



## INTERPOL and the Challenges of the 21st Century



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### Abstract

**Aim:** INTERPOL has undergone a series of reforms in the past 8–9 years. Whilst improving the transparency and accountability of the organisation, the areas of finance, technology, the CCF and diversity of the senior executive require further reform. The article aims to further explore why these issues should be a priority for INTERPOL in the short term.

**Methodology:** The article reviews recent INTERPOL news releases and outcomes of recent General Assembly resolutions to further develop the case for further reforms of INTERPOL activities. A review of material generated by NGO's and other interested parties is also included.

**Findings:** INTERPOL faces unprecedented challenges in a complex global environment. To successfully navigate this complexity, INTERPOL will need addressing three vital areas of operation. First, INTERPOL will need to restructure its budget and secure increased permanent funding to enable the renewal of its information technology infrastructure. Second, it needs to reform the CCF as a vital enabler for the continued issuance of red notices. Third, INTERPOL will have to address these shortcomings in its senior executive diversity.

**Value:** A more comprehensive understanding of the issues that INTERPOL currently faces will ultimately assist policy makers. The understanding of the inherent weakness in the INTERPOL budget structures will assist governments to consider alternative funding models. Similarly, INTERPOL is required to be at the forefront of developing world leading information solutions to law enforcement including border agencies. Lastly, INTERPOL requires the support of all 195 member countries to continue to have

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international legitimacy in key policy forums. Senior executive representation constitutes a vital component.

**Keywords:** INTERPOL, funding, technology, CCF

## Introduction

As INTERPOL celebrates its 100-year anniversary it provides the ideal time to reflect on the journey that the organisation has travelled and to identify some of the key issues that will contribute to defining whether INTERPOL can be judged as a success into the future.

Whilst the organisation has transitioned through many phases throughout this time, other than the suspension of the organisation's activities during the second world war, there has never been arguably more challenging circumstances than exist today for an international organisation to function effectively.

Whether INTERPOL is capable of the self-reform required to meet those challenges remains to be seen. The last 8–9 years has witnessed some reform of processes that could be described as incremental self-preservation. These revolve largely around the attempts to sustain the issuance of red notices and related processes and a rather standard update of governance policy and procedures, such as declaring conflicts of interest, the introduction of a code of conduct and tighter rules concerning election processes ([URL1](#)), that were non-existent prior to this time.

However commendable this progress may be, the challenges facing INTERPOL are more significant. A major refresh of technology, structural deficiencies in the budget, processes surrounding the issuance of red notices, the Commission for the Control of INTERPOL Files (CCF) and the lack of diversity with the senior leadership of INTERPOL are required to be addressed to enable the organisation to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

## Context

At the time of writing this article, Europe is engaged in a major war, terrorism has flared again in the Middle East that has repercussions that could and probably will extend globally ([URL2](#)). Conflict and terrorism continue across Eastern and Western Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. China has engaged in one of the most prolific arms build ups in modern history ([URL3](#)), whilst the US

engages in a major economic offensive to restrict the spread of cutting-edge technologies to countries judged hostile to intentions (URL4).

The now undeniable impacts of climate change are affecting millions of the world's populations more often and more severely. This creates economic and actual hardships that place extra pressure on resource poor governments and provides a further incentive for migration, often facilitated by organised crime. Politically, new blocs are being born and transformed. Much of the security architecture that the global community has relied upon either no longer exists or has been reduced in reliability (URL5).

Traditionally, the leadership of many international organisations, INTERPOL included, have been dominated by European and North American candidates. A product of both the post Second World War order and the better resourced and organised bureaucracies it was in effect, a product of the time (Wade, 2013). Clearly this post war order is now under stress. New organisations such as the G20 and BRICS to name but a few are jostling to find a niche in a more contested global environment. Institutions such as the EU, the United Nations are finding it increasingly difficult to influence the global security architecture. The Global Coalition Against Daesh was a classic example whereby the United States and other key players simply bypassed the United Nations in the pursuit of Daesh due to the perceived inability of the UN to achieve any meaningful outcomes. Ironically INTERPOL was a member of this coalition (URL6).

In this sea of shifting alliances and blocs, the global community is searching for institutions to assist in coalescing individual state players into meaningful coordinated action on a range of issues including organised crime, terrorism and cybercrime. What better institution than INTERPOL to bring together 195 member countries police forces? The casual observer would believe that such an organisation would be strongly supported by governments globally. Yet INTERPOL is an interesting case as it is an 'orphan' organisation. It does not belong to, or is it affiliated with the United Nations, OECD or any other umbrella organisation. It is largely funded through the police budgets of its member countries. The result is an underwhelming budget that falls well short of the organisations objectives. This orphan status is both an asset and a liability, that impacts both political clout and financial security.

On one hand INTERPOL is not constrained by the bureaucratic maze so constantly encountered with dealing UN agencies, but on the other hand it lacks the political influence to extract any political or financial benefit from other international groupings such as the G7 or G20 where it is often reduced to cameo appearances and bylines in communiqués (URL7). This is no way to be

interpreted as a criticism of the Secretary General or his staff who dutifully try to capitalise on these opportunities when they arise.

## Technology and Finance

Despite Hollywood's tendencies, INTERPOL is ostensibly an information-based agency. Its currency is the information that member countries are willing to share to successfully investigate their own crimes and to prevent crimes from impacting fellow member countries. To facilitate this process INTERPOL hosts 19 separate databases ([URL8](#)). Whilst a dedicated team of information technologists holds this capability together working with a relatively miniscule budget, if the status quo continues then INTERPOL risks slipping into irrelevance and redundancy unless major investments are made not only to upgrade but also to sustain these important capabilities.

To rectify this situation the General Assembly approved in 2019 the introduction of the I-CORE programme. A multi-year 100 million euro investment into upgrading INTERPOL's operational data bases and technology backbone to assist to ensure that the organisation can deliver well into the twenty-first century ([URL9](#)). The initial benefits are clear – access to biometrics at borders, smart case messaging to more easily identify and extract data and the creation of a unified information architecture. All features that contemporary police practitioners would expect in a modern policing information exchange organisation. Yet INTERPOL has struggled to find donor countries to fund these initiatives. Admirably, several European countries have made contributions to the I-CORE project to kickstart the building of these vital capabilities.

The challenge of I-CORE is made more difficult in terms of sustainment. The ongoing maintenance and enhancement of permanent databases extends of many years. The initial budget of building and refining a modern information technology is expensive. However, licence fees, attracting and retaining key personnel for key areas remains an ongoing concern and is not unique to INTERPOL. The INTERPOL budget is generally not structured or funded to account for these foreseeable expenses.

The total INTERPOL annual budget consists of around 153 million euros per year. Statutory contributions (member country dues) provide about 68 million euros per annum whilst the balance consists of voluntary cash contributions totalling 54 million euros and in-kind contributions of 36 million euros (mainly the cost of seconded officers and premises provided by governments), ([URL10](#)). The amount of cash contributions can vary from year to year and is

primarily originates from governments. These funds are normally tied to delivering a specific outcome such as training in counter terrorism or funding for staff for a set period in the crime against children section for example, so there is limited flexibility for INTERPOL on how to expend these funds.

With only 68 million euros of certain recurring funding and an ever-increasing salaries bill as the secretariat reaches nearly 1100 staff members then INTERPOL may face some difficult decisions ahead. Unless a substantial increase in recurring funding can be secured, then INTERPOL will likely face the difficult choice between reducing information technology services supporting member countries police activities or reducing the number of staff within the secretariat. An unenviable choice for sure.

## **Processes/CCF**

The most contentious area of INTERPOL's operations in the past 10 years has been the issuance of the famous red notice and its abuse by primarily, but not exclusively, autocratic regimes to pursue their opponents. As a result of the enormous increase in the issuance of red notices since the introduction of the internet-based system called I-Link in 2009, the public pressure on INTERPOL has grown ([URL11](#)). Whilst intent of the introduction of this system was proper it appears that little thought was given to consequences of what an exponential increase in the issuance of red notices would result in.

This growth ultimately culminated in a crisis within INTERPOL in 2015 where several lawsuits resulted in the organisation realising that it was facing an existential crisis. The choices were clear, either cease the issuance of red notices and hence one of the primary rationales for the organisation's existence or enact a series of reforms that enabled the continuation of the issuance of red notices ([URL12](#)).

Over the following years several well documented initiatives were enacted that enabled INTERPOL to fulfil one of its core functions and continue with the issuing of red notices. These have been well recorded elsewhere. The process remains with its critics. An important part of this process was a limited reform of the CCF. Whilst it is well known that two chambers were created to assist in the administration of its functions arguably some of the most impactful reforms were not addressed.

Many complaints exist about the performance of the CCF ([URL13](#)). The majority of these revolve around three issues. First, the reasons for the decisions were often not in writing. Second, communication was often slow and excruciating as

the CCF insisted on mailing all correspondence. Third, the positions for the CCF are part-time and unpaid. Therefore, complainants are often waiting months and sometime years for decisions as the CCF meets on only 4 occasions per year. The impact of these delays can have major consequences for the applicants.

To expedite the CCF process elected members could be paid a salary and moved to full time positions. This initiative would have the advantage of decreasing the time taken to make decisions and could be undertaken with a reduced number of members. It would also increase the knowledge and professionalism of the CCF as a dedicated panel exclusively examining matters. The supporting secretariat would also be updated with staff skilled in legal registry and research functions and modern communication techniques.

## Senior Executive Diversity

A colleague once commented that when he walked into the INTERPOL headquarters it looks more like Europol than an international police organisation. This observation was obviously a direct swipe at the diversity of staff at the INTERPOL Secretariat. Whilst INTERPOL has recently proposed in the 2022 General Assembly a belated attempt to address the longstanding concerns about the lack of diversity within the organisation, it essentially misses the point.

The INTERPOL Secretariat correctly highlights that officers from over 100 countries are represented within the secretariat, ([URL14](#)). This has been the case for some time. Rather, the Europol comments made by the colleague referred to the senior executive level positions within the organisation. These are predominantly occupied by officers from European and North American countries. While there is nothing wrong with the officers' individual abilities (all were selected on the basis of merit), it is hardly reflective of the global constituency that INTERPOL represents.

Numerous studies have proven that diverse leadership teams are generally more successful than those that are not ([Burke & Titus, 2020](#)). There exists a significant opportunity for INTERPOL to build a high performing leadership team that is truly representative of the membership. In the INTERPOL secretariats defence, there is often a lack of diverse candidates for senior executive positions within the organisation. Whilst some efforts have been made to attract more diverse fields of candidates these have generally been lacklustre and inconsistent. Let's hope that the Executive Committee of INTERPOL fulfils its core functions and ensure that the secretariat follows up on this General Assembly resolution in the future.

## Conclusion

The successful administration of any international public organisation is challenging, even in stable and prosperous times. At the time of writing this article the global community is emerging from a global pandemic, encountering difficult financial conditions, facing regional conflicts and the emergence of an unstable Middle East and Africa for the foreseeable future. Under these circumstances, and to be successful, organisations will require the financial resources, technology, processes, and people to be successful or perhaps even survive.

INTERPOL needs to attract a stream of financing that is reoccurring to build and sustain the 19 vital databases that provide the tangible backbone of its business. To date INTERPOL has been unable to convince member countries that funding is required to be mainstreamed from national budgets rather than siphoned off from already stretched national police budgets as is the current practice. Unless this can be achieved then in a few years INTERPOL will once again be placed in the unenviable position of having to cut staff and reduce programmes.

The INTERPOL red notice and CCF reform must continue and deliver some major changes if the red notice is going to survive as a credible international instrument. The CCF must undertake major reforms to establish itself as a reputable venue for red notice adjudication. It is up to the INTERPOL General Assembly to decide whether these changes can take place and for the secretariat to enact them with timeliness and vigour.

The composition of the INTERPOL senior executive must reflect the organisation that it represents. It does not do that now and has not done this for some time. Swift and decisive measures are required to be taken to encourage diversity throughout the senior executive cadre of the organisation. The INTERPOL Executive Committee has a special responsibility to ensure that the resolution passed at the last General Assembly is acted upon and the highly visible results are there for all to see.

If these steps are not undertaken, then it is difficult to see how the organisation will prosper. It is unlikely that a single calamity will occur, and the organisation will collapse overnight. A more likely outcome is that INTERPOL will slowly slip into irrelevance as international bodies sometimes do.

Many observers do not realise how close that INTERPOL came to calamity in 2018 when several members of the organisation genuinely threatened to quit the INTERPOL if a Major General of the Russian FSB was elected as President of the organisation. This then poses the question of how would the global police community cooperate, especially in the pursuit of international fugitives if an organisation such as INTERPOL did not exist? No one knows for sure the

answer to this question, but surely the answer is not as effectively. If an international body were to be proposed today to adapt the same or similar mission as INTERPOL, could it be done? It is extremely unlikely that any consensus could ever be reached in today's geopolitical environment.

That INTERPOL with all its faults remains the most viable option available in meeting these threats and attempting to ameliorate the impacts of organised crime, terrorism and cybercrime globally. INTERPOL has a substantial amount of work to do to make the organisation as effective as possible in achieving its own mission.

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## Online links in the article

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- URL1: *INTERPOL conference: Global security hinges on a safer Africa*. <http://interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2021/INTERPOL-General-Assembly-overwhelmingly-endorse-Executive-Committee-elections-reform>
- URL2: *The 'New' Middle East and its Global Consequences*. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-new-new-middle-east-and-its-global-consequences/>
- URL3: *China's Military Modernization: Implications for Regional Security Track 1.5 Dialogue*. <https://www.state.gov/keynote-remarks-for-chinas-military-modernization-implications-for-regional-security-track-1-5-dialogue/>
- URL4: *Biden's Unprecedented Semiconductor Bet*. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/27/biden-s-unprecedented-semiconductor-bet-pub-88270>
- URL5: *With the end of four centuries of western dominance, what will the world order be in the 21st century?* <http://brookings.edu/articles/with-the-end-of-four-centuring-of-western-dominance-what-will-the-world-order-be-in-the-21st-century>
- URL6: *Urgent global response needed for 'insidious' cybercrime*. <http://interpol.int/ar/1/1/2017/INTERPOL-to-highlight-the-need-for-military-to-police-terrorism-data-flow-at-Global-Coalition-meeting>
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- URL8: *Our 19 databases*. <https://www.interpol.int/How-we-work/Databases/Our-19-databases>

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URL12: *84th INTERPOL General Assembly*. <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/Events/2015/84th-INTERPOL-General-Assembly>

URL13: *INTERPOL reforms and the challenges ahead for cross-border cooperation*. <https://fpc.org.uk/interpol-reforms-challenges-ahead-cross-border-cooperation/>

URL14: *Increasing diversity a priority at the INTERPOL General Secretariat*. <https://www.interpol.int/News-and-Events/News/2022/Increasing-diversity-a-priority-at-the-INTERPOL-General-Secretariat>

## Reference of the article according to APA regulation

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