

## Exploring Agreements of Convenience Made among Violent Non-State Actors

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### *Abstract*

*This article aims to enhance our understanding of how different groups of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) interact. It narrows the conceptual gap that has existed in the literature on VNSAs and the complex and multiple types of relationships that exist among them in order to better comprehend their decision-making and the ramifications that emerge from these decisions and interactions. Drawing on recent field research in Colombia's border regions, the study develops a typology of VNSA interactions, conceptualised as a two-dimensional "clustery continuum" of VNSA arrangements. These borderlands lend themselves to such an undertaking because different types of VNSAs are present there and they unite an internal armed conflict context with a non-conflict, yet violent context by comprising both the Colombian and the neighbouring countries' border zones. Taking a holistic and nuanced approach, this article first links the silos of civil war, mafia and organised crime literature by exploring situations in which these different dynamics coalesce. Second, it assumes a transnational perspective rather than a purely national view by considering borderlands that include territory of various states. Third, it unpacks the different types of VNSA interactions by describing them as based largely on economically motivated "arrangements of convenience", rather than drawing on a dichotomy of conflict and cooperation. This case study yields insights on how to develop a more sophisticated understanding of VNSA interactions in other contexts as well.*

### *Introduction*

This article aims to enhance our understanding of how different groups of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) interact by conceptualising these interactions as a two-dimensional "clustery continuum" of VNSA arrangements. The study draws on recent field research in Colombia's borderlands, which epitomize the myriad and complex types of relations that exist between diverse kinds of VNSAs. Some major features of Andean borderlands add fuel to this precarious mixture: weak state governance systems, a low-risk/high-opportunity environment, and a proneness to impunity, rendering border zones "the place to be" for rebels, paramilitaries, post-demobilized groups, and criminal organisations alike. In such an environment, different groups are hostile to each other and fight for territorial control. And yet, VNSAs also cooperate to profit from illegal economic activities, especially drug trafficking.

The VNSA presence in borderlands has spurred state and civil society concerns regarding security policies and started to generate academic work on the causes and implications of the borderland status quo.[1] Though these works doubtlessly represent important contributions to understanding the security implications of VNSA-presence, significant gaps remain vis-à-vis the puzzling relationships among VNSAs. In particular, investigations into the transnational

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relationships among VNSAs involved in illicit economic activities such as drug trafficking are avenues which have until now remained unexplored.[2]

To be sure, investigations on non-borderland areas in Colombia and in other regions of the world have examined the dynamics that are generated by the presence of armed groups and other VNSAs. However, this literature is very segmented and speaks to specific types of VNSAs only. For example, there is a large body of literature on how insurgent or paramilitary groups shape civil war dynamics, including Kalyvas (2006), Arjona (2010), Collier (2003) and Stanliland (2012).[3] Other works such as Gambetta (1993) and Varese (2001) look at how mafia groups interact with each other, and yet other works focus on the interactions of different drug cartels, for example in the Mexican context.[4]

Another growing body of literature has analysed how different types of VNSAs interact, yet these considerations are mostly confined to one country, such as Williams' (2009) work on Iraq, [5] or, guided by the post-9/11 security paradigm that focuses on the "crime-terror-nexus", they concentrate on the groups' long-term motivations rather than on the interactions among them as such.[6] The apparent absence of a conceptualisation of the different types of interactions has led to dichotomies of conflict and cooperation, which are represented by works on conspiracy theories,[7] conflict theories,[8] and in-house-criminality theories.[9] Only recently, scholars have started to take a more fine-grained look at interactions of different armed groups, an example being Stanliland's analysis of relationships between insurgents and the state in civil war contexts, yet not of interaction among various kinds of VNSAs.[10]

This article aims to complement these different works by taking both a more holistic and more nuanced approach. Colombia's borderlands lend themselves to such an undertaking because different types of VNSAs—including civil war actors, mafia organisations, networks of organised crime and common criminals—are present there. Also, they unite a civil war context with a non-conflict yet violent context by including both the Colombian "conflict-situation" and the neighbouring countries' "non-conflict situation". Against this backdrop, empirical evidence is used from these borderlands to develop a typology of VNSA interactions, conceptualised as a two-dimensional "clustery continuum of VNSA arrangements."

In doing so, this article first links the silos of civil war, mafia and organised crime literature by considering a context in which these different dynamics coalesce. Second, it assumes a transnational perspective rather than a purely national view by considering borderlands that include territory of various states. Third, drawing on a modified version of Phil Williams' (2002) business network theory, it unpacks the different types of VNSA interactions by describing them as based largely on economically motivated "arrangements of convenience", rather than drawing on a dichotomy of conflict and cooperation. This case study yields insights on how to develop a more sophisticated understanding of VNSA interactions in other contexts as well.[11]

Following a brief comment on methodology and categorisation, the article describes Colombia's borderlands, the dynamics of the Andean region and the global cocaine business, and the borderland department of Nariño, the focus of this study. Then a typology is offered of different kinds of VNSA interactions, followed by some reflections on how scholars and policymakers can make use of this conceptualisation in other regions as well.

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***A Word about Methodology and Categorisation***

The methodology used to analyse multiple types of arrangements among different kinds of VNSAs is based on a case study design that draws on examples of arrangements in the Colombian southern border department of Nariño and other areas along the Colombian-Ecuadorian and Colombian-Venezuelan border. To these regions qualitative methods (complemented by quantitative dimensions) were applied. Various data sources and research methods were used. Over the period of nine months (August 2011 to May 2012), anonymous, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Colombian departments of Cundinamarca, Nariño, Norte de Santander and Putumayo; the Ecuadorian provinces of Carchi, Esmeraldas, Pichincha and Sucumbíos; and the Venezuelan state of Táchira. Interviewees included academics, government officials, members of the state forces, staff of international and non-governmental organizations, ex-combatants, community leaders including Afro- and indigenous leaders, clerics, displaced persons and refugees. These data were complemented by participatory observation in civil society events and local community reunions, reviews of policy documents, media articles and secondary literature, as well as the evaluation of surveys and databases.

Before mapping the VNSA interactions two caveats are in order that arise from the particular nature of the study. First, the subject under investigation is associated to illegality and thus data is partly based on estimates and unofficial information. In order to mitigate this challenge, the variety of sources described above enabled source triangulation, which was then used to evaluate the validity of field research findings. Methodological triangulation allowed for further cross-checking. Second, given the informality of the VNSA groups and their interactions, labels serve the purpose of analytical clarity rather than to create typologies based on political or economic motivations. There have been cases in which small criminal gangs committed crimes in the name of groups, including the so-called Rastrojos or Águilas Negras, in order to gain leverage, although the latter distanced themselves from being authors of the crimes. Also, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC) militias in urban spaces operate in a functionally different way than FARC members in remote, rural areas. Thus, though reflecting their organisational membership, subsuming them under “FARC” might not necessarily speak to the differences in the ways in which they interact with other groups.

***The Andean Borderlands and the Global Cocaine Business***

Context is key to understanding any type of VNSA interaction. During the 1970s, Colombia became the world’s largest cocaine producer, with an increasing number of armed groups becoming involved in the cocaine business. Coca was primarily cultivated in Bolivia and Peru while Colombia was the centre of processing and trafficking. But with the emergence of two major drug cartels in Medellin and Cali during the 1980s, Colombian traffickers started to dominate the business. This benefited most armed groups, including guerrilla and paramilitary groups that formed part of Colombia’s decades-old internal armed conflict.[12] FARC and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), two major insurgent groups that still operate today, started to coexist with the cocaine business by levying taxes on traffickers in exchange for protecting the illicit cultivations, laboratories and exports.[13] When the two cartels were destroyed in the early 1990s and the cocaine market became more disorganised, the cultivation of

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coca within Colombia increased and the paramilitaries and FARC intensified their involvement in the drug business. While the former dominated international cocaine trafficking, the latter expanded their activities to direct control, production, and domestic distribution.[14] Officially, from 2003 to 2006, the paramilitary umbrella organisation United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, founded in 1997, was demobilized, but this process concurred with the emergence of smaller successor groups, paramilitary splinter groups and criminal groups. They co-operate in drug trafficking and, at times, form alliances with FARC or ELN.[15]

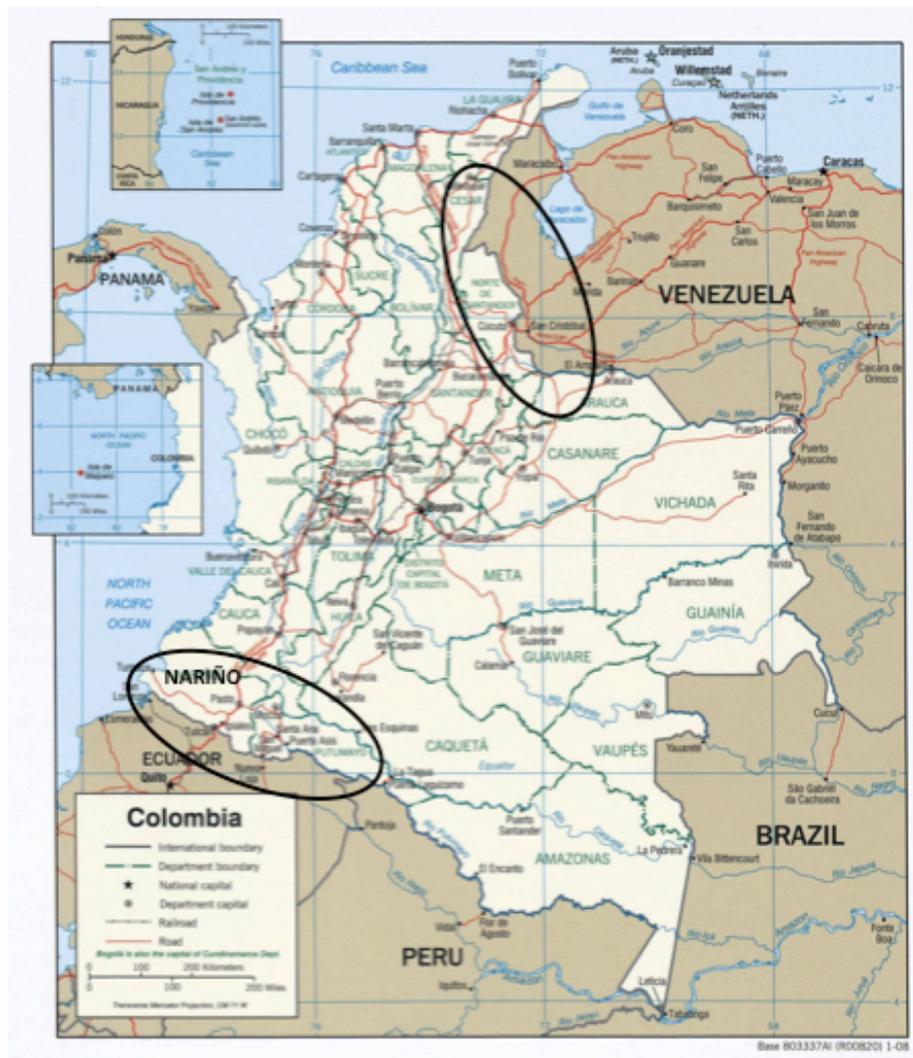
Today, the cocaine business pervades the entire Andean region. Though the overall surface area of coca cultivation decreased from an estimated 210,900 hectares in 2001 to 149,100 hectares in 2010, coca cultivations are still widespread: for 2010, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reports cultivation estimates of 30,900 hectares in Bolivia, 62,000 hectares in Colombia and 61,200 hectares in Peru.[16] Areas of coca cultivation have also been detected in the border zones of Ecuador, Brazil, Panama and Venezuela, often close to processing laboratories. Likewise, services connected to the cocaine business are provided throughout the region. Ecuador, for example, is crucial for money laundering and the provision of precursors.[17] Finally, all Andean states, particularly Ecuador and Venezuela, are starting points of drug trafficking routes to markets in Europe or the United States.[18]

In order to explore how different types of VNSAs interact, this analysis draws on examples from the Colombian Southern border department of Nariño,[19] complemented by examples from other areas situated along the Colombian-Ecuadorian and Colombian-Venezuelan borderlines (see Figure 1). Borderlands are convenient sites for this type of research because different types of VNSAs coalesce (civil war combatants, organized criminal networks, mafia, common criminals). Furthermore, assuming a transnational perspective that includes both sides of the borderline, the border context serves to scrutinise to what extent there are differences depending on whether the local political situation is a conflict or non-conflict context. Nariño in particular is a fruitful case to examine because it concentrates a high number of different VNSAs that interact with each other in multiple ways.

As Table 1 illustrates, a Colombian think tank has estimated that, as of 2008, there are over 2,300 members of various VNSA groups operating within this department.[20]

**Table 1:** Groups and Member Estimates

<b>Group</b>	<b>Estimated Members in Nariño in 2008</b>
Rastrojos	800
FARC	700
National Liberation Army (ELN)	400
Águilas Negras	180
Autodefensas Campesinas Nueva Generación	150
Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia	150

**Figure 1:** Map of Andean Borderlands, with Field Research Locations Highlighted

**Source:** University of Texas, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, online at:

[http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/txu-oclc-256488229-colombia\\_pol\\_2008.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/txu-oclc-256488229-colombia_pol_2008.jpg)

Two reasons for the high concentration of VNSAs in Nariño stand out: first, the developments in Colombia's security policies since the beginning of this millennium, and second, the department's geostrategic relevance. First, the impacts of Plan Colombia were particularly drastic in Nariño's neighbouring department Putumayo. Due to intense eradication efforts and the state forces' military operations, both coca cultivations and armed groups shifted eastward to Nariño, where these groups have been gaining strength, particularly over the last five years. Second, Nariño comprises all stages of the cocaine production chain. Favoured by propitious climatic and geographic conditions, with almost 15,951 hectares of coca in 2010, Nariño has the

largest amount of coca cultivation areas of any Colombian department. The territory is also heavily used for the production of cocaine: processing coca leaves into coca paste, and crystallising this paste. 334 cocaine base laboratories (*cocinas*) and thirty-four hydrochloride cocaine laboratories (*crystalizadores*) were destroyed here in 2010. The fact that there are further laboratories that have been detected, but not destroyed (and presumably even more that have not been detected), shows the dimensions of this business within the department. Finally, Nariño is also a hot spot for the latter stages of the cocaine business. It has both a land border (with Ecuador) and a maritime border (with the Pacific Ocean), and thus comprises two of the seven starting points of international trafficking routes. A case in point is the route starting in Tumaco, where the cocaine is loaded on partially submersible vessels (called semi-submarines) in order to be transported via the Galapagos Islands to Central America, or Mexico and then trafficked into the US.

The Colombian state forces constitute a further armed group whose presence in the department is remarkably high. The number of state forces present in Nariño has increased from 6,000 active members in 2008 to 14,000 active members in 2011.[21] This presence influences the ways in which VNSAs interact and, also, members of the state forces engage in direct interactions with VNSAs. Considering the complex relationships that exist between VNSAs and state forces would go beyond the scope of this article; however, it definitely constitutes a fascinating separate issue on which further research is required.[22]

### *Categories of VNSA Arrangements*

To explain the relationships among VNSAs, Phil Williams' conceptualisation of VNSAs as "business networks" can be used as a starting point. It postulates that the relationships between VNSAs are variable and that they have "arrangements of convenience"—that is, they form various types of linkages to pursue specific interests and can range from conflict and competition to co-ordination and co-operation.[23] Williams applies this concept mainly to the interactions of different criminal groups, but, as the works of Schmid and Naylor show, it can also be instructive regarding the interactions of different types of VNSAs.[24] The links between different VNSA groups are similar to those that can be detected in the licit business world, as Williams and Godson note: "The collaboration may take diverse forms ranging from strategic alliances and joint ventures at the most ambitious level through tactical alliances, contract relationships, supplier customer relations, to spot sales at the most basic level." [25] Through these links the different groups form a network which is adaptable, resilient, and conducive to expansion. This is advantageous for two reasons: it brings mutual benefit and spreads the risk.

Based on fieldwork in the Colombian-Ecuadorian and Colombian-Venezuelan borderlands, seven categories of arrangements of convenience can be identified in which different kinds of VNSAs may engage:

- i. Violent combat
- ii. Spot sales and barter agreements
- iii. Tactical alliances

- iv. Subcontract relationships
- v. Transactional supply chain relationships
- vi. Strategic alliances
- vii. Pacific coexistence

This typology serves analytical purposes and thus is a simplifying exercise. In reality, the categories are very fluid and flexible—i.e., the lines between the different types of arrangements are blurred. Given their dynamic nature, they can change over time and space. A certain type of arrangement that exists between one or more groups with another or other groups can evolve into another one: spot sales may evolve into tactical alliances to subcontract relationships and, eventually, they can be transformed into a strategic alliance. However, this does not necessarily occur in a linear way. Fragile arrangements such as tactical alliances may at once change into violent combat. Also pacific coexistence can “jump” straight into violent combat if one party to the arrangement does not comply with the tacit rules. Conversely, tactical alliances can develop directly into a strategic alliance. Furthermore, as indicated above, the different VNSA groups are not always easy to identify, since some may operate in the name of others or different subgroups operate differently under the same name.

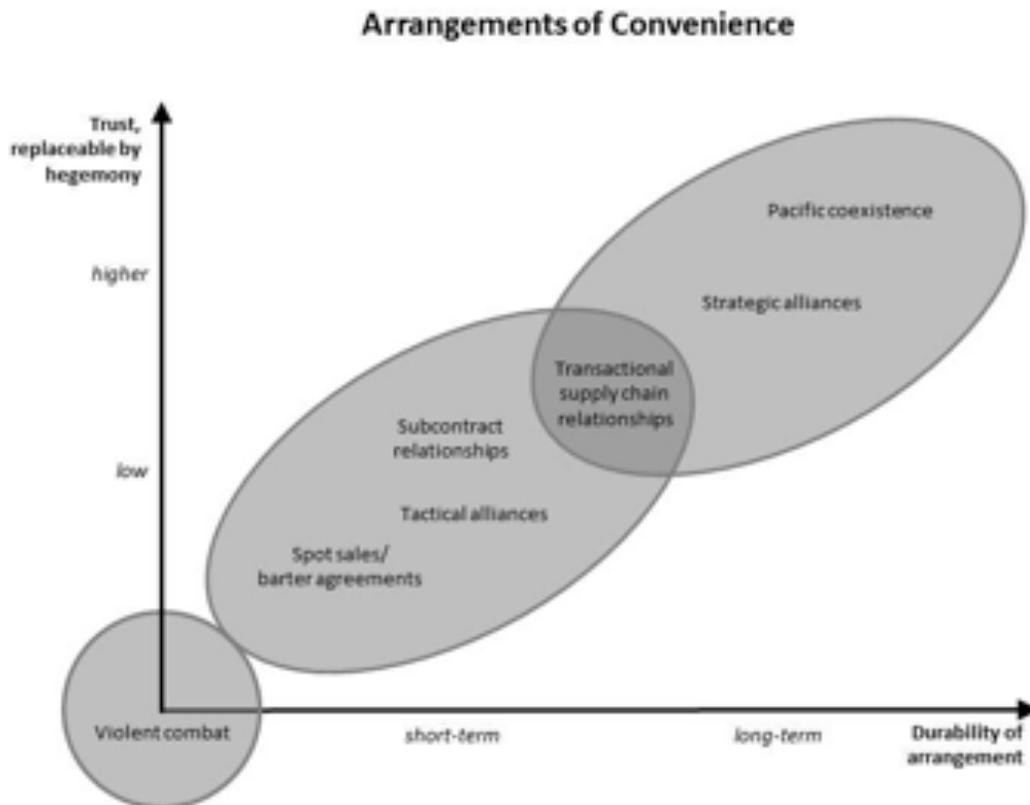
Also note that they can overlap; they are not mutually exclusive. One group can engage in various arrangements simultaneously; for example, Group A can have a strategic alliance with Group B and, at the same time, engage in violent combat with Group C. Furthermore, different arrangements can be embedded into each other and form spatial enclaves. There might be an enclave of tactical alliances between Group C and D within a certain territory in which transactional relationships exist between Group A and Group B. For example, while the rural areas of Catatumbo are under FARC and ELN control, in villages within these areas post-demobilised groups have arrangements among themselves.[26] Finally, these arrangements do not take shape in isolation of other actors. VNSAs not only interact among themselves, they also engage in arrangements with state forces, local elites and external actors, among others. This typology does not comprehensively reflect this complex reality, but rather serves as an analytical tool to enhance understanding of VNSA interactions.

To increase the analytical leverage of these categories of arrangements, they can be conceptualised as comprising a two-dimensional “clustery continuum”, as illustrated in Figure 2. The vertical dimension constitutes the degree of trust between the groups that interact.[27] It can range from non-existent trust over low trust to higher trust. Importantly, trust can be replaced by hegemony of one group. For instance, if Group A is hegemonic and subcontracts Group B, this arrangement might be based on the fact that Group A is more powerful than Group B and thus Group B complies with the rules of the arrangement in fear of punishment rather than because of a trust-relationship between the two. The horizontal dimension is the durability of the arrangement. It can range from non-existent over short-term to long-term arrangements. This dimension combines temporality, stability and institutionalisation. The more stable and institutionalised the arrangement, the more durable it tends to be. Situating the seven categories

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of arrangements on two axes that represent the two dimensions – the degree of trust (hegemony) and the durability of the arrangement – shows how they relate to each other.

Figure 2



Most notably, there is a correlation between the degree of trust and the durability of the arrangements. If there is no trust at all, the VNSAs are likely to fight each other; a minimal degree of trust is necessary in order to engage in spot sales or barter agreements; some more trust is required in order to make a tactical alliance work and so on. In brief, if VNSAs groups trust each other more, they seem to be more likely to engage in more stable relationships.

Based on these two dimensions, the seven categories of arrangements can be organized into three clusters. They differ regarding their anticipated durability and seem to concur with non-existent, low, and higher trust (or hegemony) respectively. The first cluster is *violent combat* which is determined by non-existent trust and characterised by a non-existent arrangement. The second cluster comprises *short-term arrangements*, in which we see a preponderance of spot sales and barter agreements, tactical alliances and subcontract relationships. These arrangements are based on a low degree of trust among groups and they usually are not very durable. Finally, the third cluster includes *long-term arrangements*. They are rooted in a relatively high degree of trust and may endure for extensive periods of time.

One should bear in mind that the durability of any relationship is a direct product of the local context; hence, one should refrain from defining “short-term” and “long-term” arrangements, which could be done by attributing a certain number of days, weeks, months or years to them. In reality, a tactical alliance may last three days, for example if two groups decide to use the same harbour to stock cocaine over three days until the illegal drug is shipped overseas. It can also last only one day, if this is the time that it takes for the VNSA groups to use the same trafficking route. Similarly, pacific coexistence may exist during two years, but it can also suddenly change into violent combat after six months, if power constellations have changed or personal interests come into play.[28]

In the same way as the durability of arrangements can be in flux, the limits between the three different clusters are vague, particularly between short- and long-term arrangements. In this regard, the grey zone in which transactional supply chain relationships can be situated stands out. Here, as will be explained below, low levels of trust are overcome by a broker, facilitating the long durability of these kinds of arrangements.

Based on empirical evidence from Colombia’s borderlands, VNSA arrangements across the region can be mapped in order to illustrate the two-dimensional “clustery continuum”. The focus is Nariño; however, additional examples from other areas along the Colombian-Ecuadorian and Colombian-Venezuelan borderline shall be included in order to consolidate the findings.

### *Non-existent Arrangement*

#### *(i) Violent combat*

Violent combat may arise when there is no trust between groups and diverging or conflicting interests impede any kind of agreement. There is no agreement to share a certain territory or business, nor does one group agree to simply go away or let go. Hence, disputes, threats of violence and, ultimately, violent combat can arise—for example, in order to drive out or absorb another group, to defend a territory or business or in revenge of a previous event. Violent combat can also exist if, initially, there was an agreement (for example a tactical alliance), but one of the parties decides to “break the rules of the game” and no longer adheres to it. This is comparable to competition in the licit business world, yet based on the means of violence. Examples of Nariño include violent combat between ELN and FARC in the municipality of Barbacoas in 2010. In July 2011 the same region suffered clashes between Águilas Negras, Rastrojos, and the FARC. [29] Things are similar in the Colombian-Venezuelan borderlands. In Cúcuta in 2011, for example, which had been under the dominion of the Rastrojos, the Urabeños entered and began taking over control. This example shows that violent combat does not necessarily manifest itself in a traditional war battlefield. Rather, violence is employed in a more subtle, selective way. For example, the Urabeños gained control by killing Rastrojos’ informants and messengers that are hardly distinguishable from other civilians in an attempt to impose a new – their own – network of informants. An adolescent who hangs around near high school, a vegetable salesman, a lady selling “minutes” for mobile phones – anyone of them might be an informant and hence be killed or threatened due to the absence of an agreement between the two groups. Instances were also

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found of overlapping and multiple arrangements that include violent combat. For instance, in Tumaco as of April 2012 there have reportedly been violent disputes between Rastrojos together with FARC on the one hand and Águilas Negras with smaller criminal gangs on the other hand.

The costs and benefits of violent combat between different VNSAs are obvious. As a downside, they have to invest material, financial and human costs in order to sustain the fighting. Yet if they win their fight, an increase in economic, social and/or political power, territorial dominion and prestige are just some of the prospects that may make it worthwhile for VNSAs to engage in such an undertaking. To be sure, the prospects of victory are not always based on such strategic long-term impacts. Violent disputes can also break out due to personal interests, for example if a local boss decides to operate independently or a group member takes action on his or her own. The reasons for such behaviour are manifold. They can range from personal revenge (for example, if a member of another group has an affair with his or her partner), greed, or internal power struggles (for example, with the objective of overthrowing his or her boss).

### ***Short-term Arrangements***

Short-term arrangements are comprised in the second cluster of the two-dimensional continuum of arrangements of convenience. They are based on low trust and tend to last over a relatively short period of time.

#### ***(i) Spot sales and barter agreements***

Spot sales involve commodities, for example illegal drugs or weapons that are purchased immediately “on the spot”, either on a cash basis or as a barter agreement (for example, arms-for-drugs-deals). They can be destined for the internal market of the country where the deal takes place, or for export to markets in other regions such as the U.S. or Europe. Even though spot sales and barter agreements are often just a one-off transaction, they require a minimal degree of trust between the two parties of the deal or hegemony of one group. Also, spot sales and barter agreements are characterised by minimal institutionalisation and stability. At least at the moment of switching products or paying cash for a certain good, both parties have to share some common understanding on what the deal is about.

Driven by economic interests, such business deals can materialize very spontaneously. Leaders of hostile groups may sit together to undertake a deal one day because it brings benefits to both of them, and the next day they might fight each other again. The village of Llorente, on the road that connects Tumaco with Pasto in the Colombian department of Nariño, is notorious for such deals. Apparently, in 2007 it resembled a “business centre” where members of VNSA groups met to negotiate shipments, entries of precursors, and made payments to access trafficking routes or purchase illegal goods.[30]

Comparative advantages are key in these types of relationships. For example, in the case of arms-for-drugs deals in the northern part of Colombian Norte de Santander and in the Venezuelan state of Zulia, Colombian VNSAs exchange cocaine with arms provided by Venezuelan VNSAs. The Colombian VNSAs, particularly the FARC and ELN, need the arms to sustain the fight against the Colombian government. Against this, the Venezuelan VNSAs ship

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the cocaine via international trafficking routes that start near the Lake of Maracaibo and continue via West Africa to end on the market of Western Europe. Consequently, the benefits that may arise for VNSAs from these types of arrangements are very high. However, the risk is also very high. Given the minimal degree of trust, deals can easily be dishonoured. Cheating and betrayals are common; also, treachery involving state forces has occurred. An important aspect in this regard is the illegality of these deals. Certainly, this characteristic brings huge benefits, especially in borderlands, which feature a low-risk/high-opportunity environment because the state presence tends to be rather low and border crossings increase the illegal products' value. Nevertheless, while the risk to be detected by law enforcement officials may be rather low, the risk of a "broken deal" is very high. Given that the deals are by no means legally binding, VNSAs have to base their calculations regarding whether to engage in them or not on the minimal degree of trust they might have and on the potential to use their power to enforce compliance. In other words, trust might be replaced by power of one group.

(ii) *Tactical alliances*

Tactical alliances are temporary collaborative agreements between different VNSAs. Trust tends to be rather low among groups in these types of arrangements. Based on immediate benefits and often personal considerations, they are only a little stable and institutionalised, hence they fall under short-term arrangements.

As the example of the city of Tumaco demonstrates, these features make them extremely fragile. [31] In Tumaco, Águilas Negras, Rastrojos, FARC militias of the mobile column Daniel Aldana, the Sinaloa cartel and other criminal groups are present.[32] Most of them are likely to form tactical alliances at times—for example, in the form of sharing intelligence to circumvent law enforcement measures, using the same wharf or transport routes to ship their illegal goods, or purchasing equipment, such as ammunition and weapons, or cocaine from the same brokers. These alliances may break if, for instance, a leader feels humiliated by actions of a member of the other group, if an alliance with another group promises greater benefits, or if someone is suspected to be traitor.

By definition, in most cases tactical alliances are not designed to serve long-term strategic purposes. In a similar manner, the costs and benefits materialize immediately. On the one hand, the most obvious benefits are the economic profits and increased social status that VNSAs can reap from tactical alliances. In the case of Colombia's borderlands, those places which constitute the starting points or key of international trafficking routes such as Tumaco or key hubs of "narco-transactions" such as Cúcuta are particularly attractive for VNSAs to engage in these arrangements. Near borders, especially maritime borders, the value of the illicit products that are at the core of these arrangements tends to be higher than elsewhere. The products have already passed most of the stages of the production chain and thus accumulated value. Moreover, the borderlands' low-risk/high-opportunity environment makes these deals extremely lucrative.

On the other hand, an obvious cost factor is the instability of these kinds of arrangements. Given the high opportunities that these deals provide, competition is high and "business partners" quickly replace each other. The rules of the games being rarely clear, the fragile nature of tactical alliances leads to high rates of mistrust. Quickly shifting support networks produce uncertainty

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that often gives reason to engage in violence, which takes shape in selective homicides against potential traitors, suspected state collaborators, messengers, or informants. Since no one knows who is on whose side, on whom to rely, and to whom to talk, it is extremely difficult to establish who might be involved in those arrangements, and who is not. The lines between bystanders and active members are highly blurred. In Tumaco for example, schoolchildren are paid by members of VNSA groups to transport small arms in their school bags. In Ipiales, newspaper readers standing on a street corner or sitting on a park bank may be informants.[33] In such tense environments, emotions can lead to lethal acts of aggression, for instance as personal revenge. The minimal degree of trust among VNSAs, and the fact that many of such tactical alliances are based on personal considerations, can lead to dilemmas for each group member and destroy what could be called “group-internal social fabric”. How can one be loyal to their superiors if they might have switched sides? How can one rely on support of fellow group members if they might be traitors and have engaged in a temporary tactical alliance with the enemy to maximise their own personal benefits? In this regard, organisational structure matters. Members of groups that are organised hierarchically and that have a long history tend to face fewer dilemmas than those of groups which are highly fragmented and follow a network-like logic with independent cells or nodes led by rather independent middle-range bosses.

(iii) *Sub-contract relationships*

Sub-contract relationships among VNSAs are relationships in which one party accepts an offer of another party to provide certain services over a defined period of time. This can be a one-time service such as a contract killing or a service provided over a longer period of time, such as the provision of security services through modern mercenaries. In Tumaco, for example, the Águilas Negras are said to have been contracted by the Mexican Sinaloa cartel in order to provide security services.[34] These kinds of relationships are more institutionalised than spot sales and barter agreements, which are only one-off transactions. Also they are likely to be more institutionalised than tactical alliances.

Arguably, although there is a rather low level of trust, sub-contract relationships require more trust between groups than spot sales and barter agreements because the service provided takes place after the arrangements have been made. However, this trust-base can also be replaced by hegemony of one group. Often, the sub-contracted group becomes dependent on the “contractor,” or complies in fear of punishment. In Ocaña, for instance, post-demobilised groups are said to have contracted youth gangs in order to keep certain neighbourhoods under control.[35] Such sub-contract relationships can also take shape across borders, as seen in the case of San Lorenzo, situated in the Ecuadorian province of Esmeraldas which borders Colombia. In San Lorenzo, local youth gangs have been sub-contracted by Colombian post-demobilised groups.[36] Finally, sub-contract relationships can emerge from simple favours, a practice that has been common among many mafia structures in Italy, the United States and other parts of the world.[37] A gang boss might help out someone in need and, in return, sub-contract this person at a later point in time to provide a service. The advantage of such kinds of arrangements is that each party to the contract can make use of particular skills and experiences. For example, the youth gangs know the local context better than post-demobilised groups that come from other parts of the country,

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and thus have better leverage to put pressure on them. Furthermore, sub-contract relationships spread the risk and increase impunity as law enforcement officials have more difficulties in tracing back the crime's intellectual perpetrator than would be the case in a direct crime. On the downside, the sub-contracted party enters into a relationship of dependence which can be very difficult to exit, and the contracting party has to rely on the trustworthiness or the effectiveness of threat of punishment in order to be sure that the service will be provided. Frequently, contract killers have turned against their own bosses in order to increase power; recent examples can be found in Putumayo earlier this year.[38]

### *Long-term Arrangements*

Long-term arrangements are based on higher levels of trust and are more durable than short-term arrangements.

#### *(iv) Transactional supply chain relationships*

In the case of transactional supply chain relationships, the groups are at "arm's length". They respect territorial limits of influence within which each group exercises economic, social and/or political control. Since in most cases this leads to a territorial segmentation, the groups usually have limited commitment with each other, though being connected through financial or material transactions. The demarcations of influence can be drawn according to the supply chain along which illegal or legal activities (such as mining) take place. Accordingly, the territorial segmentation is reflected in the "division of labour" in which each group assumes one or several specific functions. Important examples for the Andean context are the production stages of cocaine: for example, the FARC protect and control the cultivation and the first production stages, a drug trafficker (or broker) buys the coca paste and sells it to the Rastrojos, and these or other groups are in charge of further processing and transporting. Another broker negotiates with international organised criminal organisations such as the Mexican drug cartels, who buy the cocaine and take over international trafficking of the final product.[39] This appears to be the case along River Mira: while the FARC's Daniel Aldana mobile column apparently controls Bajo Mira, the Rastrojos are said to control Alto Mira and Frontera and have links with Mexican drug cartels in charge of the international shipment. Notably, the operational territories of different VNSAs often coincide with an urban-rural divide.[40] Generally, rebel groups in control of coca cultivations and the first processing steps, particularly ELN and FARC, are principally present in rural areas.[41] Against this, the new emerging, post-demobilised, drug trafficking and "neo-paramilitary" groups, subsumed by the Colombian government under the general term BACRIM (*bandas criminales emergentes* – emerging criminal bands), tend to exercise territorial dominion in urban areas which are strategic for trafficking routes, international shipment and other connected services.

The broker role described in this example is crucial for understanding the considerable degree of stability and institutionalisation of the arrangement which one would expect to be based on high levels of trust. While short-term agreements feature low trust, and long-term agreements relatively high trust, transactional supply chain relationships are different. In this case, there

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usually is no direct interaction between groups. Being an intermediate figure, the broker allows for relatively stable relationships by bridging the “trust-gap” that might exist between the groups—particularly if they have different ideological or political motivations, or simply differ in their economic interests. This might explain why insurgent groups have quite durable arrangements to engage in transactions with post-demobilised groups although the trust base is rather low. It might also explain why in some cases, rebels such as the FARC who protect coca cultivations and control the first processing from coca to coca paste suddenly switch “business partners” for the final processing into cocaine and the shipment: the broker might have found a higher bidder or the broker has changed. For example, in Catatumbo—a rural region in Norte de Santander—Víctor Ramón Navarro Serrano, alias “Megateo”, is an important broker. With an influence sphere that reaches to the Venezuelan side of the border, he is the puppet master of many of the most crucial deals relating to the cocaine business in the region and has contributed to maintaining the division of labour within the lucrative illicit drug business over many years.[42] So, while benefits arise from the specialisation and comparative advantages of each group, their dependence on the broker to merchandise the product, to buy the product that needs further processing or to ship it to the international market can constitute limitations on the VNSAs’ scope of decision-making as to how to manage their income sources.

(v) *Strategic alliances*

Strategic alliances are long-term commitments between different VNSAs that are based on a relatively high degree of trust and institutionalisation. They share intelligence, revenues, and/or expenses and might have “war pacts” in order to jointly fight against a third group.[43] In Nariño, ELN and FARC are said to operate jointly in the municipalities of Santa Cruz, Samaniego, Cumbitara, La Llanada and Los Andes, among others, to combat state forces.[44] Also in the area of Catatumbo, they seem to have joined forces. This is suggested by graffiti of the two group names at house walls, painted in the same colours and the same style, suggesting that they have been produced by one person and would have been eliminated if one of the two had rejected them.[45] In these cases, they share the same territory. The same applies to the relationships between Águilas Negras and Rastrojos, who apparently joined forces in Tumaco, though previously they fought each other.[46] Another type of example is the supposed strategic alliance between the FARC and the Mexican Sinaloa cartel, which allowed the FARC to conduct ideological work in Mexico.[47] Here, the two groups operate in different territories; it therefore can be cited as a special case of strategic alliances across different regions.

Strategic alliances can also be in force in only a limited territory. In Putumayo for example, the FARC are said to be present in the area surrounding Puerto Guzman, the Rastrojos in Puerto Caicedo, and a mix of various different VNSAs in Puerto Asís. The trafficking route from northern parts of Colombia via Putumayo to the Ecuadorian province of Sucumbios and finally the Ecuadorian capital city Quito connects these three places. Without being of much strategic importance as such, Puerto Caicedo in particular is an important transit point through which drugs and arms have to be transported. Therefore, if groups such as the FARC wish to cross the village, they have to engage in an arrangement with the Rastrojos who control it.[48] While being limited spatially, in temporal terms such an arrangement can be long-lasting. It is

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implemented on a reiterative basis: the FARC or other groups not only cross the territory under the Rastrojos' dominion once, but on a regular basis in order to traffic drugs or arms. Usually, they pay some kind of "taxes" or "protection money". This arrangement guarantees that they can pass their merchandise without being attacked by the Rastrojos who, in turn, benefit from the financial profits they make out of this arrangement.[49]

Whether hegemony plays a role in strategic alliances is questionable. If two groups engage in a long-term arrangement and one of them is considerably more powerful, it suggests itself that the weaker one is absorbed by the stronger one. This can be the case because members of the less powerful group defect to the hegemon as they hope to reap more benefits out of it. In this case, they can be considered part of the hegemon and no interaction with a second group is taking place. Or the weaker group is absorbed because the hegemon forces group members to capitulate and join them and those who do not do so are killed; this scenario can be equalled with violent combat.

Similarly to the previously described arrangements, costs of engaging in strategic alliances involve the loss of the VNSA group's independency. Nonetheless, it can be an indispensable means to assert oneself against a third party, particularly state forces, and is therefore of considerable use if trust is relatively high among groups.

#### *(vi) Pacific coexistence*

Pacific coexistence is another long-term arrangement based on rather high levels of trust which tend to be comparatively stable. In this case, different VNSAs have tacit agreements of non-aggression and non-interference in each other's affairs.[50] They may share a territory and operate in a parallel manner without having any kind of interaction, or they operate in neighbouring territories and respect their territorial limits—for example, along important infrastructure elements such as oil pipelines and rivers or streams as well as land trafficking routes. In both cases, the VNSAs exercise economic, social and/or political control within the environment they are embedded in. To cite an example, in late 2007 and early 2008, FARC and Águilas Negras appeared to have an arrangement of pacific coexistence in Norte de Santander. [51] The advantage of such a relationship is the absence of risks or loss of independence which might occur in the case of other arrangements. However, despite trust, there is always the risk that the other party to the arrangement might disobey the rules of the game. Furthermore, without having any transactions, the group acts in isolation, which makes it less competitive in comparison to highly specialised VNSAs that rely on division of labour and comparative advantages to increase economic profits.

#### ***The Added Value of the Typology***

From this analysis of the conceptual "clustery continuum of VNSA arrangements," we can derive insights on a number of important factors, including the drivers of group decision-making, the levels of violence that result from VNSA interactions, the variation in impacts on local communities, and the importance of group-specific characteristics. Importantly, these factors are

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not only relevant to the context of Colombia's borderlands, but are also applicable to the study of other regions that face similar challenges arising from the activities of VNSAs.

(i) *Drivers of decision-making*

As the discussion of the typology's components has demonstrated, the rationale for VNSAs to engage in one or several arrangements of convenience is similar to the economic motivations that are decisive in the licit business world. First, arrangements among groups increase mutual benefits through maximising comparative advantages. In the case of transactional supply chain relationships, each link in the chain is different. In most areas of Nariño, Putumayo and Norte de Santander, the FARC control coca cultivations and are in charge of the first processing phase. To cite one example, they are historically rooted in rural areas of Putumayo where they receive the local population's support. The post-demobilised groups are concentrated in urban areas and have closer links to trafficking organisations from other countries, for example the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel or the Zetas. This analysis therefore suggests that some groups establish a certain division of labour within the illegal drug supply chain rather than controlling everything at once. Another factor that has seemed to be pivotal for VNSAs' decision-making is to spread the risk. In this regard, sub-contract relationships are cases in point. Contract killings considerably minimize the risk of being connected to particular crimes by law enforcement officials. The immediate perpetrator is often contracted by a middle man who works for someone else, hence, the intellectual perpetrator of a contracted homicide is hard to determine. VNSAs resort to such arrangements so that their crimes remain in impunity and, on top of this, the investment costs are not very high. For example, in the Ecuadorian coastal province of Esmeraldas, which borders Colombian Nariño, killers can be contracted for no more than twenty US dollars.[52] Surely, while comparative advantages and spreading the risk are reasons for VNSAs to engage in short- or long-term arrangements, diverging interests may lead to a situation of non-existent arrangements (e.g., violent combat).

To these rather generic points that drive VNSAs to make arrangements (or not) with other groups, one needs to add some additional factors that influence why a VNSA group decides to interact with others in one or several of the above outlined types of arrangements. Empirical evidence from Colombia's borderlands has shown that four factors are particularly relevant: first, the degree of trust between groups; second, the local context; third, the role of the state forces and other external actors; and fourth, the organisational structure of the VNSA group.

First, as outlined above, the degree of trust seems to correlate with the stability and durability of an arrangement. Hence, if Group A and Group B have only minimal trust in each other, they are unlikely to engage in a strategic alliance. Second, the local context shapes VNSA groups' decision-making. Being embedded in a context where a group has an historic stronghold, VNSAs are more likely to engage in more durable relationships with others. Conversely, contexts of recent interest to many groups leave VNSAs less clear about who has what kind of support from whom and are therefore often the setting of multiple different types of short-term arrangements, as seen in the case of Tumaco. Another defining variable is whether the state where the arrangements take place is in armed internal conflict or not. Comparing the Ecuadorian with the Colombian side of the Colombian-Ecuadorian borderlands demonstrates that most groups tend to

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maintain a lower profile on the Ecuadorian side. To be sure, this might be a reflection of the fact that VNSAs in Ecuador do not overtly fight against state forces. However, also among themselves, they are more contained when it comes to resorting to violence, and thus the relationship type “violent combat” is not as likely as it arguably is on the “conflict-side” in Colombia. Third, state forces and other external actors play a role in VNSAs’ decision-making. On the one hand, Group A might decide to engage in a strategic alliance with Group B if this represents a way to defend itself against state forces. The same applies to tactical alliances. On the other hand, if Group A has been betrayed by Group B who is collaborating with state forces, this might be a reason for Group A to engage in violent combat against Group B.

Outlining the implications of other external factors—such as political or economic elites, international cooperation or external state forces—goes beyond the scope of this article. However, such external influences have to be taken into account if the decisions of VNSAs to engage in one or another arrangement of convenience are to be understood. Finally, organisational structure matters. A VNSA that is organised hierarchically with a centralised command is likely to operate very differently on the ground than VNSAs with fragmented leadership. Being more independent, in the latter case decisions are much more likely to be based on personal, short-lived considerations leading to short-term arrangements than in the former case, where strategic thinking and organisational benefits may be given more weight. This might explain why the Rastrojos (for example) seem to follow very different logics across the country. Near the border with Ecuador they might have a tactical alliance with the FARC, while in Cúcuta no such alliance is in force.

#### (ii) *Insights on violence*

Another added value of the typology is that it facilitates insights regarding the levels of physical violence that result from VNSA interactions. Long-term, trust-based relationships are relatively non-violent. If the arrangements last only for a short time, the situation is obviously more characterised by violence, since the breaking of any arrangement leads to violent combat. This might explain why the Rastrojos for example seem to follow very different logics across the country. If violence has not been registered over a long time period, this might be an indicator of a long-term arrangement between two or more VNSA groups, rather than the absence of them. Such a “tense calm” can easily reach a tipping point where violence bursts out, due to the infringement of the arrangement. The city of Ocaña in the Colombian department of Norte de Santander for example, had experienced a period of hundred days without homicides since January 2012, which could be considered a remarkable achievement, given Norte de Santander’s decade-long history of violence.[53] Nevertheless, this was just the preamble of an outburst of violence in the following months which is said to be related to struggles among various VNSA groups.[54]

#### (iii) *Variation in repercussions on local communities*

As a third analytical benefit, the typology can be used to better understand how local populations are affected by the presence of VNSAs. There is a growing body of literature on how

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communities are affected by civil war dynamics.[55] However, these works focus on forms of violence and do not consider contexts that might not fit into the conventional framing of civil wars—that is, contexts where various different VNSAs are in complex relationships with each other, ignoring borders that define the political situation by separating states in armed internal conflict from non-conflict states. Organising the arrangements of convenience into the three clusters speaks to such contexts and offers an analytical tool to go beyond dynamics of violence. It points to the variation in how local communities are affected: while violent combat inflicts violence on local communities, short-term agreements produce high degrees of uncertainty and mistrust, and long-term agreements are hardly noticed from the outside as they come along with a shadow form of governance implemented by an illicit authority, leading to shadow citizen security.[56] Also, while violent combat among VNSAs offers little space for local communities to stay “untouched”, and short-term arrangements produce confusing dynamics in which no one knows who is on which side, long-term arrangements may help provide some “rules of behaviour” to which the local population can adhere in order to not be punished. A more detailed discussion of this can be found elsewhere, yet it is important to briefly raise these points so as to highlight the analytical added value.[57]

*(iv) Group-specific characteristics*

Finally, the two-dimensional clustery continuum and its components serve to enhance understandings of variation across different VNSA groups. Ideological proximity can be an important factor for groups to engage in long-term arrangements. Groups tend to trust each other more if they are politically or ideologically more aligned. This might be a reason why Colombia’s borderlands manifest several strategic alliances and pacific coexistence between FARC and ELN rebels, for example in the region of Catatumbo in the Colombian department of Norte de Santander, which borders with Venezuela, and in Samaniego, situated in the Colombian department of Nariño, which borders with Ecuador.[58] Against this backdrop, arrangements between these groups and post-demobilised groups, the so-called BACRIM, tend to be rather short-term. For example, in Tumaco there are tactical alliances between Rastrojos and FARC, but arguably no long-term arrangements.[59]

***Conclusion***

This article has attempted to narrow the conceptual gap that has existed in the literature on VNSAs and the complex and multiple types of relationships that exist among them in order to enhance understandings of their decision-making and the ramifications that emerge from these decisions and interactions. Conceptualising VNSA interactions on a two-dimensional “clustery continuum of VNSA arrangements” facilitates a more fine-grained picture of VNSA dynamics than has been available so far.

The concept’s analytical and methodological benefits lead to several conclusions. First, durability makes a difference. By unpacking the interactions according to their durability, it serves as an analytical tool to better understand local dynamics on the ground; these vary depending on the degree of stability and institutionalisation of the arrangements. Second, change

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is relevant. Conceptualizing the interactions on a flexible continuum reflects the dynamic nature of these kinds of relationships. This allows accounting for both external factors that influence the arrangements of convenience among VNSAs (such as changing power levels) and for internal group changes, such as a modification in the group's organisational structure. Third, context matters. By taking into account the degree of trust and hegemony of the groups, the typology facilitates considering the local context and how it varies across regions. This approach also encourages us to consider how the local political situation impacts VNSAs when deciding which kind of arrangement they should engage in as part of their efforts to increase economic or political benefits and spread risk. Also, though the VNSA group might be viewed as the same across various regions, decisions on engaging in arrangements vary depending on local power and trust constellations, organisational independence, and particular interests that these groups have in the respective region.

In addition to the contribution to scholarship of a new analytical tool, this study reveals important policy implications. Equipped with a detailed understanding of how VNSAs interact and what the costs and benefits are for them to engage in specific arrangements of convenience, we can address these relationships and create incentives to untie them. In this line of reasoning, manipulating trust relationships among different groups might be a convenient entry point to influence VNSA interactions. For example, targeting the broker of transnational supply chain relationships—who has connections to various groups and negotiates with all of them—can produce more immediate and effective results than targeting the group in charge of processing or selling, since the broker can simply look for another business partner. Also, security policies to protect local communities benefit from this analytical tool. Knowing what kinds of arrangements produce what type of insecurity facilitates targeted policy responses that are designed to combat violence, uncertainty and mistrust.

To be sure, several important aspects remain to be investigated in order to increase the leverage of this analytical tool both for academics and policymakers across the globe. For example, more research is needed to determine whether there is a causal relationship between the degree of trust and the durability of the arrangements and how exactly a group's hegemony plays a role. Also a rigorous deepening of each category could offer even more revealing insights into the rationale behind them and the implications for the local context and beyond. Still, this study serves as a useful starting point to understand not only VNSA dynamics in Colombia's borderlands, but also other areas in the world where multiple types of VNSAs are present, such as Central America, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, certain areas in West Africa and the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia. Consolidating it with empirical evidence from these and other regions could constitute an ambitious, yet promising way ahead to better understand and face the challenging dynamics that emerge from interactions among different VNSAs.

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## Notes

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