

Trump's Coming War on the Mexican Drug Cartels

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Photos of fentanyl victims are displayed at The Faces of Fentanyl Memorial at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration headquarters in Arlington, Va., on Sept. 27, 2022. Alex Wong/Getty Images



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Commentary

President-elect Donald Trump has [declared war](#) on the drug cartels in Mexico. “The drug cartels are waging war on America, and it’s now time for America to wage war on the cartels,” he said in one of his toughest videos ever.

And it wasn’t the first time. He strongly advocated for many of the same actions in his first term and got results.

Trump’s incoming appointees support that tough approach. The

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potential future “[border czar](#),” Thomas Homan, said on Nov. 12 that Trump is committed to deploying the “full might of the United States Special Operations to take them out.” The appointed [defense secretary](#), Pete Hegseth, said in 2023 that military “precision strikes” on the cartels might be needed to deter them from operating “in the open with impunity.”



The United States has every ethical reason to launch a war on the cartels. They use chemical precursors from [China](#) to produce the vast majority of the illegal fentanyl that causes most of the [82,000](#) opioid overdose deaths in 2022 in the United States. That’s over 27 times more deaths every year than happened from the 9/11 attacks.



Fentanyl poisoning is deliberate and far worse in the number of deaths than anti-U.S. terrorism. Those who sell illegal fentanyl in the United States, when it results in death, are justly convicted of [murder](#).

Yet China and Mexico get off scot-free. Beijing uses its supply of precursors as leverage against the United States on issues like Taiwan, which proves that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) intends the deaths that result when Washington does not submit. If we want Beijing to stop the shipment of precursors, the CCP demands that we stop following the law to supply Taiwan with the weapons it needs for its self-defense. Some have called these CCP actions a form of blackmail, chemical warfare, or [genocide](#). Arguably, they are all three.

Just as the mullahs in Iran used Hamas to attack Israel, the CCP is using Mexican cartels to attack the United States. The risk for Hamas and now the cartels is that they could be targeted in response. Trump [published](#) an “action plan to destroy the drug cartels” in December. He

is threatening to designate them as terrorist organizations, cut them off from the international financial system, hit them with cyberattacks, [deport](#) or execute foreign drug dealers and gang members, finish the border wall, and eliminate cartel leaders. This could be done with cruise or drone-fired missiles.

If Mexico fails to help or take over these tasks themselves, Trump could unmask the Mexican politicians who cooperate with the cartels, entirely close the border, impose tariffs on Mexico, and impose a naval blockade to stop precursor shipments.

The falsely glamorous image of being a cartel leader with a grand hacienda, pool, caravan, and armed guards posted on the perimeter wall will not seem so glamorous when these expensive homes and vehicles attract Hellfire missiles on a regular basis, forcing drug kingpins into less glamorous digs in [hill camps](#) and Mexico City's back alleys. Neither will it be honorable to be a high government official in Mexico when Trump starts unmasking them as on the cartel payroll.

None of this will be particularly easy. The Mexican government opposes U.S. military force on Mexican territory. Designating the cartels as terrorists and using covert operations is one response. Mexico is America's largest trade partner and could withhold drug enforcement and immigration cooperation, though there is not much of that anyway.

The United States should not attempt to take and hold territory permanently in Mexico, as this would be a violation of the U.S.-led international order that we help enforce by protecting Taiwan and Ukraine against China and Russia, for example. We should not become the enemy we oppose. But short cross-border targeted attacks on cartels would not be dissimilar to U.S. operations in Pakistan, including the killing of Osama bin Laden. America needs to rapidly and vigorously defend itself against all attacks, including novel offensives like fentanyl, or we lose our deterrent credibility.

Another difficulty is diplomatic. A naval, drone, or special operations campaign in Mexico could cause the United States stress at the United Nations and with our allies. But ethics are on our side because we are

under attack with building U.S. civilian casualties that are greater than in any war in U.S. history. The new U.S. ambassador to the U.N., Elise Stefanik, is tough as nails and up to the job of defending us there.

Trump's critics note that a finished border wall could still be [tunneled](#) under, from a house on the Mexican side to a house on the U.S. side, for example. Many such tunnels reportedly already exist, making it difficult for U.S. law enforcement to catch the smugglers. And none of this would stop fentanyl from coming in through the millions of small mail packages flown into the United States from China and around the world. If producing fentanyl is difficult in Mexico, it could be moved to Afghanistan, Burma (Myanmar), or Nigeria. There are plenty of global criminal organizations that would welcome the chance to profit and care little about the deaths of innocent Americans.

But not fighting the worst drug kingpins and most prolific illegal labs, wherever they are found, is to acquiesce in the deaths of U.S. innocents and is therefore not an option. Destroying as many of the cartel bosses and labs as possible serves to not only stop at least some of them but also strengthens deterrence against others.

Accelerating plans for a war on the cartels will make officials in Mexico, and those from around the world, much more [pliable](#) to Trump's demands. Their caving in advance of Trump's war would be the best of all worlds and something that happened in [2019](#) by Mexican negotiators when he made similar plans. However, Mexico quickly fell back into its old ways over the last four years.

So this time, Trump may not be as willing to make a deal. He might just start with the public disclosure of bribery in Mexico City as justification for his military strikes against the worst of the cartel leaders and their illegal fentanyl labs out in the country. The nexus between the cartel bosses and corrupt politicians is a target-rich environment, and Trump has appropriate plans for both.

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