

SPECIAL REPORT

No. 309 | JANUARY 23, 2025

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How the President Can Use the U.S. Military to Confront the Catastrophic Threat at the Border with Mexico

*Robert Greenway, Andrés Martínez-Fernández,
and Wilson Beaver*

Given the rapidly deteriorating conditions at the U.S. border with Mexico and only tenuous U.S.–Mexico cooperation, it is appropriate for the U.S. to engage in serious planning and preparation for an enhanced and scalable military role in confronting the growing threats at the border. Congress should appropriate resources for an enhanced border security role for the U.S. military. The Defense Department should prioritize border security in its planning. Bolstering Customs and Border Protection capacities and resources should occur alongside an increased U.S. military enforcement role. Joint military action, coordinated with approval from the Mexican government, is the ideal condition for any direct U.S. action against the cartels on Mexican territory. However, unilateral U.S. military action may be necessary to prompt cooperation from a resistant Mexican government or otherwise contain the cartel threat.

The unchecked growth of Mexican drug cartels poses a rapidly increasing threat to U.S. national security and the well-being of the American public. The rise of illicit fentanyl has driven U.S. overdose deaths to staggering levels, surpassing 100,000 annually since 2021. Mexico’s drug cartels have also become instrumental in the expansion of mass illegal migration, increasingly including the movement of individuals affiliated with foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) and the espionage operations of hostile foreign governments.¹

Over the past four years, the long-standing challenges around illegal migration and illicit narcotics at the U.S border have deepened and accelerated, threatening to destabilize the United States. Hostile foreign governments in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and elsewhere are weaponizing mass migration against the United States. Enabled by lack of control at the U.S. borders, both south and north, these nations and hostile non-state actors

have supported the infiltration into the United States of transnational criminal organizations like Tren de Aragua, foreign spies, and terrorists from the Middle East.²

At the same time, it is increasingly clear that the Chinese Communist Party is actively funding and deploying America's most deadly drug threat in history in the form of fentanyl, causing a destabilizing crisis and a death toll that each year eclipses the total of U.S. casualties from the Vietnam War.³ All these threats pass through the U.S. southern border, deployed from within Mexico by deadly and increasingly powerful drug cartels.

As the threats facing the U.S. at its border with Mexico rise, cooperation with Mexico has rapidly deteriorated. For decades, Mexico has been a complex security partner for the U.S., with counternarcotics cooperation impaired by corruption, capacity limitations, and political shifts. Mexico's previous government under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador had accelerated the decline in Mexico's counternarcotics enforcement actions while imposing substantial new limits on security cooperation with the U.S. This stance created a broad-based and rapid deterioration in both U.S.–Mexico security cooperation and Mexico's own law enforcement and security operations against the cartels. In effect, this security policy is characterized by the Mexican government granting drug cartels significantly expanded operating freedom within Mexican territory.

President Claudia Sheinbaum, who took office in October 2024, has indicated planned continuity with López Obrador's security policies during her administration. Notably, the Mexican government has proved more willing to disrupt the flow of illegal migration across its territory (but even this cooperation has proven tenuous).

President Trump has made it clear that his Administration will confront the cartel threat. On the first day of the new Administration, President Trump designated Mexican cartels as FTOs and indicated that he may deploy the U.S. military to Mexico to target the cartels.⁴ Several follow-on policy measures are available to the Trump Administration to confront the cartel threat. By reasserting U.S. national security interests in the U.S.–Mexico relationship, and using U.S. economic leverage, the U.S. can push a reluctant Mexican government to confront the cartel threat housed within its borders. The 2026 renegotiation of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) offers one such opportunity, while other issues, such as Chinese transshipment through Mexico, also demand attention. However, there is a clear need for increased U.S. action to contain and confront the cartels and their illicit activities. The increasingly unreliable nature of the U.S.–Mexico security partnership has already led the Trump Administration

to signal a stance in which it prioritizes new measures and resources that reduce the reliance of the U.S. on the willingness of the Mexican government to contain the cartel threat.

The U.S. can push a reluctant Mexican government to confront the cartel threat housed within its borders by reasserting U.S. national security interests in the U.S.–Mexican relationship, and through economic leverage.

The first steps on this front should consist of measures, such as substantial bolstering of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) border security capacities, increasing restrictions on formal and informal border crossings, ramping up U.S. law enforcement efforts, targeting illicit financial flows tied to the cartels, and sanctioning corrupt Mexican officials. At the same time, the increasingly dangerous nature of the threats emanating from Mexico, and the Mexican government's quickly declining capacity to maintain the rule of law, should also lead the United States to seriously contemplate measures that use the capacities and resources of the U.S. military to protect the U.S. border. While the U.S. military has played varying support roles at the U.S.–Mexico border in the past several years, the Trump Administration should explore options to bolster and expand that role in the face of these threats and potential future instability. Indeed, President Trump has shown his intent to do so in his declaration of a national emergency at the U.S. southern border.⁵

A broad and diverse set of options and legal authorities are available to the second Trump Administration for using the resources and capacities of the U.S. military to ensure the integrity of the border with Mexico. Additionally, there is substantial historical precedent for an active U.S. military role in border security and managing migration crises.

There are risks and trade-offs to repurposing U.S. military resources and personnel toward border security and deportation operations. Given the increasing risks of a conflict in the South China Sea, as well as ongoing instability in the Middle East and Europe, demands for limited U.S. military resources are substantial. Nonetheless, steps can and should be taken in congressional appropriations and Department of Defense (DOD) planning to mitigate effects on military readiness elsewhere.

This *Special Report* lays out and explores some core options and approaches for deploying U.S. military resources, ranging from support for infrastructure constructions and logistics to direct action against Mexican drug cartels. Ultimately, the decision of how to use the military to confront border security threats should be made by following thorough intelligence-based planning, resource and funding commitments, and appropriate coordinated measures across relevant U.S. government agencies.

To enable effective U.S. military support for border security, the Trump Administration and Congress should ensure that appropriate funding is appropriated to the DOD for fiscal years (FYs) 2025 and 2026, as well as to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). In this way, the impact on military readiness in other critical theaters could be limited. The Secretary of Defense should also order a full review of available defense resources and programs to apply in support of U.S. border security. This review should include bolstering of Reception, Staging, Onward Movement, and Integration processes and resources at and around the U.S.–Mexican border.

The U.S. military possesses unique resources and capabilities to assist with a range of missions and roles to confront the various aspects of the border crisis. When it comes to large-scale illegal-alien detention and deportation, some of the underused but most impactful resources include U.S. military transport vehicles and facilities around the world which could support detention and repatriation of illegal aliens, including to higher-risk and extra-hemispheric countries of origin. These and other options should be considered to ensure U.S. control over its border, with capacities to scale the response as needed.

Options for direct action against the cartels within Mexico should be a last resort and operate on an escalating scale, to be deployed in consideration of the present operating environment and diplomatic context. The approach for any direct military action should be tailored to the dual objectives of destabilizing cartel supply chains and prompting a desired change in behavior by the cartels or the Mexican government in the case of unilateral action. Lower-risk options, such as interception of cartel drones around the U.S. border, may still be effective, though current conditions heighten the importance of planning for more aggressive measures, including on Mexican territory.

Joint military action, coordinated with the approval of the Mexican government, is the ideal condition for any direct U.S. action against the cartels on Mexican territory. However, in the appropriate context, unilateral U.S. military action may be employed to disrupt cartel activity and prompt cooperation from a resistant Mexican government. At the same time, there are high risks of undesirable response from the Mexican government and drug

cartels. Therefore, any direct U.S. military action should be preceded and accompanied by coordinated measures to mitigate undesirable responses and limit the exposure of the U.S. to the same.

Joint military action is the ideal condition for any direct U.S. action against the cartels on Mexican territory. However, unilateral U.S. military action may be employed to disrupt cartel activity and prompt cooperation from a resistant Mexican government.

Mexico and the Cartel Threat

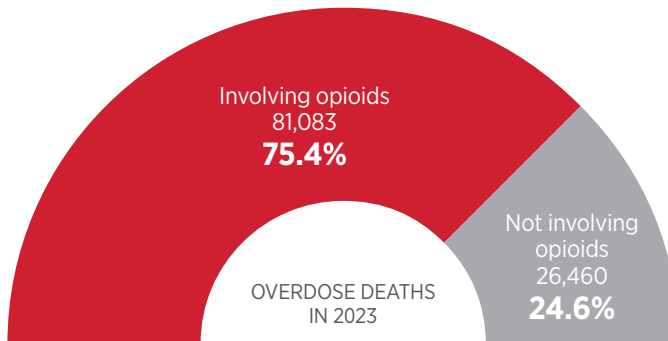
The nature of the cartel threat has shifted notably in recent years as the Mexican government increasingly pulls back on enforcement against drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). Mexican drug cartels have seized on their effective free reign on Mexican territory to ramp up illicit drug trafficking and migrant smuggling into the United States, tapping into highly profitable new revenue streams that threaten U.S. security and stability. This wealth has allowed cartels to grow in power and lethal capacity, further dissuading the Mexican government from deploying its limited enforcement capacities against the cartels.

Leveraging their sophisticated and sprawling illicit networks, Mexican drug cartels receive an estimated \$30 billion each year in illicit revenue. Today, drug cartels are the fifth-largest employer in Mexico, with between 160,000 and 185,000 members.⁶ Cartels are also equipped with military-level weaponry, including anti-aircraft weapons and armored vehicles, while increasingly employing advanced technologies, such as drones and signal jamming systems.

Mexican drug cartels have successfully used violence and corruption as a primary tactic to capture and control territory within Mexico, gaining increasing levels of operational freedom in recent years. Even as the Mexican government has substantially reduced its armed confrontations with the cartels, cartel violence has risen to disturbing levels, with upwards of 40,000 recorded homicide deaths each year.⁷ For the U.S., the consequences

CHART 1

Vast Majority of Overdose Deaths in U.S. Involve Opioids



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, “U.S. Overdose Deaths Decrease in 2023, First Time Since 2018,” May 15, 2024, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2024/20240515.htm (accessed December 16, 2024).

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of increasingly empowered drug cartels have been dire. Between 2021 and 2023, the U.S. recorded 326,126 overdose deaths as fentanyl seizures tripled and more than 8.5 million border encounters.⁸

Cartels in Mexico have proven willing partners for U.S. adversaries seeking to destabilize the United States. The Chinese Communist Party, through Chinese chemical companies and criminal groups, has provided a steady flow of fentanyl precursors to Mexican cartels, while Chinese money launderers aid the cartels in laundering their profits to avoid U.S. law enforcement.⁹

As hostile regimes in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and elsewhere weaponize mass migration against the U.S., Mexican drug cartels have also become central players in the management and facilitation of the onslaught of illegal migration. Similarly, these networks of mass migration are increasingly global and extra-hemispheric in origin, bringing the arrival of migrants affiliated with Middle East terrorist organizations and hostile foreign governments around the world.

In the face of this sophisticated and highly capable criminal threat pushing rapidly increasing flows of illicit fentanyl and mass migration, U.S. border officials are unable to assert basic control over the border as the magnitude of these challenges overwhelm their enforcement and detection capacities. Meanwhile, U.S. border security has suffered greatly as a result of the collapse of security cooperation from Mexico.

Over the past six years, corruption, capacity limitations, and domestic political factors pushed the Mexican government to substantially pull back

on past efforts at confronting drug cartels with Mexican security forces. Under President Lopez Obrador, Mexico also cut off major channels of security cooperation and partnership with the U.S. In 2021, President Lopez Obrador followed through on past criticisms of U.S.–Mexico security cooperations and the so-called war on drugs by withdrawing Mexico from the Mérida Initiative, the long-standing framework which marked a deepening of security relations between Mexico and the U.S. In its place, Mexico and the U.S. agreed in 2021 to the Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities. As its name suggests, the Bicentennial Framework emphasized public health and demand aspects of the narcotics crisis while de-emphasizing security and enforcement measures against drug cartels.¹⁰

Under the new president, Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico is likely to remain an unwilling partner to confront the cartel drug threat. Indeed, President Sheinbaum’s statements indicate continuity with former President Lopez Obrador’s vocal resistance to escalating measures against drug cartels. Mexico, under both Lopez Obrador and Sheinbaum, has been more open to cooperating on stemming the flow of illegal migration, however, this cooperation is also limited and contingent on unrelated factors and likely concessions from the U.S. As the drug cartels become more deeply entrenched in the human smuggling trade, Mexico’s willingness to take action against illegal migration might further wane.¹¹

Chinese companies and criminal groups provide a steady flow of fentanyl precursors to the cartels, while Chinese money launderers help them to hide their profits from U.S. law enforcement.

Some initial incidents of confrontations between the Mexican military and drug cartels in the early weeks of President Sheinbaum’s government could suggest an increased willingness to assert some level of control over the cartels, but the extent of this shift is unclear.¹² It is highly unlikely that, absent pressure from the United States, any organic shift in security policy by the Mexican government would be sufficient to defeat or substantially curtail the drug and human smuggling operations being carried out by the Mexican cartels.

Against the backdrop of these increasingly dangerous and dire circumstances around border security, the 2024 U.S. presidential elections reintroduced the discussion of the cartel threat to the U.S. political debate with renewed urgency. As President-elect, Donald Trump had highlighted the threat and called for designating drug cartels as FTOs and even discussed the possibility of direct military action against the cartels in Mexico.

Following the November 2024 elections, President-elect Donald Trump once again highlighted the urgency of the narco-migration crisis and took action by pressuring the Mexican government to bolster its efforts to halt the flow of fentanyl and migrants or face significant new tariffs. This step by the President-elect resulted in new action from the Mexican government, including the largest fentanyl seizure in the history of Mexican enforcement.¹³ This underscores the importance of using economic and political pressure as the first option with the Mexican government to end its dangerous stance on narco-migration.¹⁴ The Trump Administration should continue to leverage these tools, including withholding foreign aid, limiting remittances, and applying visa sanctions, in its engagement with Mexico. At the same time, given the depth of the cartel threat, contemplation of even direct military action should also be a part of the policy discussion on border security.

Immediately upon taking office, President Trump made it clear, in his declaration of an emergency at the border, that he intends for the U.S. military to play a crucial role in protecting the United States against the cartel and mass migration threats.

U.S. Military at the Border. The DOD has supported the DHS with border enforcement since 2006 through different roles to bolster and supplement Border Patrol capacity.¹⁵ These roles have been carried out by both active-duty military and non-activated National Guard forces, including activities ranging from data entry and warehousing support to engineering and intelligence activity. However, the U.S. military's support role for the past several years in securing the U.S. border has been limited both in scale and scope to a level that fails to meet the surging illegal migration and deadly fentanyl trafficking.

The U.S. military has also acted at the border to protect American sovereignty in the more distant past. In 1916, the U.S. military launched incursions into Mexico from U.S. territory after hundreds of Mexican rebels under Pancho Villa invaded New Mexico, killing U.S. soldiers and civilians. (See Appendix 3 for an overview of U.S.–Mexico border relations.) The primary goal of the U.S. military is to protect the lives of American citizens, and securing the border is a security necessity.

At current staffing levels, placing all Border Patrol agents on the U.S.–Mexican border simultaneously would have each agent covering more than half a mile of territory. This leaves the U.S. border vulnerable on a day-to-day basis, with the consequences seen across the United States. This mismatch of Border Patrol capacities and the flood of fentanyl and migration is made even more dangerous during periodic spikes in mass migration, which further stretch Border Patrol capacities, revealing the necessity of U.S. military support.

Construction of a border wall has been an important step in bolstering border security. As such, completion of border barrier construction remains an important step for securing the U.S. border with Mexico. Nonetheless, an increasingly innovative, dangerous, and well-resourced cartel threat continues to point to the need for an active enforcement presence at the border.

The U.S. military has a constitutional role in the defense of U.S. sovereignty against these foreign incursions. The DOD also has the appropriate resources and capacity to supplement overstretched Border Patrol capacities against the growing threat posed by drug cartels. There are a variety of ways in which the U.S. military can be employed more appropriately in defense of the U.S. border, ranging from preventing the incursion of illegal migrants into the United States, bolstering intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capacities at the border, and confronting the cartels at the U.S. border. In the past, flawed legal arguments and resistance from within the Pentagon have limited the appropriate deployment of the U.S. military at the U.S. border. However, given the rapidly deteriorating situation, and the rising threats to the United States, it is appropriate that the White House and Congress re-evaluate and bolster the DOD’s role at the U.S. border.

An increasingly innovative, dangerous, and well-resourced cartel threat continues to point to the need for an active U.S. enforcement presence at the border.

Finally, it is worth noting that, while the United States border agents and soldiers take great care in not crossing into Mexican territory, this care is often not reciprocated by the Mexican military. Indeed, in recent years, there have been numerous incidents in which Mexican soldiers have crossed into U.S. territory.¹⁶ Particularly egregious examples of these incursions in recent years have included incidents when Mexican forces

crossed into Texas and detained a group of U.S. soldiers.¹⁷ In other incidents, Mexican security officials were detected crossing into the United States while guarding a shipment of illegal narcotics.¹⁸

Beyond its historical roles at the border with Mexico, the U.S. military has also played a significant role in managing past migration and refugee crises. In incidents such as the Haitian migration crises of the 1990s and the refugee resettlement after the Vietnam War, military facilities and resources have been crucial to managing the large-scale flow of foreign nationals to the U.S. (See Appendix 2 for detailed historical case studies.)

Legal Authority for Deployment of the U.S. Military to Secure the Border

A set of flawed and incorrect interpretations of U.S. law are often presented as restricting the ability of the President to employ the U.S. military in defense of U.S. borders to non-law enforcement activity. However, Article II of the U.S. Constitution gives the President authority to use the U.S. military to protect the sovereign territory of the United States from an uncontrolled incursion of foreign nationals across America's southern border whenever the President determines that such incursions pose a threat to U.S. citizens, sovereignty, or national security.

The announced designation of entities like the Mexican cartels as FTOs under U.S. law stands to trigger enhanced domestic law enforcement authorities, such as asset seizures.¹⁹ However, the designations would not affect, one way or another, the President's constitutional powers as commander in chief to deploy the military in defense of the nation and its territorial integrity.

The Department of Justice has long held that “[t]he text, structure and history of the Constitution establish that the Founders entrusted the President with the primary responsibility, and therefore the power, to use military force in situations of emergency,”²⁰ and these powers “give the President broad constitutional authority to use military force in response to threats to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.”²¹

In an influential opinion in 1941, then-Attorney General and later Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson set forth this foundational understanding: As commander in chief, Jackson opined, the President may order the land and naval forces of the U.S. “to perform such military duties as, in his opinion, are necessary or appropriate for the defense of the United States,” including “in time of peace as well as in time of war,” and “this

authority undoubtedly includes the power to dispose of troops and equipment in such manner and on such duties as best to promote the safety of the country.”²² Similarly, acting Attorney General John Richards opined in 1898 that the “preservation of our territorial integrity and the protection of our foreign interests” are entrusted to the President by the Constitution; his powers to protect these interests “grow out of the jurisdiction of this nation over its own territory and its international rights and obligations as a distinct sovereignty,” and in exercising these powers, “the President is not limited to the enforcement of specific acts of Congress.”²³

The President’s deployment of military forces on the southern border in an outward-facing posture to protect the sovereign territorial interests of the United States would not constitute domestic law enforcement operations and would not be constrained by the Posse Comitatus Act (18 U.S. Code § 1385), provided the Armed Forces are not used in the pursuit or apprehension of foreign nationals who have crossed the border and are found within the interior of the U.S.²⁴

The Posse Comitatus Act should not be interpreted as a legal limitation on the President’s constitutional powers to employ the U.S. military in defense of America’s borders.

Accordingly, any decision to use the U.S. military to cross the border and take action directly against cartel operatives in Mexico would not be affected by the Posse Comitatus Act and would depend entirely on the President’s judgment that such action is necessary to protect the sovereign interests of the U.S.²⁵ Such action could be taken at the request, or with the consent, of the government of Mexico, or it could be based on a determination by the President that Mexico has failed to address the source of the threat to the U.S. and is unwilling or incapable of addressing it adequately from the perspective of U.S. national security.²⁶ Therefore, the Posse Comitatus Act should not be interpreted as a legal limitation on the President’s constitutional powers to employ the U.S. military in defense of America’s borders, including in the detention of illegal migrants and the seizure of illicit fentanyl at the U.S. border.

Approaches for Employing the U.S. Military at the Border

As noted, the U.S. military, including active-duty soldiers, have played a number of roles at the U.S. border over the past several years, such as for logistical, engineering, and intelligence support. There is a strong case for bolstering the military's level of support and presence across these lines of action to supplement limited capacities of the U.S. Border Patrol. However, given the increasing dangerous and destabilizing nature of the national security threats at the border, it is appropriate to explore new roles and actions for the military to combat the cartels and restore the integrity of the U.S. border.

The President and Pentagon should first consider the different options for the scale, magnitude, and means for employing the U.S. military at the border. These determinations will either limit or expand the menu of options and missions that the U.S. military can undertake to support border security.

The National Guard, Active-Duty Forces, and the CBP. The National Guard has recently played a leading role in bolstering U.S. border security capacities. However, there are also some inherent challenges in relying on non-activated National Guard forces to defend the U.S. border, particularly for longer and sustained deployments. Without federal funding, substantial and sustained National Guard deployments can cause undue and potentially unsustainable financial burdens on state governments. The absence of direct federal funding can even lead to payroll problems, including delayed pay for deployed guardsmen and insufficient equipment.²⁷ In the case that the federal government does reimburse a state government for these costs, that support may be transient as power changes hands from one Administration to the next, complicating longer-term planning for deployments.

Additionally, as a part-time force, the National Guard is also less suited to rapid or sustained deployments at the U.S. border than active-duty soldiers. At the same time, National Guard troops may lack specialized training and logistical and intelligence support to counter certain threats and forms of cartel activity. Restrictions on equipping National Guard troops with DOD weaponry and equipment can similarly cause logistical complications.²⁸

Some of these challenges with non-activated National Guard deployments can be overcome with proper federal support and coordination with the Pentagon; however, deployment of active-duty soldiers has clear advantages in many cases. As such, it is likely best practice to use both National Guard and active-duty military in different capacities.

The links between illegal migration and narcotics trafficking to the U.S. are undeniable.

Another approach for employing the U.S. military in support of border security would be to operate primarily as logistical and technical support to CBP agents, offering DOD equipment and technology for their use. This has been the most common approach to the border as it minimizes the footprint of military forces at the border, limits costs for the DOD, and avoids most potential legal challenges. However, this also significantly constrains the impact and options for the DOD, particularly given the capacity and personnel challenges of the CBP.

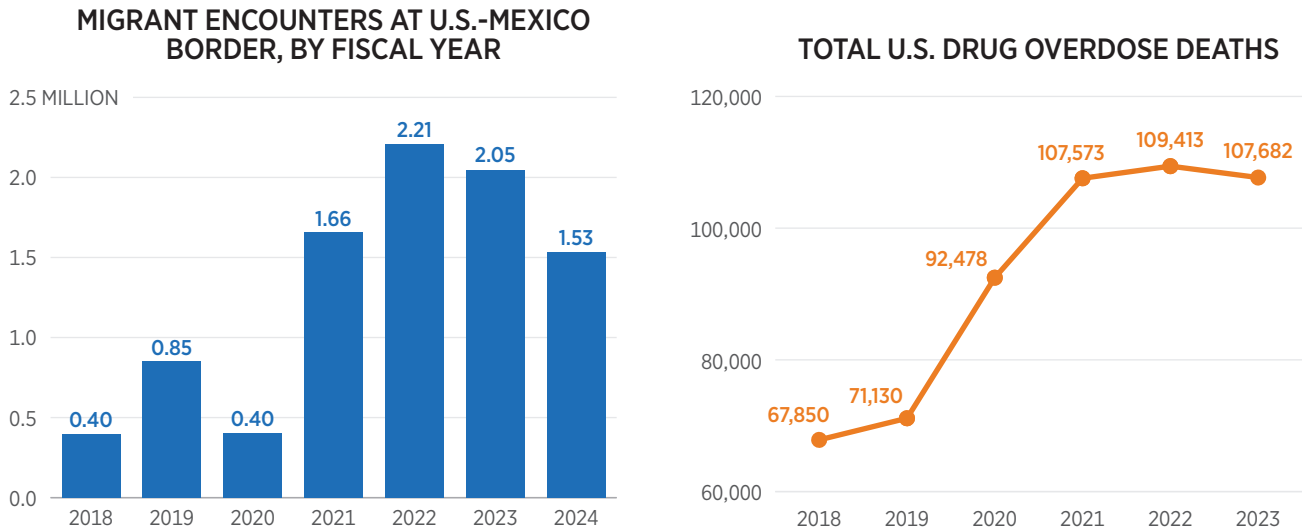
Illegal Migration vs. Narcotics Trafficking. The links between illegal migration and narcotics trafficking to the U.S. are undeniable. Both illicit activities rely on a porous U.S.–Mexico border and feature Mexican cartels as dominant actors, while relying on many of the same illicit support networks and methods for money laundering, co-opting of government officials, and even many logistical needs. However, there are also substantial differences between these dual threats that are likely to require distinct, if complementary, policy responses, particularly when it comes to the role of the U.S. military.

Compared to illegal migration, fentanyl and other drug supply chains rely much more heavily on the active participation of criminal networks within the U.S., such as narcotics distribution. Similarly, the criminal infrastructure within Mexico for drug trafficking includes high-value items such as laboratories, stored precursor chemicals, and pill presses.

For the purposes of U.S. policy formulation, perhaps the most crucial difference between fentanyl trafficking and illegal migrant smuggling is in the way each cross into the United States. When asylum and parole systems are properly applied by the United States, illegal migration and migrant smugglers historically have sought to bypass U.S. officials and ports of entry. By contrast, a substantial majority of illicit fentanyl is currently trafficked into the U.S. at ports of entry. The DHS reports that more than 90 percent of interdicted fentanyl is found at ports of entry. As this often-cited statistic only refers to fentanyl pill *interdictions*, it dramatically misrepresents the true volume of fentanyl trafficking between ports of entry. However, it nonetheless appears that, due in part to their compact size and high potency, combating the trafficking of fentanyl pills into the U.S. requires both a more substantial focus on securing ports of entry as well as the areas between ports of entry.

CHART 2

As Migrant Encounters at Mexico Border Increased, So Did U.S. Overdose Deaths



SOURCE: U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “Nationwide Encounters,” <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters> (accessed December 16, 2024), and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, “Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts,” <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm> (accessed December 16, 2024).

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Because of these distinctions as well as the volume of fentanyl production in Mexico, policies focused solely on border security are far more effective in reducing illegal migration than narcotics inflows. Indeed, this reality was exhibited in recent years, particularly during the 2020 pandemic, when collapsing levels of illegal migration were accompanied by spiking fentanyl trafficking and overdose deaths in the U.S. The difficulty in detecting illicit fentanyl at the border is one underlying factor, while fentanyl trafficking also has more viable avenues of trafficking into the U.S. than illegal migrants, such as mail parcels, maritime smuggling, and shipping containers.

Because of the cartels’ capacity to mass produce fentanyl thanks to sprawling illicit support infrastructure in Mexico, substantially cutting the flow of fentanyl to the United States requires complementary action both toward securing the U.S.–Mexico border and debilitating the cartels’ operations within Mexico and beyond.

It is also important to view illegal migration and narcotics trafficking distinctly because of the starkly different stances the Mexican government takes toward them. Under President Lopez Obrador and President

Sheinbaum, the Mexican government has agreed to take substantial action to stem the flow of illegal migration while at the same time offering stark resistance to calls from the U.S. to confront the drug cartels and their fentanyl trafficking. As the Mexican government clearly views illegal migration and drug trafficking as separate issues, it is likely to respond in different ways to new U.S. measures against them. For example, in the case of unilateral U.S. military action against drug cartels on Mexican territory, the Mexican government may respond by ceasing cooperation on migration, particularly in the absence of coordinated U.S. diplomacy.

Nonetheless, while many measures or actions by the U.S. military will not alone be sufficient to curtail the illegal migration and illegal drug crises, many measures will be complementary and necessary to secure progress on both challenges.

Options and Missions for the U.S. Military at the Border

The U.S. military needs an appropriate expansion of more permanent staging and operational sites to support a sustainable, rapid, and effective deployment of U.S. forces. The form this expanded footprint takes should be determined by a strategic evaluation by the Pentagon and could include housing for military personnel, permanent forward-operating locations, and migrant detention facilities.

To allow immediate deployment of troops to secure the border, the U.S. Congress should ensure appropriate funding to the DOD for FY 2025, as well as the DHS. The Secretary of Defense should order a full review of available defense resources and programs to apply in support of U.S. border security.

Table 1 presents a series of specific actions and missions through which the U.S. military can support border security and combat the twin challenges of illegal migration and narcotics trafficking. Following Table 1 is a short discussion of select mission sets and relevant considerations.

Countering Cartel Drones at the Border. Drug cartels are increasingly using drones (unmanned aircraft systems (UAS)) at the U.S.–Mexico border to gain tactical awareness of the U.S. security presence. This enables cartels to more easily move drugs and migrants across the border while avoiding detection. Cartels also use drones to transport illicit drugs over physical barriers at the border.

North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) estimates that these cartel drones cross the U.S. border at a rate exceeding 1,000 incidents each month—and rising.²⁹ U.S. Border Patrol reports significantly higher rates of cartel drone incursions into the U.S., with more than 10,000 incidents in the Rio Grande Valley sector over the course of one year.³⁰

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TABLE 1

Options for U.S. Military Border Security Mission (Page 1 of 2)


Mission	Goal/Desired End State	DOD Asset Classes and Infrastructure	DOD Programs/Branches	Coordinating U.S. Entities	Legal Authorities
1	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) at the U.S.-Mexico Border, Between Ports of Entry	UAVs, surveillance aircraft, surveillance towers, thermal sensors, cameras, satellites, HUMINT	Air Force, Army, Army Corps of Engineers, NORTHCOM	CBP, local/state police, DEA, HSI, state National Guard, FBI, CIA, NSA, National Reconnaissance Office, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency	Chapter 15, Title 10, U.S. Code; Title 10, U.S. Code, section 284
2	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance at the U.S.-Mexico Border, at Ports of Entry	Secure border ports of entry against illicit drug smuggling by deploying advanced screening technology, infrastructure, and personnel	Air Force, Army, Army Corps of Engineers, NORTHCOM, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency	CBP, local/state police, DEA, National Guard, FBI, CIA, NSA, National Reconnaissance Office	Chapter 15, Title 10, U.S. Code; Title 10, U.S. Code, section 284
3	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance in Mexico	UAVs, manned aircraft, satellites, HUMINT	NORTHCOM, Air Force, Army, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency	CBP, DEA, local/state police, National Guard, FBI, CIA, HSI, NSA, National Reconnaissance Office	Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, Executive Order 12333
4	Counter Cartel Drones at U.S.-Mexico Border	Detect and intercept cartel surveillance drones at and around the U.S.-Mexico border to limit situational awareness of cartels	Army, Air Force, NORAD	CBP, FAA, local/state police, state National Guard, National Reconnaissance Office	Chapter 15, Title 10, U.S. Code; Title 10, U.S. Code, section 284; President's Article II authority, Insurrection Act
5	Infrastructure Improvement and Expansion at U.S.-Mexico Border	Expand and construct infrastructure at the U.S.-Mexico border to support mobility of enforcement personnel and restrict smuggling activity	Army Corps of Engineers, NORTHCOM, NORAD	CBP, local/state police, State National Guard	President's Article II authority
6	Migration Enforcement at U.S.-Mexico Border, Between Ports of Entry	Deploy U.S. military personnel to intercept and detain illegal border migrant and drug smuggling activities	Army, Marines, NORTHCOM	ICE, CBP, FBI, CIA, HSI	President's Article II authority, Insurrection Act

TABLE 1

Options for U.S. Military Border Security Mission (Page 2 of 2)

Mission	Goal/Desired End State	DOD Asset Classes and Infrastructure	DOD Programs/Branches	Coordinating U.S. Entities	Legal Authorities
7 Illegal Migrant Detention	Leverage and adapt DOD bases and installations to manage large scale detention of illegal migrants	U.S. military installations (see Map 1 and Appendix Table 1), surveillance towers, detention facilities	Army Corps of Engineers, Army, Marines, NORTHCOM	ICE, CBP, FBI	Title 10, U.S. Code; Insurrection Act
8 Illegal Migrant Transport and Deportation	Leverage DOD's global transport capacities and basing to facilitate deportation of migrants from the U.S., including to higher risk nations	(Inclusive of Mission 7), transport aircraft	Army, Air Force, AFRICOM, CENTCOM, SOUTHCOM, NORTHCOM	ICE, CBP	Chapter 15, Title 10, U.S. Code; Title 10, U.S. Code, section 284
9 Direct Action Against Drug Cartels in Mexico	Deploy U.S. military weapons systems and special forces to destroy and/or capture strategic cartel targets within Mexico	(Inclusive of Mission 3); air-to-surface weapons systems, armed UAVs, special forces	SOCOM, SOUTHCOM, NORTHCOM	CIA, FBI, DEA, HSI	President's Article II authority
10 Bolster Maritime Interdiction Capacity	Increase resources including Naval assets tasked with countering illicit narcotics trafficking through maritime routes	Coast Guard and U.S. Navy assets, UAVs, surveillance aircraft, satellites	Navy, Coast Guard, NORTHCOM, SOUTHCOM, Air Force	DEA, HSI, FBI	President's Article II authority
11 Intelligence support to immigration detention and deportation efforts in U.S.	Leverage DOD military intelligence and military-to-military partnerships to provide information on high-risk illegal migrants in the U.S., supporting their detention and deportation	HUMINT	DIA, AFRICOM, CENTCOM, SOUTHCOM, NORTHCOM	ICE, CBP, FBI, CIA	President's Article II authority
12 Partner-nation capacity building	Bolster offering of security cooperation to willing partners in Latin America along the route of illegal migration and drug trafficking to the U.S.	Foreign military sales, education and training exchanges, intelligence sharing, foreign military financing	SOUTHCOM, NORTHCOM	DHS, HSI, CBP, FBI, DEA	President's Article II authority

SOURCE: Authors' research.

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Mexican drug cartels are using drones at the border to gain tactical awareness of the U.S. security presence—the Biden Administration even prevented the Border Patrol from firing on the drones.

Under the Biden Administration, the U.S. has even prevented the U.S. Border Patrol from firing on or otherwise engaging these cartel drones, increasing the vulnerability of the U.S. border. U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and NORAD also lack standardized operating procedures to counter the drone threats.

While cartel-controlled UAS have reportedly centered around monitoring and reconnaissance activity against the U.S. Border Patrol, there are also multiple known instances of cartels deploying weaponized drones with explosives against rival cartels in Mexico.³¹ The cartels' proven capacity and disposition to weaponize armed drones adds an urgent dimension to the largely unanswered surge of cartel UAS at the U.S. border.

Authorizing the Border Patrol to destroy cartel drones would be an obvious first step. However, Border Patrol agents lack the presence and capacity to adequately counter the more than 1,000 cartel drones crossing into the U.S. each month. The U.S. military's role in defense of the U.S. and its advanced counter-drone capacities make it the appropriate lead for enacting countermeasures against cartel drones in and around U.S. airspace at the southern border.

To intercept these hostile drones and restore control of U.S. airspace around the border, the U.S. military could deploy military personnel at the border with authorization to monitor and shoot down cartel drones with conventional small arms, perhaps aided by specialized anti-UAS optics. Military forces at the border could also receive the DOD's drone detection equipment including thermal, radio, and acoustic sensors. To further support an effective counter-drone campaign, the U.S. Army could arm mobile patrol forces at the border with more advanced mobile and handheld counter-drone technology developed over recent years, such as targeted jamming systems and mobile counter-UAS systems.³² Employing the DOD's newer counter-UAS technologies would not only support measures to combat the cartel drone threat, but would also provide the U.S. military with valuable experience in countering hostile drones.

Supporting counter-UAS actions from existing U.S. military bases can be a first step, and the military should also explore the potential of establishing new forward-operating locations at and near the border to bolster mobile counter-drone forces. The DOD and Congress should ensure enough funding to support an effective counter-UAS mission at the border, including the availability and procurement of new counter-UAS technologies.

Migration Enforcement. As noted, the President has the constitutionally enshrined power to direct and deploy the military in defense of the U.S. border. This includes halting the penetration of the border by illegal aliens directed by Mexican drug cartels. Such a role for the U.S. military is necessitated by the surging nature of mass migration to the United States, and the inherent national security risks that this presents.

Legal and logistical challenges, however, may make deployment of non-activated National Guard forces, under a state governor's control under Title 32 of the U.S. Code, a simpler course of action to bolster U.S. border security. State control permits the National Guard the legally clear ability to operate in a law enforcement capacity. Additionally, the DOD can even direct, support, and fund these state-controlled deployments, as made clear by Section 502(f) of Title 32. However, such an approach can be infeasible in some cases, including if a governor does not cooperate with the federal government.

Alternatively, the President may also deploy both active-duty military and activated National Guard forces to secure the border and detain migrants seeking unauthorized entry into the United States. Active-duty deployment of this kind should be supported by the construction of logistical and strategic operating locations along the border with the purpose of housing detained aliens, storing equipment, and housing military personnel.

The President may deploy both active-duty military and activated National Guard forces to secure the border and detain migrants seeking unauthorized entry into the United States.

Beyond the options to employ non-active National Guard troops vs. active-duty military, the President and DOD should explore both options

for a sustained presence of these forces along the U.S. border as well as a rapid-deployment supplemental force that can be called on during periods of spiking migration or cartel violence along the border.

Alien Detention at U.S. Military Facilities. U.S. military facilities can play a central role in management of detention and deportation. Currently, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has funding for just 41,500 detainee beds, a number which will have to be bolstered.³³ Given the lack of capacity at DHS detention centers, U.S. military bases have proven essential for the U.S. government's efforts to manage surging arrivals of aliens at the U.S. border. This role can continue and be expanded to both contend with the logistical challenges of rising alien arrivals as well as to support large-scale deportation operations.

U.S. military bases have been used to house large groups of alien detainees on numerous occasions. From 2012 to 2017, some 16,000 unaccompanied alien children were housed at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, at Naval Base Ventura County in California, at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico, and at Fort Bliss in Texas.³⁴ The U.S. also housed tens of thousands of Haitian aliens at its Naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, during the migration crises of the 1990s. (See Appendix 2 for historical case studies.)

Given the growing need for alien detention and deportation capacities, the DOD can, in coordination with the DHS, identify current U.S. military facilities capable of serving as detention sites for illegal aliens.

In the past, U.S. military sites in border states, such as Fort Bliss in Texas, have been primarily used for alien detention. However, given the dispersed nature of mass illegal migrants residing in the United States, large-scale deportation would have to make use of a broader set of military facilities as detention centers. A similarly more dispersed constellation of U.S. military facilities was used for alien housing after the 2021 withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. The DOD, through NORTHCOM, provided temporary housing for Afghan evacuees in the United States at eight DOD installations: Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia; Fort Pickett, Virginia; Fort Lee, Virginia; Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico; Fort McCoy, Wisconsin; Fort Bliss, Texas; Joint Base McGuire Dix–Lakehurst, New Jersey; and Camp Atterbury, Indiana.³⁵ Over about six months, these installations hosted 72,600 Afghans before their resettlement.

U.S. military bases outside the continental United States can also be used to more safely detain violent criminal detainees and others, particularly in cases where repatriation is complicated by international factors. U.S. military facilities in Latin America and the Caribbean are few and far between;

MAP 1

Locations of U.S. Bases Used to House Refugees and Migrants



- | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|----|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Naval Base Ventura County, CA | 9 | Camp Atterbury, IN |
| 2 | Camp Pendleton, CA | 10 | Eglin Air Force Base, FL |
| 3 | Fort Bliss, TX | 11 | Fort Pickett (now Barfoot), VA |
| 4 | Holloman Air Force Base, NM | 12 | Fort Lee (now Gregg-Adams), VA |
| 5 | Lackland Air Force Base, TX | 13 | Marine Corps Base Quantico, VA |
| 6 | Fort Sill, OK | 14 | Fort Indiantown Gap, PA |
| 7 | Fort Chaffee, AR | 15 | Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, NJ |
| 8 | Fort McCoy, WI | 16 | Guantanamo Bay, Cuba |

SOURCE: Authors' research. For more information, see Appendix Table 1.

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however, the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay provides a logical option for housing detained aliens.

Large-scale deportation is likely to exceed the current capacities of U.S. military facilities, requiring expansion of detention facilities. Such

expansions should be assessed for ideal sites and their funding should be allocated through the congressional appropriations process.

Military Transport Resources for Deportation. As with alien detention centers, the capacity of the DHS through ICE Air Operations to enact deportation flights is also limited. In FY 2023, ICE conducted 142,580 removals and 62,545 Title 42 expulsions of migrants to some 170 countries worldwide. Air transport for migrant deportation relies primarily on commercial airlines and charter flights contracted by ICE.³⁶ This creates logistical challenges and limitations in cases of large-scale operations or high-risk deportations. The U.S. military can again play an important role in bolstering DHS capacities by leveraging the DOD's military transport capabilities and resources.

Among the primary resources on this front would be the U.S. military's fleet of transport aircraft, which can bolster ICE's deportation flight capacities. These aircraft have been used for large-scale transport of non-military individuals in multiple occasions, including during the chaotic evacuation of Afghanistan in 2021. U.S. Coast Guard and Naval ships can also play a role in transportation of aliens, particularly between bases, such as to Guantanamo Bay.

U.S. military deportation flights and transportation may also be preferable in some cases to commercial or charter flights in multiple cases. For example, these military resources could be better suited to maintaining security and control in the case of high-risk detainee deportations. Similarly, military resources may be necessary depending on the security situation on the ground at a given destination for deportation flights.

The global reach and capacities of the U.S. military can also be used in repatriating alien migrants from outside the Western Hemisphere. The migrant surge in recent years has included a substantial increase in illegal migration from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Repatriating individuals to countries in these regions can be complicated by insecurity and logistical limitations. However, the presence of U.S. military bases and airfields in these regions can be leveraged to effectively facilitate repatriation. U.S. military resources can also be offered to Latin American countries that lack sufficient capacity to deport extra-hemispheric migrants. Doing so has the benefit of reducing repeated attempts to illegally enter the U.S. while encouraging regional governments to detain extra-hemispheric migrants.

As in the past, funding for the operation and use of military aircraft, ships, and related resources can be allocated through the DHS for reimbursement of the DOD. However, given the surging migrant flows to the

U.S., and the likely ongoing role of the U.S. military in managing these challenges, Congress and the DOD can also consider seeking an expansion of the military's air transport capacities through new funding, be it for procurement of new aircraft, transport ships, or other supporting transportation infrastructure.

Of course, in the deployment of scarce military transportation resources, the DOD can and should take steps to mitigate the detrimental effect for readiness for other theaters amid the rising threats of conflict in the Middle East and the South China Sea. Measures such as staggering deportation flights can be effective toward this end. However, ultimately, Congress should allocate new funding for military border security to more effectively mitigate negative effects on military readiness elsewhere.

Outward Facing Counter-Cartel Actions. As the assault on the U.S. southern border grows with an increasingly powerful and dangerous cartel threat, there is a clear need for the U.S. to explore potential action by the military to confront the cartel threat beyond U.S. territory. Contemplation and planning for such action are further necessitated given the trends in the Mexican government's security policies and capacities, which increasingly allow the cartels to operate largely unmolested on Mexican territory. At the same time, direct military action against the cartels brings with it substantial risks which are further elevated if such action is undertaken unilaterally.

The U.S. border security strategy must recognize the realities and limitations of border enforcement alone. Even if the United States were to massively scale up enforcement capacities at the U.S.–Mexico border, such action alone would be insufficient to contain the complex cartel threat to the United States, particularly when it comes to deadly narco-trafficking threats. Additionally, the substantial resource requirements of a sustained, high-level border enforcement mission for the U.S. military brings negative implications for military response capacities around other global threats. Therefore, the mitigation and debilitation of the cartel threat in Mexico should be a primary goal of U.S. border security strategy.

The full military defeat of the cartels presents a complex and costly proposition, particularly for U.S. forces. The substantial lethal capacity and scale of drug cartels is further complicated by their entrenchment in Mexican population centers and institutions. The existence of multiple distinct drug cartels across Mexico with sprawling support structures also elevates the complexity of confronting this threat militarily.

The U.S. border security strategy must recognize the realities and limitations of border enforcement alone.

However, well-targeted and strategically applied direct U.S. military action can be an effective tool in mitigating the cartel threat to the United States by emphasizing disruption and deterrence of high threat activity. If applied strategically to the priority threats of fentanyl trafficking and mass migration, U.S. military action can exploit vulnerabilities in cartel supply chains to disrupt their capacity and operations. Perhaps even more important than the disruptive effect of U.S. military action is its potential to dissuade cartels from engaging in these top-level dangerous activities, particularly high-potency synthetic narcotics. At the same time, U.S. military action, if applied strategically and in concert with diplomatic and economic measures, may be effective in securing and supporting the Mexican government's own efforts to confront the drug cartels.

Ideally, actions by the U.S. military in Mexico against the cartels would be undertaken with the consent and cooperation of the Mexican government and Mexican security forces. Given current political dynamics, however, there is a low likelihood of the Mexican government willingly consenting to any such action. As discussed, economic and diplomatic tools exist that can and should be leveraged to press the Mexican government to confront the cartels. Failing the success of such tools, unilateral action may be required and justified. In this scenario, application of unilateral actions against the cartels could also be employed in a scaled and strategic manner to press the Mexican government to cooperate in curtailing and eliminating the threat posed by the cartels to the United States, as noted.

Multiple options exist for less provocative, but still effective, military action in Mexico against the cartel threat. These include active U.S. aerial and drone surveillance in Mexico, with a focus on cartel territory and smuggling routes. Such surveillance could offer U.S. Border Patrol and the U.S. military valuable intelligence to disrupt and interdict smuggling activity as soon as it crosses into U.S. territory. The U.S. military could also receive authorization to target and destroy cartel drones while they are still on or over Mexican territory. Such action would substantially increase the ability of the U.S. to counter the cartel threat and signal to the Mexican government and the drug cartels declining U.S. tolerance for such threats.

Another potential mission for the U.S. military against the cartels would be the use of U.S. drone strikes or other weapons systems to destroy select

non-human targets along the U.S. border. One logical target of such action are the increasingly ubiquitous stationary jamming devices that cartels deploy on the Mexican side of the border to interfere with U.S. monitoring systems and activity.³⁷ Destroying such cartel technologies would be an important step in maintaining U.S. control and visibility at the southern border. As these systems target and interfere with sovereign U.S. border security activity, the U.S. can somewhat easily make the case for taking action against these systems, even unilaterally. Destroying the cartels' stationary jamming systems could be undertaken in concert with U.S. drone monitoring in Mexico and may even be a necessary action to doing so. Other cartel infrastructure on the Mexican side of the border present potential targets for the U.S. military, including drug-smuggling tunnels.

Much of Mexico's fentanyl labs and infrastructure have taken root in populated urban centers, raising the potential of civilian casualties and collateral damage should the U.S. military try to destroy the labs.

The possibility of more provocative and direct military action against the cartels has also been at the center of the border security debate in the United States. This includes the limited and targeted use of U.S. special forces against cartel targets and even air strikes on fentanyl labs deep in Mexican territory. Unilaterally deploying the U.S. military into Mexico has the potential to provoke severe backlash from the Mexican government, as well as likely reprisals and escalation from the drug cartels. There are also reasons to doubt the effectiveness of such actions, which may render them nonviable as a primary means to defeating the cartels, outside of extreme scenarios of massive imminent threats.

Targeting fentanyl labs for destruction with U.S. drones or other weapons systems has substantial inherent challenges. Unlike cocaine and plant-based opioids, which rely on large agricultural production, the nature of chemical-based fentanyl allows a small and clandestine footprint for its processing. This, combined with corruption and the Mexican government's limited efforts to combat drug cartels, has allowed much of Mexico's fentanyl labs and infrastructure to take root in populated urban centers, raising

the potential of civilian casualties and collateral damage. Furthermore, such action would require a dramatic increase in U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capacities in Mexico, which at present are minimal. Additionally, the dispersed nature of illicit fentanyl production by the cartels relies on hundreds or even thousands of cartel labs within Mexico, meaning that the debilitation of fentanyl production in Mexico through U.S. strikes would require a large-scale and sustained drone strike campaign with significant potential for collateral damage.

The unilateral deployment of U.S. Special Forces into Mexican territory would face similar logistical challenges, including being undermined by limited U.S. intelligence capacities in Mexico. Similarly, the disruptive effect of individual high-value cartel targets, even top leadership, is also unclear given multiple competing cartels, which have proven in the past their ability to restructure after fragmentation.³⁸ However, with sufficient intelligence and coordinated measures, potential exists for well-targeted actions to disrupt more vulnerable links in fentanyl supply chains. Additionally, while fragmentation of cartels with direct action has had undesirable effects in the past, such as temporary increases in violence, fragmentation would nonetheless have likely deleterious, if temporary, effects on cartel trafficking activity and networks. At the same time, increased violence following fragmentation could be offset with sufficient enforcement activity by the Mexican government with U.S. support.

In terms of disruption of the cartels, without careful planning and coordinated diplomacy, the benefits of limited unilateral strikes on cartel targets in Mexico stand to be outweighed by the likely blowback from the Mexican government. This could include the Mexican government fully pulling back any actions against the cartels or even fostering deeper cooperation with the cartels while weaponizing disruptions to U.S.–Mexico supply chains. Additionally, there is a significant likelihood that drug cartels would respond to more aggressive forms of U.S. military action in Mexico by ramping up violence at the border and against U.S. forces and targets.

Given the high likelihood of reprisals by cartels, any unilateral military action against the cartels on Mexican territory should be preceded by a substantial bolstering of the U.S. military presence along the border.

Proper U.S. planning for a potential escalation of violence by the cartels should also account for potential threats to the more than one million U.S. ex-pats living or working in Mexico, as they could become targets for violent reprisals. American firms operating in Mexico may also face risks both from cartel violence and government financial punishment, including expropriation.

With these risks noted, there are potential scenarios in which aggressive but limited and targeted unilateral actions, such as drone strikes, that the U.S. can employ to elicit a desired change in behavior by the cartels or the Mexican government, particularly for fentanyl trafficking and human smuggling. This outcome would of course rely on complementary diplomatic efforts and the use of other points of leverage by the United States in the bilateral relationship. At the same time, there are likely opportune targets in Mexico's complex fentanyl supply chains to substantially disrupt cartel trafficking capacities with limited, direct military action in Mexico.

Before the deployment of more direct and unilateral direct action against the cartels in Mexico, the United States should leverage these non-military tools to exhaust all possibilities to secure the cooperation and consent of the Mexican government. Doing so will mitigate the downside risks and backlash for the U.S. of military action in Mexico. If the Mexican government refuses to cooperate, then, depending on the severity and trajectory of the underlying threat environment at the border, the U.S. should consider unilaterally engaging in limited military action against the cartels. Ideally, the shock effect of this military action would be enough to galvanize the Mexican government into cooperation with the U.S., with Mexican troops and police deployed in force against cartel strongholds and re-establishing control over border areas in a joint effort to restrict the illicit flow of drugs and people and to re-establish Mexican federal control over areas currently run by the cartels.

Given the likelihood of cartel reprisals, any unilateral military action against them on Mexican territory should be preceded by a substantial bolstering of the U.S. military presence at the border.

In the extreme scenario in which, due to the dire nature and trajectory of the threats at the U.S. border, a large-scale deployment of aerial strikes or Special Forces against the cartels is necessitated, the proper strategic approaches should be evaluated with the benefit of increased intelligence-gathering in Mexico and lessons learned from the experiences of the past failures by the Mexican government to defeat the cartels. Potential

strategies could include targeting vulnerable links in fentanyl supply chains, focusing kinetic action against a single cartel, likely the Sinaloa Cartel or the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG), given their prominence and role in the fentanyl crisis. Prior to any deployment of force against the cartels by the U.S., the Trump Administration can apply a similarly strategic approach to the FTO designations of drug cartels. Limiting FTO designations to the cartels most involved in fentanyl trafficking and human smuggling, for example, can focus pressure and resources on a particular cartel while dissuading other criminal organizations from continued engagement in these illicit activities.

Budgeting for a DOD Border Security Role

The federal government will need to allocate additional funding to put into effect any of the scenarios noted in this *Special Report* and should do so proactively. Counternarcotics operations, the border security mission, and NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM all receive relatively small amounts of funding in comparison with other missions and geographic combatant commands. The President's Defense Budget Request for FY 2026 and eventual FY 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) will need to either add new funding or shift funding from other priorities into all four of these missions and commands.

For example, the FY 2025 request for the European Deterrence Initiative was \$2.91 billion, supporting rotational force deployments in Romania and Germany. In contrast, only \$901.5 million was allocated to drug interdiction and counterdrug activities.³⁹ The rotational deployments to NATO's eastern flank should end, with these forces being replaced with European NATO forces. Billions of dollars could then be shifted into drug interdiction and counterdrug activities. This would both send a clear signal to the American people that their government is putting American national security interests first and pressure allies to step up their defense spending.

The U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force will both need increases in Operations and Maintenance funding to the tune of several hundred million dollars each allocated for activities in NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM.

In terms of defense security cooperation, funding could also be shifted from other combatant commands, such as European Command (EUCOM), to SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM. A 2022 RAND study recommended an increase in financing for Title 22 accounts (such as for foreign military financing) for NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM, after detailing the small percentage of total funding by geographic combatant command of these

two commands.⁴⁰ Given the increasingly interconnected nature of adversarial activity in Latin America from China, the potential for terrorist groups to access the United States via the border, and the central role the cartels play in destabilizing governments in Latin America, the region closest to the American homeland, a reallocation of Title 22 funding away from EUCOM and other regions toward NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM is warranted.

The FY 2025 NDAA will almost certainly not contain sufficient funding for the next Administration's border strategy, which means that the DOD will have to shift resources internally, or that Congress will need to pass additional funding separate from the NDAA to fund the border strategy, or both. Congress has funded three supplemental aid bills for Ukraine over the past four years and could surely find the funding for the border security of the United States as well.⁴¹ An emergency supplemental appropriations bill for security at the southern border in early 2025 would equip the new Administration with the funding it needs to reverse the effects of the disastrous open-border policies of the past four years, and signal to the American people that Congress stands with the President in regaining control of the country's borders.

Limiting FTO designations to the cartels most involved in fentanyl trafficking and human smuggling can focus pressure and resources on a particular cartel while dissuading other criminal organizations from continued engagement in these illicit activities.

Congress can play an important role in supporting the President. During the first Trump Administration, House Republicans fought President Donald Trump over funding for President Trump's planned border wall—a mistake that aggravated the current border crisis. The American people, and conservative voters, in particular, have made clear that they recognize border security as a top priority for national security, and conservatives throughout the government ought to support policies for border security that require increased funding.

Conclusion

As with most any situation, deployment of the U.S. military should be among the last options. However, given the rapidly deteriorating conditions at the border, the spiraling security threats, and tenuous U.S.–Mexico cooperation, it is appropriate for the U.S. to engage in serious planning and preparation for an enhanced and scalable military role in confronting the broad array of threats at the U.S. border with Mexico.

Congress should appropriate resources necessary for an enhanced and scalable border security role for the U.S. military. The DOD should prioritize border security in its planning, including reviewing in detail the available assets and repurposing funding as needed.

Finally, to ensure effectiveness, employing U.S. military resources should be done in concert with other U.S. government measures. In the case of border enforcement, a bolstering of CBP capacities and resources should occur alongside an increased U.S. military enforcement role at the border. Similarly, in the case of direct action against the cartel threat in Mexico, the U.S. government should first take measures to use diplomatic, economic, and law enforcement tools to address the cartel threat.

APPENDIX TABLE 1

U.S. Bases Used to House Refugees and Migrants, with Dates and Incidents (Page 1 of 2)

	Location	Incident	Dates	Description
1	Naval Base Ventura County, CA	Unaccompanied Alien Children	May–Aug. 2014	Housed 1,540 UACs
2	Camp Pendleton, CA	Southeast Asian Refugees	April–Oct. 1975	Housed a total of over 50,000 refugees, with a population peak of 20,000
3	Fort Bliss, TX	Unaccompanied Alien Children	Sept. 2016–Feb. 2017, March 2021–June 2023	Housed 7,259 UACs from 2016 to 2017 and had the capacity for 10,000 UACs from 2021 to 2023
		Afghan Refugees	Aug. 2021–Dec. 2021	Housed and processed 11,400 Afghans
4	Holloman Air Force Base, NM	Unaccompanied Alien Children	Jan.–Feb. 2016	Housed 129 UACs
		Afghan Refugees	Aug. 2021–Feb. 2022	Housed nearly 7,100 Afghans
5	Lackland Air Force Base, TX	Unaccompanied Alien Children	April–June 2012, May–Aug. 2014, April–July 2021	Housed 800 UACs in 2012, 4,357 UACs in 2014, and about 100 UACs in 2021
6	Fort Sill, OK	Unaccompanied Alien Children	May–Aug. 2014	Housed 1,861 UACs
7	Fort Chaffee, AR	Southeast Asian Refugees	1975–1976	Housed 51,000 Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, Hmong
		Marinel Boatlift	1980–1982	Housed 25,390 refugees
8	Fort McCoy, WI	Marinel Boatlift	May–Nov. 1980	Housed and processed more than 14,000 Cuban refugees
		Afghan Refugees	Aug. 2021–Feb. 2022	Housed a peak of 13,000 refugees
9	Camp Atterbury, IN	Afghan Refugees	Aug. 2021–Jan. 2022	Housed over 7,200 Afghans
10	Eglin Air Force Base, FL	Southeast Asian Refugees	May–Aug. 1975	Housed and processed more than 10,000 refugees with a population peak of 6,000
		Marinel Boatlift	May–Oct. 1980	Housed and processed more than 10,000 refugees
11	Fort Pickett (now Barfoot), VA	Afghan Refugees	Aug. 2021–Feb. 2022	Housed and processed a total of more than 10,300 Afghans
12	Fort Lee (now Gregg-Adams), VA	Afghan Refugees	Aug.–Nov. 2021	Housed and processed over 3,000 migrants

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APPENDIX TABLE 1

U.S. Bases Used to House Refugees and Migrants, with Dates and Incidents (Page 2 of 2)

	Location	Incident	Dates	Description
13	Marine Corps Base Quantico, VA	Afghan Refugees	Aug.–Dec. 2021	Housed roughly 5,000 refugees
14	Fort Indiantown Gap, PA	Southeast Asian Refugees	May 1975–Jan. 1976	Housed more than 20,000 refugees
14	Fort Indiantown Gap, PA	Mariel Boatlift	May–Oct. 1980	Housed and processed more than 19,000 refugees
15	Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, NJ	Kosovo Refugees	May–June 1999	Housed and processed 4,025 refugees
		Afghan Refugees	Aug. 2021–Feb. 2022	Housed a peak of 14,500 refugees
16	Guantanamo Bay, Cuba	Cuban-Haitian Refugee Crisis	1991–July 1993, June 1994–Feb. 1996	Housed a peak of 13,000 Haitian refugees from 1991 to 1993 and peak of 12,000 Haitians and 33,000 Cubans from 1994 to 1996

NOTE: UAC—Unaccompanied alien children.

SOURCE: Authors' research based on various media reports and reports by Congressional Research Service, U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, Department of Homeland Security, and U.S. National Guard.

Appendix 2: Historical Cases of Military Role in Large-Scale Migration

Following are short descriptions of U.S. military involvement during the 1990s Haitian refugee crisis and the U.S. evacuation of South Vietnam.

The 1990s Haitian Refugee Crisis

Thousands of Haitians fled their country in 1991 after the military takeover of the island, creating a refugee crisis, particularly when a Florida judge issued the decision prohibiting the United States from turning them back. The 1991–1992 mass migration resulted in a total of 37,000 Coast Guard migrant interdictions. The 1994 mass migrations from Haiti and Cuba totaled 63,000 migrants.

U.S. Military Role. In 1991, General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, established a military task force to coordinate the Pentagon’s response, and ordered the military to prepare shelters, sanitary facilities, and medical care for thousands of Haitians.⁴² Guantanamo Bay became a refugee camp housing thousands of refugees. At one point, nearly 13,000 Haitians lived at Guantanamo. Such a detention center specifically created to hold illegal migrants was not unprecedented, as a similar facility was created during the Mariel boat lift by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (which existed until 2003) in an abandoned missile defense base at the edge of the Everglades to serve as a processing center. The Navy and Marines also quickly built a camp for 2,500 migrants on Grand Turk Island in Turks and Caicos at a cost of \$18 million, though delays and poor conditions prevented any migrant from being housed there.⁴³

In addition to facilities onshore, seven Coast Guard cutters and the amphibious ship *Tortuga* at anchor served as temporary homes.⁴⁴ Although some 10,490 Haitians were initially paroled into the U.S. after pre-screening interviews in Guantanamo determined they had a credible fear of persecution, this changed in May 1992 when President George H. W. Bush ordered the Coast Guard to intercept all Haitians in boats and immediately return them to Haiti without interviews while offering the option of in-country refugee processing.⁴⁵ A total of 62 cutters and 13 air stations were involved in the first seven months of this operation in 1992.⁴⁶

President Bill Clinton briefly changed this repatriation policy, though another huge surge of migrants forced him to once again halt refugee processing. Operations Able Manner (1993) and Able Vigil (1994) were conducted to address the surge and suffered from lack of planning. Cutters were

mobilized from along the East Coast to interdict migrants coming across on dangerously overloaded boats, and Guantanamo Bay was once again turned into a refugee camp under Operation Sea Signal.⁴⁷ In September 1994, as many as 12,000 Haitians and 33,000 Cubans were housed at Guantanamo Bay.⁴⁸ Some 8,000 ended up being transferred to camps at a U.S. military base in Panama.⁴⁹ Of these, most of the Cubans gained entry into the United States and most of the Haitians were sent home. Those who were allowed into the U.S. were flown in by charter plane.⁵⁰ At their peak, Operation Able Manner involved 17 Coast Guard cutters, nine aircraft, and five U.S. Naval ships patrolling the coast of Haiti, and Operation Able Vigil involved 29 Coast Guard cutters, six aircraft, and nine U.S. Naval ships patrolling the Straits of Florida.⁵¹

Policy toward Haitians making the dangerous flight across the ocean continued to be strict in George W. Bush's Administration, with the White House stating that paroling Haitians would only encourage others to risk their lives and come to America. The experiences of the Haitian and Cuban migration crises of the 1990s culminated in Operation Vigilant Sentry, which was approved in 2004 within the new Department of Homeland Security and is the current joint task force of air and surface assets and personnel assigned to address illegal maritime migration in the Caribbean corridor.

Today, the migrant detention facility at Guantanamo Bay still exists but has only housed a few dozen migrants over the past several years.⁵²

U.S. Evacuation from South Vietnam

Although U.S. combat troops left South Vietnam in 1973 according to a peace agreement signed with the North Vietnamese, North Vietnam re-equipped and escalated its efforts to take the south over the next two years. America showed little willingness to spend any more blood or treasure fighting on behalf of the South Vietnamese, so the North Vietnamese were able to rapidly take over large swaths. This left thousands of American citizens and Vietnamese allies desperate to evacuate.⁵³

The U.S. Military Role. The military used some 19 Air Wings, primarily made up of large airlift cargo planes like the various C-130 models, the A-7, the C-5 Galaxy, the C-141, and the C-9, as well as helicopters like the CH-53 and HH-53 to evacuate people from South Vietnam. To expedite the process, which saw thousands of refugees held up in time-consuming processing, the paperwork needed to evacuate individuals was simplified. When the North Vietnamese announced that they would not oppose an American aerial evacuation of Saigon if it took place immediately, more large airlifts

by the Air Force were mobilized and sent to Vietnam. The evacuees were taken to Air Force bases in Guam and Wake Island in the Pacific Ocean, where the U.S. military hastily built camps.

Following North Vietnamese bombings, rocket, and artillery attacks, the fixed-wing airlift was ended and replaced by Operation Frequent Wind, which used UH-1 helicopters to shuttle people to the American embassy or Defense Attaché Office (DAO) complex at the Tan Son Nhut Airport. From there, large CH-53, HH-53, and CH-46 helicopters extracted people to the Seventh Fleet.

In Operation New Arrivals, Military Airlift Command (MAC) and commercial airlines transported tens of thousands of refugees from the Pacific Island camps to refugee reception centers in the continental United States at several military bases including Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Camp Pendleton in California, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania. In this operation, as well as Operation New Life, around 144,000 refugees from Southeast Asia⁵⁴ were eventually settled in the United States.

Appendix 3: Brief Overview of U.S.–Mexico Border Relations

Following are brief overviews of U.S.–Mexico border relations in the 19th century, the 20th century, and the late 20th century until today.

19th Century: Texas and the Border Bandits

The Department of Defense has had a significant and evolving role in U.S.–Mexico border relations. U.S.–Mexico relations span several centuries marked by significant events shaped by a combination of historical conflicts, strategic interests, and cooperative initiatives aimed at enhancing regional security and stability. Relations began in 1810 when Mexico, then a colony of Spain, revolted—and gained independence in 1821.

Migration has always been central to U.S.–Mexico relations. In the 1830s, Mexico tried to prohibit U.S. citizens from settling in what is now Texas, leading to Texas’s independence in 1836 and the Mexican–American War from 1846 to 1848.⁵⁵ This war, fueled by territorial disputes after the U.S. annexation of Texas in 1845, resulted in significant U.S. territorial gains under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Mexico ceded about 55 percent of its territory, and the Rio Grande was established as the border.⁵⁶ Mexico’s substantial loss of land hurt its economy and national pride. The U.S. agreed to pay Mexico \$15 million, and the treaty included the protection of property and civil rights for Mexican nationals residing in the ceded territories.⁵⁷ The treaty also set the stage for future diplomatic and political relations, often marked by tension and negotiation over border and immigration issues.

The bandit wars and border skirmishes between the U.S. and Mexico in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were fueled by lawlessness, economic instability, and political turmoil. The sparsely populated and poorly policed border region became a haven for bandits and outlaws. Driven by poverty and resource scarcity in Mexico, smuggling and other illegal activities quickly became the norm.⁵⁸ Political and social upheaval during the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) further exacerbated instability and cross-border conflicts, exemplified by Pancho Villa’s 1916 raid on Columbus, New Mexico, which led to the U.S. Punitive Expedition.⁵⁹ Frequent clashes between U.S. forces and Mexican bandits, revolutionaries, and military units were common, focused on and around border cities.⁶⁰ The U.S. responded with increased military patrols and National Guard deployments, straining diplomatic relations, causing significant economic and

social costs for local communities. This period was marked by efforts to patrol and secure the border, highlighting early military involvement in regional stability.

Early 20th Century: Revolution and World Wars

During the Mexican Revolution, the U.S. provided support to different factions in Mexico, offering arms and military advice. The U.S. would occupy Veracruz in 1914 to counteract German influence and protect American interests.⁶¹ U.S. involvement in the revolution, marked by diplomatic, military, and economic actions, significantly influenced the conflict's course and often exacerbated tensions.⁶² The legacy of U.S. involvement in the revolution continues to shape bilateral relations and perceptions on both sides of the border.

World War II. World War II presented an opportunity for Mexico and the U.S. to cooperate. In 1942, Mexico declared war on the Axis powers and began to work with the U.S. government to modernize its military and defense infrastructure.⁶³ Mexico provided labor support through the Bracero Program, which allowed Mexicans to work in the U.S. to address labor shortages. The U.S. helped to organize the Mexican military by providing equipment and expertise, enhancing regional security and underscoring the strategic importance of the U.S.–Mexico relationship. Collaboration during World War II helped to mitigate historical tensions and fostered a stronger bilateral relationship based on shared interests and mutual benefit.⁶⁴

The Cold War. During the Cold War, U.S.–Mexico relations were heavily influenced by U.S. security priorities and concerns over the spread of communism. The U.S. provided military aid and training to Mexico to combat leftist insurgencies and maintain regional stability. Recognizing Mexico as a critical partner in preventing the spread of communism in Latin America, the United States engaged in extensive intelligence-sharing and security cooperations that helped to ensure that Mexico had the military capacity to deter communism incursions.⁶⁵ This period saw significant counterinsurgency cooperation, with the U.S. offering support to Mexican security forces to combat guerrilla movements and leftist insurgencies, influenced by U.S. anti-communist doctrine.⁶⁶

Late 20th Century to Present: The Rise and Fall of Security Cooperation

In the late 20th century, the United States tried to address the underlying issues that enable cartels to exploit Mexico and its citizens.

Operation Intercept. The first initiative, Operation Intercept, launched in 1969 under President Richard Nixon.⁶⁷ Operation Intercept marked an early stage in the War on Drugs. The operation was driven by rising drug use and aimed at disrupting drug trafficking while pressuring the Mexican government to take action against drug cultivation.⁶⁸

The implementation of Operation Intercept involved increased inspections at the U.S.–Mexico border. This immediately affected border traffic, commerce, tourism, and daily commutes for border communities. While the operation initially succeeded in reducing the flow of drugs into the United States, it also strained diplomatic relations with Mexico, which viewed it as an overreach and an infringement on its sovereignty.⁶⁹ Operation Intercept led to increased diplomatic tensions underscoring the need for increased cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico on drug enforcement. It demonstrated the economic and social costs of stringent border enforcement measures.⁷⁰

The Mérida Initiative. Launched in 2008, the Mérida Initiative is a bilateral security cooperation agreement between the United States and Mexico to combat drug trafficking, organized crime, and associated violence.⁷¹ It was modeled after Plan Colombia, a similar U.S.-backed initiative launched in the early 2000s to combat drug trafficking and insurgent groups in Colombia.⁷² Both plans involved substantial U.S. financial and military assistance to support each government’s efforts to reduce drug cultivation, dismantle drug trafficking organizations, and strengthen government institutions.

The Mérida Initiative provides funding, training, and intelligence-sharing to help Mexico to combat drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and includes support for institutional reforms to strengthen the rule of law, improve public security, and protect human rights.⁷³ The Mérida Initiative was initiated in response to a request from the Mexican government under President Felipe Calderón, who declared war on the cartels in 2006.⁷⁴

Joint Exercises and Training Programs. In recent years, the Defense Department has focused on joint exercises and training programs with Mexican military forces. Initiatives, such as the North American Maritime Security Initiative (NAMSI), Exercise Tradewinds, and joint border security operations, have strengthened military cooperation and regional security.⁷⁵ The U.S. and Mexico collaborate to combat illicit drug trafficking, particularly synthetic drugs like fentanyl, illicit firearms trafficking, human trafficking, and smuggling. Despite this cooperation, frustration over Mexican authorities’ involvement in the drug trade has led the U.S. to adopt a more unilateral counternarcotics strategy.⁷⁶ DTOs in Mexico maintain a firm grip on entire regions, complicating effective police or military action, with regional authorities often intimidated or compromised.

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