

November 2025

Combating the Fentanyl Crisis in “America”

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Executive Summary

This policy paper explores effective strategies to combat the drug epidemic in the United States—that is generally referred to as a “fentanyl crisis”—after the U.S. government denominated major drug cartels and other Latin American criminal gangs as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs). It elucidates the severe drawbacks of recent approaches designed to address this problem and anticipates the futility of U.S. unilateral military action against Latin American cartels. It explains how U.S.-led strategies that relied heavily on militarization (such as Plan Colombia and the [Merida Initiative](#)) and [kingpin targeting](#), as well as the possibility of military intervention in some countries—like Venezuela and Mexico—are ineffective to address a very intricate phenomenon. The drug problem in the Americas involves criminal networks organized into [complex adaptive systems](#). It is also an indicator of a severe public health crisis in the United States. This text focuses on the need of improved inter-American relations and recommends concrete steps to more effectively mitigate the so-called fentanyl crisis and drug related violence in Latin America. It proposes a comprehensive strategy to deal with this problem, focused on its root causes on both sides of the U.S. southern border.

Introduction/Background

The United States currently experiences a [deadly drug crisis](#) where fentanyl continues to be the [leading cause of overdose](#) deaths. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for three consecutive years (2021-2023), [drug overdose deaths](#) exceeded 100,000 ([surpassing](#) the number of motor vehicle traffic deaths and firearm deaths). These numbers have slightly decreased recently, but remain at extremely high levels, and uncover a serious public health problem in the United States that has [not been addressed properly](#) in the past few decades. Since the declaration of the war on drugs by former president Richard Nixon in 1971, efforts to limit the entrance of illicit drugs into the United States have been broadly [unsuccessful](#). Considering the logics of U.S. drug policy and its influence in (and/or imposition upon) the rest of the continent, as well as past results of related actions, it is foreseeable that approaches to combat the fentanyl crisis in the Trump era [will miss the mark again](#). The [anti-narco-terrorist approach](#) that includes U.S. military action against the cartels in other countries of the Americas would most probably not reduce U.S. drug consumption, and could have severe negative repercussions for the

relationship between the United States and its regional partners.

Policy Context

On the first day of his second administration, President Donald Trump signed [Executive Order 14157](#), which designated various Mexican cartels and other Latin American criminal groups (like MS-13 and the Tren de Aragua) as [FTOs](#); the list has [expanded](#) since then. Subsequently, the U.S. government has [revoked visas](#) of politicians, and frozen assets of individuals and organizations allegedly related to cartel activity. The U.S. Department of the Treasury flagged [three Mexican financial institutions](#) ostensibly tied to cartels for money laundering. The Trump administration has also considered [direct military operations at sea and on foreign soil](#) against these organizations. For weeks, the U.S. military has [attacked boats](#) off the Venezuelan coast, and Trump is even considering [possible strikes inside the country](#). Overall, the U.S. government has escalated supply-side drug control policies with a focus on drug cartels, and maintains the implementation of a [kingpin strategy](#) abroad. This approach will not solve the problem and could be detrimental for the country and its neighbors in the Americas.

Main Argument

[U.S. supply-side drug policies](#) like the kingpin strategy, or focus on drug lords, [have proven to be ineffective](#) in addressing the drug epidemic in the country. A focus on the demand and distribution of synthetic drugs within the United States is missing, and should also be considered in order to

implement a successful [comprehensive anti-narcotics strategy](#). Moreover, it is key to recognize that when talking about Latin American drug cartels we are not referring to oligopolies, nor a set of criminal corporations. Instead, we refer to a network of illicit actors/businesses (local and transnational) that form [complex adaptive systems](#). For instance, the recent reconfiguration of the Sinaloa Cartel—which sustained operational continuity despite leadership decapitations (e.g., “El Chapo” Guzmán’s capture in 2016 and “El Mayo” Zambada’s eventual arrest)—demonstrates the resilience and distributed intelligence characteristic of such adaptive systems. Moreover, the organization’s ability to absorb leadership losses, sustain logistical operations, and realign alliances across borders exemplifies emergent behavior within a complex network.

In such a context, understanding this problem requires the use of [complexity theory](#), [network criminology](#), and [systems thinking](#). Even more, U.S. drug markets involve multiple [U.S. players](#) who are not formally members of Latin American drug cartels (including local dealers, transportation businesses, corrupt authorities, among others). The current approach to combat the U.S. fentanyl crisis requires more than a crackdown on cartels and other Latin American criminal gangs (now considered FTOs), as a [global supply chain](#) fuels addiction in the United States. Hence, a comprehensive strategy should be implemented considering that the fentanyl epidemic is a public health crisis, and the cartels are structured as networks. The approach implemented today—that is a turning point in the governance of regional

security—will most probably fail. It should be dismissed.

Policy Recommendations

A [comprehensive strategy](#) to deal with the root causes of the U.S. drug epidemic is the only possible solution to address a crisis that affects the whole continent. The U.S. government should focus both on drug supply and demand. On the one hand, it should design more effective strategies to dismantle drug trafficking networks in the Americas. Such strategies should incorporate an appropriate mix of intelligence gathering, and selected enforcement targeted also at the “big” players in the hemispheric drug trade (including U.S. banks, arms producing firms, and pharmaceutical companies). On the other hand, the U.S. government needs to address the root causes of drug consumption. The DEA’s kingpin strategy and a unilateral focus on drug lords have proven to be a failed approach to diminish drug consumption; actually, drug demand generates its own supply.

What happens on U.S. soil is key and needs to be addressed: massive drug distribution in U.S. territory, the causes of drug addiction, and production of synthetic drugs inside the country. The fight against corruption that facilitates the entrances of illicit substances and their access to hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens should be a key part of this across-the-board strategy. Big pharma should also be held accountable for their responsibility in the drug epidemic that affects the Americas society. Addressing the causes of drug consumption in the United States would require effective drug abuse

prevention and harm reduction strategies. An extended and well-funded [public health approach](#) to fight the drug epidemic in the United States is essential.

Effective collaboration in well-designed anti-narcotics operations that encompass better coordination among countries involved in the regional drug trade, and among their law enforcement agencies is also fundamental. Institutional reform and inter-agency cooperation in each participant nation would also be part of an effective and comprehensive solution to this problem. The United States and its regional partners should address the respective root causes of their drug related problems. These countries should also collaborate in intelligence sharing and closing their borders to the trafficking of [fentanyl precursors](#) coming from Asia. It is equally important to recognize that [drug cartels are not essentially FTOs](#), but problems connected with drug trafficking and drug related violence are extremely serious. Lastly, the U.S. government should prevent arms trafficking and money laundering through the effective prosecution of U.S. arms producing firms and international banks involved in those activities.

An [appropriate mix](#) of drug prevention programs, harm reduction strategies, recovery from substance abuse and addiction, as well as effective law enforcement and community policing, should be a central part of this comprehensive strategy. Many experts, analysts, activists, and politicians understand this complexity, and have already provided [detailed recommendations](#) to solve the drug epidemic and drug trafficking problem in the

Americas. An initial step would be to fight misinformation with education and reliable data on the causes of this human crisis. Finally, it is urgent to debunk [misleading narratives](#) around the fentanyl crisis and the war on cartels. U.S. unilateral military action to solve a regional problem does not seem to be a rational solution.

Conclusion

Overall, the policy of designating Latin American criminal groups as FTOs redefines international cooperation and reopens long-standing dilemmas surrounding sovereignty, legitimacy, and effectiveness in the fight against transnational organized crime. The transition from cooperative, health-oriented frameworks—such as the Bicentennial Framework—to a unilateral, counter-terrorism approach represents not only a policy shift but a paradigm rupture in hemispheric security governance. The result of this move could be catastrophic.

The U.S. reclassification of Latin American cartels and gangs as terrorist organizations transforms them from criminal subjects of justice into security threats subject to extraterritorial action. This shift has long-term negative consequences. It risks escalating militarization, eroding trust, and reducing the space for civilian, health, and judicial cooperation. It also weakens multilateral institutions that previously mediated joint security agendas (such as the OAS, UNODC, and CELAC), undermining regional ownership of anti-drug strategies.

It is crucial to terminate this policy and reintroduce the public-health and

governance dimension. The fentanyl crisis or drug epidemic in America is foremost a public-health and institutional-resilience challenge, not solely a security issue. Sustainable solutions require restoring cooperation frameworks that integrate prevention, rehabilitation, and harm reduction, while also reinforcing anti-corruption and financial-transparency mechanisms. This is a matter of strategic interdependence. No country in the hemisphere can solve the synthetic-drug crisis alone. A shared responsibility approach—balancing enforcement with public-health imperatives—offers the only path toward durable stability and mutual trust.

Author

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