



Paramedics attend to a man who is overdosing in the Drexel neighborhood of Dayton, Ohio, on Aug. 3, 2017. The Epoch Times

PREMIUM REPORTS

China's Role in Fentanyl Crisis Back in Spotlight as Tariffs Loom

The United States says China is the primary source of illicit fentanyl making its way onto American streets.

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By **Catherine Yang** | November 26, 2024 Updated: November 27, 2024

When President-elect Donald Trump announced a hike in his tariff plans for China, as well as U.S. trade partners Canada and Mexico, he

drew attention to China's involvement in the illicit fentanyl crisis in the United States.

The day one plan would add 10 percent duty on top of the tariffs Trump already has planned for Chinese products, and a 25 percent tariff on all products coming in through Canada and Mexico.

Trump [said](#) on Nov. 25 that the three countries have not done enough to help the United States stem illegal immigration and the entry of illicit drugs.

Over the past two administrations, including Trump's first term, Beijing has made a number of promises to help curb the movement of illicit fentanyl but kept few of them.

Fentanyl is an FDA-approved synthetic opioid used to treat severe pain, such as in open-heart surgery, or epidurals for mothers in labor.

Illicit fentanyl, however, is often mixed with other drugs, and illicit drug makers are increasingly producing analogs, or drugs similar to fentanyl, with small molecular changes that can make the drug up to 100 times more deadly.

Fentanyl is already a potent drug—2 milligrams is enough to be a lethal dose depending on a person's size.

Illicit fentanyl and its various analogs have been linked to nearly 400,000 deaths in the United States since 2016. The United States has identified China as the [primary](#) source of illicit fentanyl coming in across the border since at least 2017 and the source of other drugs years before that.

In 2023, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) [seized](#) more than 80 million fentanyl-laced pills and nearly 12,000 pounds of fentanyl powder, representing 390 million lethal doses, more than the population of the United States.

Steve Yates, a China expert and former national security official in the George W. Bush administration, has made recommendations to Trump advisers on fentanyl policy. He and others say sanctions on Chinese banks for backing money launderers and chemical sellers will accomplish what diplomacy to date has not.

“When you don’t do those things, then you’re a doormat,” Yates told Reuters.

David Asher, a top former U.S. anti-money laundering official who helped target the finances of the Islamic State terrorist group, said this mechanism has been used against designated foreign adversaries like Iran but never Mexican or Canadian banks.

“You need to hit all the bankers. It’s sort of basic,” said Asher, who has recommended criminal indictments against Chinese and Mexican financial institutions, bounties on traffickers, and other measures.

390
MILLION

In 2023, the DEA seized fentanyl-laced pills and fentanyl powder equal to 390 million lethal doses, more than the population of the United States.



(Top) Sen. John Kennedy (R-La.) holds up a bag representing 400g of fentanyl at a hearing in Washington on Jan. 11, 2024. (Bottom Left) A package of seized fentanyl in the evidence room of the Pinal County Sheriff's Department in Florence, Ariz., on Nov. 12, 2019. (Bottom Right) A demonstrator holds a sign depicting the Chinese Communist Party's role in drug trafficking networks, at a rally in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York City on Oct. 1, 2020. Kent Nishimura/Getty Images, Charlotte Cuthbertson/The Epoch Times, Samira Bouaou/The Epoch Times

China Agreements

Fentanyl-linked deaths sharply increased in 2016. Near the end of President Barack Obama's term, China [agreed](#) to block exports of precursor chemicals, or ingredients, used to make methamphetamine, fentanyl, and its analogs to the United States.

Trump, who had campaigned on stopping the opioid crisis, formed a commission to combat the issue in March 2017 and declared a public health emergency in October that year.

The DEA [increased](#) its presence in China and engaged Chinese regime drug authorities to try to block shipments to the United States. The DEA has met with Chinese officials about blocking fentanyl since 2014 and held expert-level bilateral meetings in 2017 and 2018 to satisfy Chinese demands for more information about how these drugs were being used. This resulted in Beijing putting several key fentanyl precursors on a control list.

By 2019, Trump had secured another promise from Chinese communist regime leader Xi Jinping that China would curb exports of all fentanyl variants to the United States, putting them on an export [control](#) list.

But while the DEA and the U.S. Postal Service found that imports from China indeed [decreased](#) by 2020, the DEA noted that illicit fentanyl and analogs were increasingly coming in from Mexico.

Experts and officials have determined that precursor chemicals—which can be hard to ban if they have benign, legal applications—are shipped from China to Mexico, where local labs finish the process to create illicit fentanyl and analogs.

DEA officials note that the drugs are [cheap](#) to manufacture, as Mexican labs can buy \$3,000 worth of

\$1.5
MILLION

Mexican labs can buy \$3,000 worth of Chinese fentanyl and sell it for \$1.5 million on American streets, according to the DEA.

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Former DEA official Derek Maltz told The Epoch Times that tariffs only address one aspect of a vast and complex problem, but they certainly help and, more importantly, signal that the incoming administration will show strong leadership on the issue.

“We have to be more aggressive to get [Beijing] to cooperate more than they have in the past,” he told The Epoch Times.



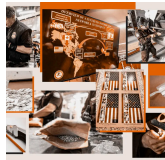
President Donald Trump signs a bipartisan bill to stop the flow of opioids into the United States, in the Oval Office on Jan. 10, 2018. Ron Sachs-Pool/Getty Images

Maltz is the former special agent in charge of the Special Operations Division of the Justice Department and former chief of the New York Drug Enforcement Task Force, the nation’s oldest and largest of its kind.

Maltz, who has tracked the opioid crisis since 2008, has seen the need for interagency cooperation to treat the issue as one of national strategic importance because it is no longer just a “drug issue.”

He said the United States needs a comprehensive plan to repair the damage done, including a defense strategy, mental illness treatment, rehabilitation, and much more.

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“It’s not just a supply issue,” Maltz said. “You can’t just throw money at it and expect it to go away.”

Fentanyl, and other drugs, are also sold directly to U.S. consumers online and shipped through the mail in [deceptive](#) packaging.

The easily editable nature of the drug also means that Chinese pharmaceutical manufacturers’ efforts far outpace regulators, officials say, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimating that there could be potentially thousands of synthetic fentanyl analogs.

Fentanyl-related deaths again rose steeply in 2020, with experts warning that a prolonged drug crisis could follow the mental health crisis caused in part by extended COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

Cooperation from Beijing on countering the illicit drug movement began to stall that year, with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [blaming](#) the United States' actions and statements criticizing the regime's human rights abuses as the basis for withholding data related to fentanyl shipments.

Then, in 2022, the CCP stopped cooperating entirely, stating it was in response to then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's (D-Calif.) visit to Taiwan.

The United States took additional unilateral steps in the meantime, sanctioning dozens of Chinese nationals and companies for exporting illicit fentanyl and related drugs. In September 2023, President Joe Biden put China on the U.S. list of major illicit drug transit or producing countries.

Talks between Washington and Beijing resumed in November 2023. Xi agreed to resume counternarcotics cooperation in exchange for the Chinese Ministry of Public Security's Institute of Foreign Science, which was implicated in human rights abuses in Xinjiang, being taken off the U.S. sanctions list.



Uyghur men walk past the exit of an underpass in Kashgar, Xinjiang region, China, on June 5, 2019. Greg Baker/AFP via Getty Images

By early 2024, counternarcotics talks continued, and China agreed to stem exports of pill presses, which are needed to create fake pills, and address money laundering and [synthetic](#) drug development.

To this day, China remains the [primary source](#) of illicit fentanyl and its precursors, according to U.S. agencies and congressional reports.

Chinese regime spokespersons have, over the years, repeatedly rejected U.S. reports that name China as the primary source of illicit fentanyl, saying instead the cause of the drug problem is the United States.

Chinese manufacturers and suppliers aren't stopping at fentanyl either, Maltz said. They've realized that the United States doesn't

strictly regulate marijuana production, he said, and are increasingly investing in the marijuana market.

Reuters contributed to this report.

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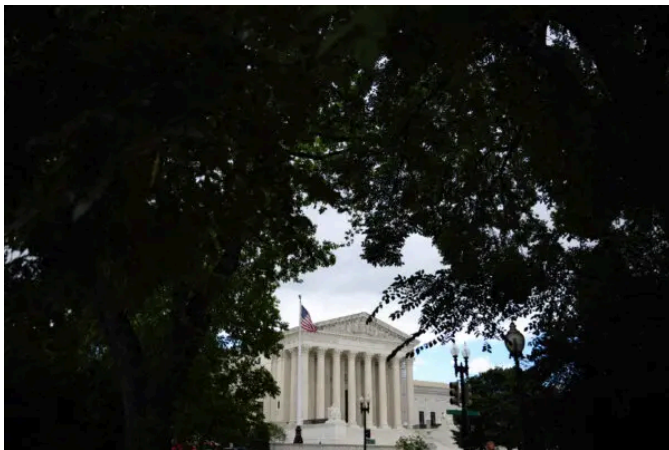
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