



Adaptive Sovereignty and Co-Evolutionary Control: State Reconfiguration in Facing Middle Eastern Methamphetamine Networks in the Indian Ocean-Southeast Asia Corridor

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Keywords:

Adaptive sovereignty; co-evolution; governance; methamphetamine networks; Middle East; Southeast Asia

ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the transformation of state sovereignty in responding to co-evolutionary transnational threats, focusing on methamphetamine networks connecting the Middle East and Southeast Asia via the Indian Ocean corridor. Using the framework of Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT) and the concept of adaptive sovereignty, this study examined a case study of the uncovering of an international network that smuggled crystal meth in coffins using a drug hardening method, as well as the practice of control delivery that led to the discovery of a methamphetamine laboratory operated by Iranian nationals. This research finds that the state no longer acts as a rigid and territorial entity, but rather as an adaptive actor capable of reconfiguring its control instruments co-evolutionarily alongside the illegal networks it faces. This case demonstrates how the meth-hardening method represents the adaptation of criminal network technology to conventional detection systems, while control delivery shows the state's capacity for policy learning by adopting the network's logic in law enforcement operations. The theoretical implications of these findings indicate that sovereignty in the contemporary era must be understood as an adaptive capacity that continuously evolves through co-evolutionary interactions with transnational actors.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on state sovereignty in facing transnational crime has long been dominated by perspectives viewing the state as a besieged entity, losing control over its territoriality in the face of globalization flows and criminal networks that transcend administrative boundaries. However, this perspective tends to overlook the state's adaptive capacity to transform alongside the threats it confronts. This article offers an alternative reading: that sovereignty is not a static property that erodes, but a dynamic capacity continuously reconfigured through co-evolutionary interactions with illegal networks.

The Indian Ocean corridor has emerged as one of the main routes for global methamphetamine trade, connecting production centers in the Middle East, particularly Iran and Afghanistan, with major consumer markets in Southeast Asia (Saleh, 2023). These networks not only move illegal commodities but also transfer knowledge, technology, and operational methods that continuously evolve (UNDOC, 2025). It is in this context that the state is required to develop what can be termed "adaptive sovereignty," the ability to reconfigure its control instruments responsively to the evolution of threats (Cao, 2026; Du, n.d.; Su & Zhang, 2025; Suntsova, 2026).

The novelty of this research lies in offering a comprehensive analysis of adaptive sovereignty and co-evolutionary control through the lens of Evolutionary Governance Theory, applied to the case of Middle Eastern methamphetamine networks in the Indian Ocean-Southeast Asia corridor. This framework demonstrates how the state reconfigures its control instruments in response to evolving transnational threats (Hameiri & Jones, 2015; Pearson et al., 2022). The urgency of this research is reinforced by the increasing scale and complexity of methamphetamine trafficking in the region, with transnational organized criminal groups maintaining a supply-driven market expansion strategy, increasing volumes and lowering the cost of the drug. Furthermore, the use of maritime routes for drug trafficking has expanded, with enforcement agencies recognizing the need to improve coastal monitoring and information sharing. This research aims to analyze the transformation of state sovereignty in responding to co-evolutionary transnational threats and formulate a framework for understanding adaptive sovereignty. The contribution of this research is the formulation of a comprehensive framework for understanding state-criminal network co-evolution that can be the basis for policymakers in developing adaptive strategies for countering transnational crime. The practical benefit of this research is to provide guidance for policymakers and law enforcement agencies in developing more effective and adaptive responses to evolving transnational threats (Amoo et al., 2024; Kavanagh, 2022; Malatji & Tolah, 2025; Okolo et al., 2021).

The case study analyzed in this article, the uncovering of a network smuggling crystal meth in coffins using a drug hardening method and the practice of controlled delivery against a laboratory operated by Iranian nationals, offers a unique window to observe this co-evolutionary dynamic. This case is interesting because it combines three important dimensions: first, criminal technological innovation through the meth-hardening method designed to evade detection; second, the geopolitical dimension involving Middle Eastern actors in the Southeast Asian region; and third, the adaptive response of law enforcement through control delivery strategies that adopt network logic.

By using the framework of Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT), this article argues that the interaction between the state and criminal networks generates co-evolutionary dynamics where both parties shape each other's capacities and strategies. In this process, the state does not merely react to threats but actively learns from the evolution of criminal networks and internalizes this knowledge into its control structures and practices. Sovereignty, therefore, is not maintained through isolation or the assertion of rigid boundaries, but through the capacity to continuously reconfigure itself in interaction with a changing environment.

METHOD

Adaptive Sovereignty and Co-Evolution in Governance From Territorial Sovereignty to Adaptive Sovereignty

The classical conception of sovereignty rooted in the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) emphasizes the state's exclusive authority over its territory and population. Within this framework, sovereignty is measured by the state's ability to maintain territorial control and enforce laws uniformly across its jurisdiction. However, transnational crimes such as drug trafficking fundamentally challenge these Westphalian assumptions. Criminal networks operate across borders, exploit jurisdictional gaps, and adapt more quickly than state bureaucracies.

In response to these challenges, governance theorists have developed concepts such as adaptive governance and resilience in social-ecological systems. Folke et al. (2005), for instance, demonstrate that adaptive systems can learn from disturbances and reconfigure themselves without losing essential functions. In this context, adaptive sovereignty can be defined as the state's capacity to maintain essential functions of control and law enforcement through continuous learning and structural reconfiguration in response to the evolution of transnational threats.

Unlike territorial sovereignty, which is static and defensive, adaptive sovereignty is dynamic and offensive. It not only protects borders but actively penetrates the spaces where illegal networks operate; including cyberspace, global supply chains, and even public consciousness. Adaptive sovereignty also recognizes that control can no longer be achieved through the state's sole monopoly but rather through collaborative networks involving non-state and international actors.

Co-Evolutionary Perspective in Governance

Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT), developed by Van Assche, Beunen, and Duineveld (2014), offers an analytical framework for understanding how governance systems evolve through interaction with their environment. EGT starts from the premise that governance is not a rational design imposed from above but the result of evolutionary processes involving path dependence, interventions, and continuous adaptation.

In a co-evolutionary perspective, changes in governance cannot be understood separately from changes in the regulated environment. As noted by Van Assche et al. (2021), "a co-evolutionary approach differs from other influential understandings of knowledge and learning in policy and governance." If conventional approaches view policy learning as a linear process where the state identifies problems and designs solutions, the co-evolutionary approach sees it as a reciprocal process where the state and its environment mutually shape each other.

Regarding drug enforcement, a co-evolutionary perspective reveals that every state intervention will trigger adaptation from criminal networks, which in turn demands further adaptation from the state (Magliocca et al., 2019). This cycle creates co-evolutionary dynamics where the capacities of both parties develop simultaneously. The method of hardening meth in coffins, for example, can be understood as an adaptation of criminal networks to increased detection at airports and ports. Conversely, the control delivery strategy used by authorities represents the state's adaptation to these new tactics, adopting a more sophisticated and network-oriented approach.

Policy Learning in Co-Evolutionary Dynamics

The concept of policy learning plays a central role in the co-evolutionary framework. Van Assche et al. (2021) identify various types of learning in governance and how each is influenced by co-evolutionary patterns. Learning can occur at the instrument level (how to do things more effectively), at the paradigm level (basic assumptions about problems and solutions), and at the identity level (who we are as governance actors).

In the analyzed case, instrumental learning is evident in the development of technical capacity to detect hardened meth in coffins. Paradigmatic learning is reflected in the shift from a repressive approach focused on evidence to a network and supply chain-oriented approach. Meanwhile, identity learning is seen in the redefinition of the role of law enforcement officers, from border guards to global detectives operating within international networks. This learning

does not occur in a vacuum but through concrete interactions with criminal networks. Each time authorities uncover one modus operandi, criminal networks develop a new one. Each time criminal networks find a new loophole, authorities develop new detection methods. It is in this process that the co-evolutionary capacity of both parties is honed and the state's adaptive sovereignty is strengthened.

Middle Eastern Methamphetamine Networks in the Indian Ocean-Southeast Asia Corridor

Regional Production and Trade Dynamics

Understanding the case of meth smuggling in coffins requires mapping the broader geopolitical and political-economic context of methamphetamine trade in the region. Iran occupies a unique position in the global narcotics landscape. On one hand, the country has a long history of opium control through a managed supply chain before the 1979 revolution. On the other hand, Iran is currently one of the main transit routes for narcotics from Afghanistan, the world's largest opium producer, to European and Asian markets (Kreutzmann, 2007).

Iran's uniqueness also lies in its technological capacity. Unlike criminal networks in the Golden Triangle region that rely on traditional production methods, networks based in Iran and Afghanistan demonstrate more advanced chemical capabilities. This is reflected in their ability not only to produce high-quality methamphetamine but also to develop sophisticated concealment methods such as drug hardening.

The Indian Ocean corridor has become a vital route for this trade. From ports in Iran and Pakistan, methamphetamine is shipped by sea to Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. The Indian Ocean offers strategic advantages: the vast expanse of water complicates surveillance, while the high volume of legal trade through strategic straits provides natural camouflage for smuggling.

Network Characteristics: Between Hierarchy and Network

Middle Eastern methamphetamine networks exhibit interesting hybrid characteristics. They retain hierarchical features rooted in their home societies, including clear chains of command and loyalties based on ethnicity or kinship (McCarthy-Jones et al., 2020). On the other hand, they adopt flexible network structures for international operations, with autonomous cells that can be quickly reconfigured if one part is uncovered.

These characteristics enable networks to adapt quickly to state interventions. When one smuggling route is closed, alternative routes are immediately activated. When one concealment method is uncovered, new methods are developed. This adaptive capacity is what makes these networks so resilient and challenging for law enforcement.

The presence of Iranian nationals in Southeast Asia as drug laboratory operators adds another layer of complexity. This shows that networks not only move commodities but also transfer technical knowledge and production expertise. Meth labs operated by Iranians in this region are not just production facilities but nodes in a global knowledge network about methamphetamine synthesis (OCCRP, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case Study: Uncovering the Meth-in-Coffin Network Meth Hardening Method as Criminal Innovation

The case analyzed in this article involves the uncovering of an international network that smuggled meth using a previously undocumented method: meth was hardened to resemble solid material, then placed inside coffins shipped as corpse deliveries. This method represents a qualitative leap in smuggling technology.

Drug hardening involves a chemical process where methamphetamine, typically in crystal or powder form, is transformed into a solid form with high density (Dharani et al., 2020). This process serves several purposes: first, reducing volume to facilitate concealment; second, evading detection by sniffer dogs typically trained to detect meth's distinctive odor; third, disguising the narcotic as another, less suspicious material.

The choice of coffins as smuggling vessels also demonstrates a deep understanding of psychology and inspection protocols (Sa'beng et al., 2021). Coffins carrying corpses are culturally respected and tend to be less strictly inspected at airports and ports. This exploitation of cultural sensitivity shows that criminal networks not only master chemical technology but also possess sophisticated sociological understanding of inspection system vulnerabilities.

This method also represents an adaptive response to increased detection capacity by authorities. When conventional smuggling methods like concealment in luggage or cargo become increasingly risky, criminal networks develop fundamentally different methods. This innovation demonstrates that criminal networks are capable of research and development; a capacity typically associated with legal corporations or state institutions.

Operational Chronology and the Meth Hardening Method as Criminal Innovation

The case analyzed in this article began on Thursday, February 12, 2026, when customs officers at the Pasar Baru Post Office in Jakarta suspected a postal package sent from Iran. Through an x-ray inspection, an anomaly was detected in the wall structure of the leather chest used as the shipping medium. This suspicion proved correct when blue crystals were found cleverly hidden within the cavities of the chest's walls. Laboratory tests confirmed that the 11.56 kilograms of blue crystals were Class I narcotics of the methamphetamine type.

This finding represents a qualitative leap in smuggling technology. The drug hardening method, in which methamphetamine is transformed from its usual crystal or powder form into a high-density solid, serves several strategic purposes. First, hardening reduces volume, facilitating concealment in tight spaces such as chest walls. Second, this chemical process is suspected to evade detection by sniffer dogs trained to detect meth's distinctive odor. Third, disguising the narcotic as a non-suspicious solid material, coupled with the choice of a coffin, culturally respected and thus less likely to be strictly inspected, demonstrates that this criminal network not only master's chemical technology but also possesses a sophisticated sociological understanding of the vulnerabilities within inspection systems.

This innovation represents an adaptive response to increased law enforcement detection capacity. When conventional smuggling methods, such as concealment in luggage or cargo, become increasingly risky, criminal networks develop fundamentally different methods. It proves that criminal networks are capable of research and development; a capacity typically associated with legal corporations or state institutions, and in this context, serves as empirical evidence of co-evolutionary dynamics.

Control Delivery Strategy: Law Enforcement Adaptation and Network Development

The law enforcement response to this new *modus operandi* demonstrated no less sophisticated adaptive capacity. Instead of immediately seizing the evidence and arresting couriers, authorities from Customs and the National Police's Criminal Investigation Agency (Bareskrim) chose a controlled delivery strategy. The goal was not merely to secure the narcotics, but to allow the shipment to proceed to its destination while conducting tight surveillance to map and dismantle the entire network structure.

This strategy proved effective. On Friday, February 13, 2026, a day after the initial discovery, the controlled delivery operation led authorities to arrest an Iranian national identified by the initials KKF at an apartment in the Pluit area, North Jakarta, who was suspected to be the package recipient. Interestingly, besides the narcotics, the package was also found to contain brass glasses. The presence of these brass glasses strengthens the indication of camouflage, where legal shipments are mixed with illegal ones, and also suggests that the network was shipping more than just narcotics—possibly equipment or precursors needed for the production process within the country.

Controlled delivery is a strategy that adopts the network logic of the adversary it faces. Its success not only proves the capacity for intelligence and cross-jurisdictional coordination but also demonstrates the authorities' capacity for policy learning. From previous experience, authorities learned that reactive approaches focused on evidence seizure were ineffective at dismantling networks. They then developed proactive, intelligence-oriented, and network-focused approaches, a learning process characteristic of co-evolutionary dynamics.

Uncovering of the Drug Laboratory by Iranian Nationals in Sunter

The culmination of the successful controlled delivery strategy was the discovery of a clandestine methamphetamine laboratory. On Saturday, February 14, 2026, follow-up actions from the arrest of KKF in Pluit led authorities to arrest another suspect, also an Iranian national, identified by the initials SB (also identified as Saeidi Bayaz) in the East Jakarta area, SB was suspected to be the drug concocter.

The subsequent search of SB's apartment unit on the 27th floor in the Sunter Agung area, Tanjung Priok, North Jakarta, revealed startling facts. The apartment had been converted into a narcotics production laboratory on a scale that could not be underestimated. From this location, authorities seized an additional 1,683 grams gross weight of methamphetamine and several sophisticated pieces of equipment that serve as tangible evidence of the network's production capacity, including:

1. One unit of an electrical powder grinder;
2. Supporting equipment: a portable gas stove, digital scales, various kitchen; utensils such as pots, kettles, strainers, shakers, and spatulas;
3. Chemicals: 3 bottles and 2 jerry cans containing acetone;
4. Other evidence: used meth-smoking devices (bongs), liquid meth waste in jars, one pack of 1 kg plastic clips, medical gloves, a steam iron, wax paper, as well as the leather chest and lining leather related to the initial shipment.

The discovery of the Sunter laboratory opens a new dimension in understanding global methamphetamine networks. The presence of Iranian experts with relatively complete production equipment shows that the network was not only moving finished products but also relocating production capacity itself. It is a strategy that dramatically reduces the cross-border

smuggling risk for final products. Iran and Afghanistan provide technical expertise and access to chemical precursors, while Southeast Asia, with an apartment in Jakarta as its base, provides a production location close to major consumer markets.

In total, the operation successfully seized more than 13 kilograms of methamphetamine; the combined weight of the 11.56 kg from the coffin and the 1,683 grams from the Sunter laboratory. This success is not merely about the sheer volume of evidence, but more about the ability to dismantle the supply chain down to its production link. Without the controlled delivery strategy, the Sunter laboratory might never have been uncovered. This case perfectly demonstrates how the state, through its law enforcement agencies, can reconfigure its control strategies adaptively to respond to and outpace the evolving tactics of criminal networks within an ongoing co-evolutionary dynamic.

Control Delivery Strategy: Law Enforcement Adaptation

The law enforcement response to this new modus operandi demonstrates no less sophisticated adaptive capacity. Instead of immediately seizing evidence and arresting couriers when the coffins arrived, authorities chose a control delivery strategy, allowing the shipment to proceed to its last destination while conducting tight surveillance to uncover the entire network.

Control delivery is a strategy that follows the network logic of the adversary. Conventional approaches focus on evidence seizure, capturing only a single link in the network. In contrast, control delivery aims to map and dismantle the entire network structure. It requires high intelligence capacity, cross-jurisdictional coordination, and strategic patience as results are not immediately visible.

In this case, control delivery not only identified domestic meth recipients but also enabled authorities to uncover a meth lab operated by Iranian nationals. It is a significant achievement because laboratories are the most critical link in the drug supply chain, as their removal disrupts production capacity across the network.

This strategy also demonstrates the authorities' capacity for policy learning. From previous experience, authorities learned that reactive approaches focused on evidence seizure were ineffective at dismantling networks. They then developed proactive approaches oriented toward intelligence and networks. This learning process does not occur linearly but through trial and error, evaluation of failures, and continuous adaptation; characteristic features of co-evolutionary dynamics.

Uncovering of Drug Laboratory by Iranian Nationals

The uncovering of a meth lab operated by Iranian nationals in Southeast Asia opens a new dimension in understanding global methamphetamine networks. This shows that networks not only move finished products but also move production capacity itself, a strategy that dramatically reduces cross-border smuggling risks.

The presence of Iranian experts in these laboratories reflects the global division of labor in the political economy of narcotics. Iran and Afghanistan provide technical expertise and access to chemical precursors, while Southeast Asia provides production locations close to major consumer markets. It is a classic example of an illegal global value chain where various production stages are geographically distributed based on each location's comparative advantages.

From a security perspective, this uncovering also raises questions about broader geopolitical implications. Does the presence of Iranians in drug networks in Southeast Asia reflect the involvement of criminal individuals, or are there dimensions involving state actors? Literature on transnational crime shows that the boundary between criminal networks and state actors is often blurred, especially in regions with weak governance. Although evidence in this case does not show direct involvement of the Iranian state, the fact that its nationals were able to establish and operate sophisticated laboratories abroad indicates organizational capacity beyond ordinary individual criminality.

Co-Evolutionary Analysis: State and Network in Dynamic Interaction

Cycles of Adaptation and Counter-Adaptation

This case can be read as a study of adaptation and counter-adaptation cycles between the state and criminal networks. The following table summarizes the identified co-evolutionary dynamics:

Stage Criminal Network Action State Reaction Co-Evolutionary Impact:

1. Conventional smuggling Increased entry point detection Increased risk for couriers,
2. Innovation of hardening & coffin method Initial confusion, detection failure Network gains temporary advantage,
3. Exploitation of system gaps Intelligence development, protocol adaptation State detection capacity increases,
4. Routine operation with new methods Control delivery strategy State uncovers network structure,
5. Post-uncovering adaptation Strengthened international collaboration New cycle begins.

This cycle shows that interactions between the state and criminal networks have no clear endpoint. Each expansion of state capacity is met with innovations from criminal networks, while each of those innovations prompts further adaptation by the state. It reflects co-evolutionary dynamics, where both sides continuously develop through mutual interaction without ever reaching a final equilibrium.

Knowledge Transfer and Co-Evolutionary Capacity

One of the most interesting aspects of this case is the knowledge transfer occurring in both directions. Criminal networks transfer chemical knowledge about methamphetamine synthesis and hardening techniques from the Middle East to Southeast Asia. Law enforcement, through control delivery operations, gains valuable knowledge about network structure, communication methods, and funding patterns (Esseiva et al., 2007).

More importantly, indirect knowledge transfer also occurs where innovation from one party unintentionally "teaches" the other. When criminal networks develop meth-hardening methods, they indirectly "teach" authorities about weaknesses in existing detection systems. When authorities respond with control delivery, they indirectly "teach" networks about the need for structural diversification and operational decentralization. The capacity to learn from interaction is what Van Assche et al. (2021) call "learning in evolving governance." In this framework, a governance system's co-evolutionary capacity is measured by its ability to transform knowledge gained from environmental interaction into structural and instrumental adaptation.

Implications for Sovereignty Theory

The co-evolutionary dynamics identified in this case have important implications for sovereignty theory. First, sovereignty can no longer be understood as a binary condition (present or absent), but as a spectrum of continuously developing capacities (Liu & Song, 2026). The state in this case did not lose its sovereignty when criminal networks successfully smuggled meth, but its sovereignty was being tested and challenged. The state's adaptive response strengthens its sovereignty in the long term.

Second, adaptive sovereignty does not depend on isolation or the assertion of rigid boundaries, but on the capacity to penetrate and operate within transnational spaces. The control delivery strategy used by authorities shows that effective control is achieved not by closing borders but by following networks across borders. It represents a shift from territorial logic to network logic in the practice of sovereignty.

Third, adaptive sovereignty is relational; it is formed through interaction with other actors in the global environment. The state's capacity in this case is determined not only by its internal resources but also by the quality of its interactions with criminal networks, neighboring countries, and international institutions. Sovereignty, therefore, is a property emerging from networks of relations, not a property inherent in isolated entities.

Policy Implications: Towards Co-Evolutionary Control

Institutional Reconfiguration

The first implication of this analysis is the need for institutional reconfiguration in handling transnational drug crime. Rigid and compartmentalized bureaucratic structures will be unable to respond to rapid co-evolutionary dynamics. What is needed is a more fluid structure, with short communication lines between units, capacity for rapid reconfiguration, and tolerance for experimentation and failure.

In practice, this means encouraging decentralization of authority to operational levels, building cross-functional teams that can be formed and disbanded as needed, and developing organizational cultures that value learning from experience. Adaptive institutions also require rapid feedback mechanisms so that field information can be immediately translated into strategy adjustments.

Intelligence and Organizational Learning

This case also highlights the importance of investing in intelligence capacity and organizational learning. Successful control delivery strategies are only possible if authorities have deep understanding of the structure and modus operandi of the networks they face. It requires not only data collection but also sophisticated analysis capable of identifying patterns and connecting seemingly separate dots.

Organizational learning also requires mechanisms to document, analyze, and disseminate lessons from each operation. Too often, valuable knowledge gained through field operations is lost when officers transfer duties or when reports are merely stored in archives without further analysis. Building "organizational memory" about the evolution of criminal networks and past responses is a prerequisite for breaking adaptation cycles that disadvantage the state.

Cross-Border Collaboration and Networked Sovereignty

The most essential implication is the necessity to redefine sovereignty within the framework of cross-border collaboration. Adaptive sovereignty cannot be realized by states

working alone. Methamphetamine networks stretching from the Middle East to Southeast Asia can only be confronted through law enforcement networks stretching equally far. It demands the development of more effective cross-country collaboration mechanisms, not only at the level of formal agreements but also at the daily operational level.

Real-time intelligence sharing, joint operations, harmonization of legal procedures, and mutual recognition of jurisdiction are key elements of what can be called "networked sovereignty." In this framework, a state's sovereign capacity is measured not by its ability to act alone but by its ability to build and mobilize international collaborative networks. The most sovereign state is not the most closed one, but the one most connected and most capable of influencing the direction of global collaboration.

CONCLUSION

The February 2026 case of an Iranian methamphetamine network uncovered in Jakarta starting with the discovery of 11.56 kg of hardened blue meth hidden in coffins at the Pasar Baru Post Office, followed by a controlled-delivery operation that led to an arrest in Pluit, and culminating in the exposure of a full production laboratory in a Sunter apartment along with an additional 1,683 grams of meth, all within just three days (February 12–14, 2026) shows that the state does not merely react to transnational crime but adapts alongside it: every innovation by the criminal network (hardening the drug, disguising it, setting up a local lab) triggers a corresponding adaptation by law enforcement (intelligence capacity, controlled-delivery tactics, cross-location investigative tracing), forming an evolving, reciprocal pattern. The presence of Iranian experts building a lab directly in Jakarta, rather than smuggling in a finished product, also reveals a global division of labor in the drug trade's political economy: technical expertise and precursor access from the Middle East, production located close to consumer markets in Southeast Asia. This suggests state sovereignty is better understood not as static territorial defense, but as a dynamic capacity to detect, follow, and dismantle networks across borders practically requiring synergy between detection technology (e.g., X-rays at post offices), intelligence capacity (enabling controlled delivery), and sustained investigative ability (tracing leads to the lab itself) turning a potential loss into a strategic success against transnational crime.

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