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I will begin by presenting the facts that influenced my policy recommendations, and then provide an analysis of the information along with my ideas of how to move forward in the most effective way possible. I am hopeful that once you have all of the facts surrounding these issues, you will be better equipped to create effective policy solutions.

## 1. Fentanyl

### 1a. Fentanyl Epidemic and Drug Use Statistics

- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention(2021), Fentanyl is 50x stronger than heroin, 100x stronger than morphine, and synthetic opioids are responsible for the deaths of over 150 people *every day* in the United States.
- In 2021, there were more than 107,000 drug overdose deaths in the United States, setting a new record, and the number is rising every year.
- Drug overdoses cost the U.S. economy \$1 trillion/year in 2021.
- Americans spent nearly \$150 billion on illegal drugs in 2016.
- The U.S. seizes around 1.5 million pounds of cocaine and 65,000 pounds of methamphetamine being smuggled into the country each year.
- In 2021, U.S. customs seized 5 tons of fentanyl.
- Heroin use increased 100% from 2010 to 2016 in the U.S.
- The changes in what consumers in rich countries want determines what the cartels manufacture.
- The supply chains in China and Mexico are fueled by consumers in rich countries.

- Fentanyl pills are said to be “more bang for the buck” when it comes to costs to produce.
- The increase in fentanyl pills is due to their being more palatable to the White middle class American.

(Cappy & Tialios, 2023), (CDC, 2021), (California Department of Health(CDH), 2021), (CDC, 2022)

## 1b. Fentanyl Information

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid substance with 2 labels depending on its source:

**pharmaceutical fentanyl** or **illicitly manufactured fentanyl**. Pharmaceutical fentanyl is created by drug companies and used by physicians in hospitals to treat severe pain. It's typically used during and after surgical procedures when other pain medications are not effective. Illicitly manufactured fentanyl is created in hidden labs using fentanyl powder, alcohol, and heat.

Fentanyl comes in **powder** or **liquid** form. The powder can be insufflated (snorted) like other drugs in powder form (i.e. cocaine, heroin, or meth). It is also used to lace other street drugs like heroin, cocaine, or even Marijuana, to create a stronger effect and make them highly addictive. Marijuana users, especially, don't expect their drug to be laced and without an opioid tolerance, the Marijuana can be lethal.<sup>1</sup> Fentanyl has several street names: Apache, Dance Fever, Friend, Goodfellas, Jackpot, Murder 8, and Tango & Cash(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

Producing fentanyl has now become a gig operation in Mexico. Fentanyl is cooked and then it's most often pressed into pill form by producers—with the majority located in Mexico and China. However, unlike methamphetamine, or “meth,” the process and chemicals used make it

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<sup>1</sup> Education and public awareness are very important. Consider using harm reduction, like fentanyl test strips in every state. Pennsylvania recently made them available and Texas is considering it. If drug users are going to continue using, provide a way to do so safely. I predict the number of fentanyl overdose deaths will decrease dramatically.

a much simpler endeavor requiring only two people. The labs are small and mobile, so they are much more easily hidden from law enforcement. An interview with a fentanyl manufacturer (“cook”) in a documentary I watched recently, provided even more insight into the production process. During the interview, the “cook”, covered in protective gear from head to toe, said that in the past he and his partner worked producing heroin for one of the cartels. Now that the demand for fentanyl is so high, he and his partner work as independent contractors, selling to anyone willing to buy. Buyers purchase millions of pills at a time. The attraction to this “gig,” he said, was money. Working in the fields in his small town, he was not able to make enough money to feed his children<sup>2</sup>, but doing this means he is able to take care of his entire family.

The fentanyl “cook” also said that due to the demand in rich countries like the U.S., the amount of heroin they had previously manufactured would increase every year; from 2020-2021 the amount *doubled*. Now, the Mexican drug cartels have moved away from heroin to produce fentanyl. It’s cheaper, easier to produce, and much easier to smuggle (especially in pill form). Smuggling 1 ton of fentanyl is the same—in amount and profit—as 50 tons of heroin.

## 2. Mexican drug cartels

### 2a. Drug cartel facts and information

Located in Mexico, these groups were once strictly drug trafficking enterprises. They used legitimate shipping methods such as cars, trains, and drones, as well as illegitimate methods such as human bodies, to smuggle drugs into the United States. Their primary product was Marijuana, but the legalization of Marijuana in 18 U.S. states has caused a significant drop in demand, causing a drop in smuggling efforts and cartel income.<sup>3</sup> In fact, drug trafficking is no

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<sup>2</sup> We have the same issue here; selling drugs to escape poverty, not to hurt people. Helping people escape poverty provides more opportunities.

<sup>3</sup> Keep this in mind for future talks on decriminalization/legalization of drugs.

longer the primary source of income. According to Alfredo Castillo, Mexican Special Envoy in Michoacán, for the 8 major drug cartels, illegal mining and extortion are currently the top sources of income (Cappy & Tailios, 2023). It is estimated that the cartels earn \$19-\$29 billion each year. They use a portion of their income to pay off judges, politicians, police, and members of the military in order to conduct business, produce and distribute drugs, and avoid arrest. 60% of Mexican territory is controlled by the cartels. One of the methods used to maintain control is by getting the citizens on their side. They pay songwriters and artists to write and sing *Narco ballads* (songs glorifying the lifestyle), and some perform social outreach activities, such as handing out food and money, giving Christmas presents and toys to the children, or by repairing infrastructure. In a documentary, one woman said that the government doesn't take care of the people, the cartels do (Cappy & Tailios, 2023).

If you look at the organizational structure and tactics used by the major cartels, they are similar to the Walmart business model. The cartels use highly sophisticated methods of production, shipping, and distribution. Underground tunnels from Mexico to the United States have electricity, motorcycles used to quickly travel back and forth, and some even have surveillance systems. It takes business intelligence and organizational skills to coordinate and control large numbers of workers, in a hierarchical structure, to successfully operate a drug enterprise. A typical group has runners (or smugglers), armed guards and security officers, people in charge of production and distribution, and they all communicate using a system of walkie talkies, phones, and code words.

A lot of the drug supply coming from Mexico into the U.S. is shipped from the major ports of entry along the Mexican coast: they include the Ports of Manzanillo, Lázaro Cardenas, and Heroica Veracruz. The drugs are smuggled in the large shipping containers intermingled with legitimate products being shipped across the ocean to the U.S. This is possible due to the corruption of workers, officials, and U.S. Customs agents at the shipyards and on the boats (Tailios, 2023).

## 2b. The Major Players

The cartels have experienced a lot of changes over the years. What used to be a few large groups has evolved into a structure I would compare to a very complicated family tree. Then Mexican President Cardón began a “war on drugs”<sup>4</sup>in the 1990’s that caused the cartels to fracture into 150 different groups, and to this day, they continue to multiply as leaders are arrested or killed and new leaders take their place(Cappy & Tialios,2023). There are cartels operating in 60 U.S. cities as well.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 is a list of the largest and most well-known cartels currently active in Mexico.

Fig. 1- Major drug cartels in Mexico

<b>Sinaloa Federation</b>	Leader: Joaquín Guzmán, formerly led by Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, now led by his 4 sons, controls 40%-60% of the country's drug trade, considered most cohesive, but also has ties to smaller organizations
<b>Jalisco New Generation</b>	Leader: Rubén Oseguera Cervantes (“El Mencho”), first appeared in 2011 by publicly displaying 35 corpses of members of the Los Zetas cartel, known as one of the most dangerous cartels in the country after shooting down a military helicopter in 2015, uses military equipment and gear with their logo on everything, even the guns
<b>The Gulf Cartel</b>	One of the oldest organized crime groups, international network, involved in kidnappings and assassinations worldwide, known for its extreme violence, many leaders captured, but still going strong
<b>The Los Zetas Cartel</b>	Leader: unknown- originally led by Miguel Angel Treviño Morales (“Z-40”), arrested in 2013 and replaced by his brother who was arrested 2 years later, made up of former elite members of Mexican military, originally worked as hitmen for the Gulf cartel, extremely savage, target migrants who can't pay extortion fees, killings posted online, known for leaving bodies and body parts on public display

<sup>4</sup> See the section on what we did wrong in the past for more details.

<sup>5</sup> A reason that labeling the cartels as FTOs could be a national security threat in itself.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Key points in this paper

1. Why it's important that we collaborate with Mexico.
2. Why our (and Mexico's) attempts to combat the cartels in the past have failed.
3. Why I suggest that the cartels be considered **Commercial Insurgencies, not Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)** as others have suggested.
4. What I suggest of the United States in order to succeed in making both countries more secure and free from cartel violence and corruption.

### 1. Why we need to work with our neighbors to the South

#### 1a. Facts about our ally

According to Peter Zhianai, "If Americans start to think of Mexicans as drug runners again, regardless of why, that destroys our most productive trading relationship and our most brilliant opportunity for our future right at the gate."(on the *Joe Rogan Experience Podcast*, 2023).

- Mexico is our second largest trading partner with \$671 billion in trade
- There are 126.7 million people living in Mexico.
- They have a \$2.4 trillion GDP.
- Mexico is one of the most cost-effective places to locate manufacturing operations.
- Collaboration with Mexico could decrease the world's reliance on authoritarian countries for trade, and create a "check and balance" system for dealings with China.

- Mexico still remains one of our most valuable investment partners. Bilateral trade grew 482.2% from 1993 to 2020.
- \$100.9 billion USD (2019 total per the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis), or 39.1 percent of all inflowing (stock) in Mexico, comes from the United States, according to Mexico's Secretariat of Economy.

According to Mexico's Defense Minister, Mexican cartels have expanded into a strategic regional security threat for the United States. They currently control 60% of Mexico, and according to the Congress' Investigative report, political violence leading up to the Mexican midterm elections in 2021—when reportedly more than 100 politicians were killed and many more were threatened—led some analysts to assert that Mexican cartels have taken direct electoral interference to new levels (Cappy & Tialios, 2023). In 2022, 11 journalists were killed.

According to the National Drug Threat Assessment (NDTA) released by the DEA (2020), "While drug-related violence in Mexico remains a concern, there is minimal spillover violence in the U.S., as U.S. based Mexican cartel members generally refrain from inter-cartel violence to avoid detection and increased security by law enforcement." Better collaboration between the United States and Mexico could help solve the problem. We must first look at the history of the attempts to work together and what has occurred to further understand why we have such difficulty doing that now, before we can discuss how to fix it.

## 1. What has been done in the past that has failed

### 1a. President Cardón "Hugs not bullets"

On December 11, 2006 in Mexico, newly-elected President Cardón sent federal troops into Michoacán to put an end to the cartel's rule there. This led to the deaths of

11 soldiers and the injuries of more. Several cartel members were captured that day, but it ended up causing the major cartels to fracture and form 150 smaller groups. This marked the beginning of Cardón's "war on drugs" and militaristic approach to stopping them.

In 2007, the United States started helping Mexico with a militaristic approach to the "war on drugs." The two countries created "Plan Mexico," also known as the *Mérida Initiative*—a security agreement signed by President Bush and President Cardón in May of 2007. This "plan" was presented as an "initiative for regional security and cooperation." However, the security at stake was not the Mexican people, but of the American Corporate elite and its allies, the Mexican authorities, who want to guarantee the returns of their investments and the plundering of Mexican resources. And for that they will ensure the political safety of the country.

The U.S. trained Mexican security forces and fought the cartels. With bipartisan support from Congress, the *Mérida Initiative* has comprised the majority of foreign aid to Mexico since fiscal year 2008. Since then we have spent \$3 billion dollars. Regardless, since 2006, there have been 360,000 homicides in Mexico, and the rate continues to increase(CRF.org, 2022).

The next President of Mexico, Lopez Obrador, wanted to take a less militaristic approach. He called his strategy "hugs not bullets" and said, "Violence cannot be confronted with violence. Fire cannot be extinguished with fire, and evil cannot be confronted with evil." The Mexican federal police were found to be very corrupt and unorganized. They were disbanded and replaced by a joint National Guard led by 250

retired military and law enforcement officers. There were 80,000 soldiers. In September of 2022, complete control of the Guard was handed over to the SEDENA Mexican Army. According to the CIA World Fact Book, The Guard, along with state and municipal police, is now responsible for enforcing the law and maintaining order; the regular military also actively supports police operations. The military officers responsible for leading the Guard are all hand-picked and trusted by President Obrador. Only 50% of the National Guard bases in Mexico are operational. Even though they are triple the size of the old federal police force, they had 8,000 arrests in 2021, compared to 21,700 arrests by federal police in 2018(Cappy &Tialios, 2023).

The attempts at controlling cartels in the past have failed for both Mexico and the United States. Before I reveal my ideas, I'd like to briefly discuss what has happened between our countries that has caused tension between us.

## 2. What happened to the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico?

### 2a. The mistake we made

Our relationship was already strained, but it worsened in October of 2020 when the United States arrested the retired Mexican Army General and Defense Minister, Salvador Cienfuegos, for alleged influence with a cartel. This move severely damaged relations. Mexico was very unhappy with us, and in the end, the arrest was not worth it because the charges were eventually dropped. Unfortunately, the damage was already done. Mexico and the U.S. did work together in one instance in 2020 when they were able to freeze the revenue streams of the Jalisco cartel.

Things grew even more tense when Senator Lindsey Graham (R/NC) recently introduced a bill to properly label the Mexican drug cartels as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, or FTO. The Mexican President, Obrador fired back by speaking out to the press to say that the fentanyl epidemic in the U.S. is caused by our moral failings and “not enough hugs.”

## 2b. What we can do

Regardless of how well we get along, a collaborative effort is the only option to defeat the cartels. The best way to do it? Go after their revenue streams. It's the money that drives them, so that's what will hurt them. U.S. Air Force General Glen Vanherck is in charge of the military at the U.S. border and he has some ideas on how to defeat the cartels as well; new technology—using drones and sensors to help decrease the smuggling at the border(Cappy & Tialios, 2023).

## 2c. FTO label

In my opinion, using the label: Foreign Terrorist Organization does not fit. For one, their violence and attacks are not politically or ideologically motivated. That is part of the description of an FTO. I suggest instead that we label them as Commercial Insurgencies. Unlike the FTOs, the cartels meet the requirements to fall under that term.

Here is the definition for Commercial Insurgencies:

“ Widespread and sustained criminal activities with a political dimension that challenges security of the state”(Tialios, 2023). We've already seen how they threaten and assassinate politicians who disagree or go against them. They also threaten and bribe government officials, members of the military, and police officers. They are obviously a danger to the state. Particularly, the Jalisco cartel with their military capabilities. Cartels have already overturned the governments in most of the territories in Mexico and maintain rule there. The definition continues, “As groups

they implement coercion and violence to influence politics, economics, the military, and information media in order to profit from illicit activity.”

On January 22, 2022, Mexican Army troops were attacked by pro-cartel residents. They were able to confiscate weapons and gear from the Jalisco cartel and noted how their name and logo was emblazoned on everything. One descriptor of a Commercial Insurgency is the use of branded gear.

### 3. My proposal

We work alongside the Mexican President, National Guard, and police to achieve the following:

- Officially label the drug cartels as Commercial Insurgencies to unlock the resources and punitive measures it provides.
- Secure the border by working with General Vanherck and the border military to use sensors and drones to monitor unmanned portions of the border known for drug trafficking.
- Seal off all underground tunnels coming from Mexico into the U.S. (that we're aware of) and possibly install motion detected cameras.
- With Commercial Insurgency designation, cut off all cartel revenue streams where indicated.
- Use resources to capture the cartel leaders; give lower-level cartel members immunity in order to get to the top of each organization.
- Develop an educational outreach program for residents of cartel-controlled states to understand how dangerous they are, regardless of what they do for the community, and offer incentives and rewards for information about where leaders can be found.

- Develop an educational outreach program in the U.S. to help people understand that it is the drug use in America that fuels these organizations. Even better: see next
- Meet with the DEA and other departments that would be responsible for the decriminalization and/or legalization of drugs. I realize this is not something that will happen quickly, but keep in mind how the cartels had to find other sources of income after the legalization of Marijuana in just 18 U.S. states. Imagine if it was legal nationwide. Not only would it cut off the revenue for the cartels, but the tax revenue alone would allow significant improvements in our drug treatment programs and fund those without insurance to get into treatment. The less people that are buying the drugs, the less demand and revenue.

## Conclusion

Defeating the Mexican drug cartels is a possibility. It won't be possible unless Mexico and the U.S. can begin to work together on this. Securing the border will help stop some of the fentanyl coming into the country, though some resources should also be utilized at ports of entry being that by ship is a major drug-trafficking route used by the cartels. Designate the cartels as Commercial Insurgencies and utilize resources to: cut off their revenue streams, use lower-level members and residents to aid in capturing the leaders, weed out corruption in the Mexican government, military, and police by using the joint National Guard. Finally, I think it would be worth taking the time to sit down to dinner with President Obrador. Apologize for recent events that may have offended him and discuss the importance of working together on this issue, and on many other occasions that would benefit us.

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