport large quantities of illegal drugs, mainly cocaine, to international markets.

Colombia

Colombia is the largest producer of cocaine and the primary origin point for narco-subs. These vessels are often constructed and launched from remote

areas along the Pacific coast. Groups like the **Clan del Golfo** and **FARC** dissidents are deeply involved.

Mexico

Mexico acts as a major transit hub for drugs arriving from South America. Although most narco-submersibles are not built here, they are received and offloaded along the Mexican coastline. Cartels such as **Sinaloa** and **CJNG** manage much of the logistics.

United States of America

The United States is one of the principal destination markets for drugs transported by narco-submersibles. Agencies such as the **U.S. Coast Guard** and the **Drug Enforcement Administration** (DEA) play a significant role in intercepting these vessels and dismantling smuggling networks. The U.S. also contributes intelligence and technological resources to international cooperation efforts.

Ecuador

Ecuador has recently become a key launch point for narco-submersibles due to its Pacific access and weakened port security. Cartel influence in cities like Guayaquil has grown, contributing to rising drug violence.

Peru

Peru is the second-largest cocaine producer globally. While narco-submersibles are not typically built here, drugs are transported through Peru before reaching launch sites in Colombia or Ecuador.

Central American Countries

Nations such as **Costa Rica**, **Panama**, and **Honduras** are used as transit routes for narco-submersibles moving north. These countries are vulnerable to cartel violence but actively engage in regional cooperation and rely on international assistance to improve maritime interdiction and intelligence-sharing.

European Union

Europe has become an increasingly prominent end market for drugs trafficked via maritime routes. EU Member States, including Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands, are involved in joint operations to detect and seize narco-submersibles. Europol and national coast guards contribute to surveillance and investigation efforts across Atlantic and Mediterranean waters.

Spain & Portugal

These countries are often entry points for cocaine into Europe. Due to its available geographical advantage, it is smuggling narcotics into the country, to start the spread over Europe, extremely efficiently.

Their coast guards and police services work closely with Latin American authorities and **EUROPOL** to intercept narco-sub and dismantle smuggling networks.

Netherlands & Belgium

Major ports such as Rotterdam and Antwerp serve as key entry points for cocaine smuggled via maritime routes, often concealed within commercial cargo. Criminal organizations exploit the high volume of trade and logistical infrastructure in these ports, making them strategic hubs for distribution across Europe.

EU Agencies

The **European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA)** and **EUROPOL** support joint investigations and analysis on drug trends.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC provides technical assistance, global data collection, and policy guidance to support Member States in combatting narco-sub trafficking. It encourages international cooperation and the development of legal and operational frameworks to disrupt drug flows and prosecute offenders.

International Law Enforcement Agencies

Organisations such as **INTERPOL** and regional coast guards play a vital role in cross-border information sharing and joint operations. These entities facilitate coordinated investigation teams and contribute to the early detection and interception of narco-sub in international waters.

Technological and Surveillance Firms

Private-sector companies engaged in maritime security are essential in developing detection systems capable of identifying semi-submersible vessels. These firms supply radar, sonar, infrared, and satellite technologies used by law enforcement agencies to monitor suspect maritime activity and respond effectively.

Timeline of key events

Late 1990s	First reports emerge of drug cartels in Colombia using basic, homemade semi-submersible vessels to evade maritime surveillance.
Early 2000s	Narco-submarine designs evolve with more advanced materials, allowing longer travel distances, deeper submersion, and improved stealth.
2006	The U.S. Coast Guard makes the first widely publicized seizure of a narco-submarine near the coast of Florida, bringing international attention to the threat.
2010	Colombia and Panama launch coordinated naval patrols in the Caribbean, increasing seizures of narco-subs and pressuring trafficking networks.
2012	A spike in interceptions is reported across Central America and Mexico, indicating diversification of trafficking routes. Operation Martillo, a multinational U.S.-led operation, is expanded to target maritime drug smuggling, including narco-subs.
2015	Law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and Europe begin deploying high-resolution sonar and underwater drones to detect low-profile vessels.
2017	The UNODC releases its first dedicated report on narco-submarines calling for stronger international cooperation and legal frameworks.
2019	Narco-submarine trafficking is detected for the first time outside the Americas, with suspected vessels intercepted near Southeast Asia and Europe. Spain seizes a 20-meter-long homemade narco-sub in Galicia, one of the first found in European waters.
2021	Joint multinational task forces are formed in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, increasing coordinated interdiction and intelligence sharing.
2023	Nations such as the U.S., Colombia, and Ecuador invest in AI-powered maritime surveillance technologies to better track narco-subs in real time. Europol expands its involvement in maritime drug detection and

links narco-sub seizures to broader transnational criminal networks.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

1. Plan Colombia (1999–2015)

A major joint U.S.–Colombian effort focused on reducing coca cultivation, dismantling drug cartels, and strengthening Colombia’s military. Significant financial and technical resources were allocated to detect and intercept maritime trafficking, including the use of narco-sub.

Why it failed or was limited:

- Cartels adapted rapidly by improving submarine designs to be more difficult to detect.
- Human rights abuses and environmental degradation undermined domestic and international support.
- Reduction in drug production in Colombia was offset by an increase in other countries like Peru and Bolivia.

2. Operation Martillo (2012–present)

An ongoing U.S.-led international maritime initiative involving over 20 countries from Central America, the Caribbean, and Europe. It aims to intercept maritime drug shipments, including those carried by semi-submersibles.

Impact and limitations:

- Has successfully intercepted numerous narco-sub and disrupted trafficking routes.
- However, traffickers adapt by switching launch points and increasing sub sophistication.
- Unequal resource distribution and gaps in regional coordination continue to limit long-term effectiveness.

3. Ecuador's Coastal Surveillance Programs (2018–present)

Ecuador, a key departure point, has increased coastal radar and naval patrols to detect illegal departures of narco-submersibles from its Pacific coast.

Limitations:

- Despite increased surveillance, narco-submersibles still regularly launch from the Ecuadorian coast due to corruption, limited resources, and gaps in radar coverage.
- Many vessels are launched from remote mangrove areas that are hard to monitor.

4. Legal Reforms in Colombia and the U.S. (2010s–2020s)

Several nations introduced legal frameworks to criminalize the construction, possession, and operation of unregistered semi-submersible vessels.

Limitations:

- Prosecution is still difficult without direct evidence of drug cargo.
- Jurisdictional challenges remain in international waters.
- Laws vary greatly between countries, leaving legal loopholes.

Possible solutions

Existing Measures

1. Plan Colombia (1999–2015)

A joint U.S.–Colombian initiative aimed at reducing coca cultivation and dismantling

drug cartels. The plan included military aid, training, and surveillance technology, with part of the strategy focusing on detecting narco-submarines.

- *Limitations:*
Cartels rapidly improved sub design, making detection harder.
Human rights abuses and environmental harm weakened support.
Coca cultivation shifted to Peru and Bolivia.

2. Operation Martillo (2012–present)

A U.S.-led multinational effort involving over 20 countries from Central America, the Caribbean, and Europe. Through joint patrols and intelligence sharing, it has intercepted numerous narco-subs.

- *Limitations:*
Gaps in patrol coverage allow smugglers to adapt.
Traffickers switch routes and improve submersible technology.

3. Ecuador's Coastal Surveillance (2018–present)

Ecuador has boosted coastal radar and naval patrols to counter narco-sub launches from its Pacific coast.

- *Limitations:*
Remote mangrove areas remain hard to monitor.
Corruption and scarce resources hinder enforcement.

4. Legal Reforms (2010s–2020s)

Countries like Colombia and the U.S. have criminalized unregistered submersibles, even without drug cargo onboard.

- *Limitations:*
Enforcement in international waters is difficult.
Uneven legislation leaves exploitable legal gaps.

Further reading

1. UNODC – Global instability compounding social, economic and security costs of the world drug problem
https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/June/unodc-world-drug-report-2025_-global-instability-compounding-social--economic-and-security-costs-of-the-world-drug-problem.html
2. DEA – **Drug Trafficking Trends**
<https://www.dea.gov/>
3. Insight Crime – **Narco-Subs in Latin America**
<https://insightcrime.org/>
4. Slashgear – What is a submarine and where do they come from?
<https://www.slashgear.com/1805632/narco-submarine-explained-where-come-from-why-exist-drug-trafficking/>

Bibliography/ Further reading

ASEAN Secretariat. (2020). **Regional cooperation on combating drug trafficking**. ASEAN. <https://asean.org/storage/2020/09/ASEAN-Drug-Cooperation.pdf>

BBC News. (2019, March 15). **Narco-submarines: Drug smugglers' stealth vessels seized**. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-47512131>

European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs. (2024, July 25). **Global drug intelligence network: Reducing flow of international drugs**. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/global-drug-intelligence-network-reducing-flow-international-drugs-2024-07-25_en

Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. (2021). **Maritime drug trafficking and narco-submarines**. <https://globalinitiative.net/maritime-drug-trafficking/>

Grey Dynamics. (2024). **Narco-submarines guide: The underwater world of drug trafficking**. <https://greydynamics.com/narco-submarines-guide-the-underwater-world-of-drug-trafficking/>

Insight Crime. (2024). **Under radar: What hundreds of narco-sub seizures tell us about global cocaine routes**. <https://insightcrime.org/news/under-radar-what-hundreds-of-narco-sub-seizures-tell-us-about-global-cocaine-routes/>

Pardo, B. (2020). Narco-submarines and the evolving maritime drug trade. *Journal of Maritime Security*, 8(2), 134–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/MarSec.2020.02134>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2017). **Narco-submarines: The hidden threat in drug trafficking**. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/narco-submarines.html>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2023). **World drug report 2023**. <https://www.unodc.org/wdr2023>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2025, June). **UNODC world drug report 2025: Global instability compounding social, economic and security costs of the world drug problem**. https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2025/June/unodc-world-drug-report-2025_-global-instability-compounding-social--economic-and-security-costs-of-the-world-drug-problem.html

U.S. Coast Guard. (2018). **Drug interdiction operations: Narco-submarine seizures**. <https://www.uscg.mil/drug-interdiction>

World Health Organization. (2022). **The global health impact of narcotics trafficking**. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/global-health-narcotics-impact-2022>