

CONGRESS MUST REJECT DISASTROUS SLIDE TO WAR IN MEXICO

Once considered outlandish, a U.S. war in Mexico has moved from a fringe idea to an alarming possibility. Former president Trump threatens military operations there if re-elected, in a guaranteed-to-backfire attempt to curtail the fentanyl trade. And his threats to use military force in Mexico policy are supported by a number of Republicans in Congress, far-right think tanks, and Republican presidential also-rans.

This backgrounder outlines both this possibility and its destabilizing consequences, details the ways in which some on the U.S. right are attempting to build support for eventual military action in Congress, and points to a legislative agenda that can help blunt a slide toward conflict with non-state actors in Mexico in 2025, 2029, or beyond.

“Battle Plans”: What a Second Trump Term Means for U.S.-Mexico Policy

Former president Trump sought to conduct military operations in Mexico while in office. As he runs for re-election, both he and the policy machinery supporting his bid are gearing up to make these operations a reality, despite their predictably dire consequences for both the United States and Mexico

“Battle plans”: While president, Trump [pushed](#) to launch missiles into Mexico to “destroy the drug labs,” musing, “We could just shoot some Patriot missiles and take the labs out, quietly.” [Rolling Stone](#) has reported that now-candidate Trump has asked advisors for “battle plans” targeting transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), or “cartels,” in Mexico, with or without Mexican government cooperation. Plans include unilateral military strikes, troop deployments, and [covert Special Forces assassination operations](#). Publicly, he has [proposed](#) both Special Forces operations and an ill-defined naval “embargo” of TCOs on the campaign trail. His vice presidential nominee, Senator JD Vance, has previously [stated](#) that he “want[s] to empower the President of the United States...to use the power of the military to go after these drug cartels.”

It’s not just Trump: Ken Cuccinelli, former senior Department of Homeland Security (DHS) official during the Trump administration, wrote a [blueprint](#) for a “defensive war” against TCOs for a MAGA-aligned think tank that Trump has reportedly been [briefed](#) on. And before giving way to Trump in the primaries, almost every Republican presidential candidate in 2024 [endorsed](#) some version of unilateral military action in Mexico.

Doubling down on a failed strategy: Beginning in 2007, the United States supported Mexico’s government in waging a stepped-up “[war](#)” on TCOs and drug traffickers, including arresting or killing people considered high-value targets (known as the “kingpin strategy”). This militarized approach has not only failed to curb drug availability in the United States, but it also led to the diversification of criminal groups and trafficking networks [in and beyond](#) both countries, while contributing to skyrocketing levels of serious human rights violations in Mexico. Today, nearly two decades after this militarized campaign was launched, annual homicides in Mexico remain at roughly triple their prior levels, hundreds of thousands of people have been [displaced](#), and over 100,000 people are recognized by the Mexican government as disappeared, the vast majority of them over the last two decades.

Based on this recent history, it’s apparent that [a U.S.-led military campaign in Mexico will backfire on U.S. communities, while endangering everyday people in Mexico, contributing to further displacement and forced migration, and sparking an all-encompassing diplomatic crisis with the United States’ largest trading partner.](#)

And even if this bellicose rhetoric is an attempt to “leverage” such threats to strong-arm Mexico’s government into redoubling the use of its own military to pursue the same agenda (or, in [Project 2025](#)’s Orwellian terminology, advancing a “sovereign Mexico”), the resulting conflict will still lead to similar consequences while further eroding Mexico’s constitutional order and civilian control over the military – as evidenced by recent efforts to place the country’s National Guard, a federal police force, under the control of its defense secretariat.

In short, neither Mexico nor the United States can militarily deploy their way out of drug trafficking; rather, the key to reducing violence and to weakening Mexico’s criminal organizations is to strengthen Mexican institutions’ capacity and practices to tackle corruption, reduce impunity, and address communities’ needs.

The Far-Right Congressional Agenda to Normalize War in Mexico

Far-right members of Congress are building support around a range of bills that pave the way toward unilateral U.S. military action in Mexico. Some actively authorize armed intervention; others present a “slippery slope,” efforts to slowly “[habituate](#)” Congress and the executive branch over time to the prospect of war in Mexico. Members should aggressively oppose these bills.

[H.J.Res.18](#), AUMF CARTEL Influence Resolution: A new authorization for the use of military force that gives the executive extraordinary and unchecked power to wage a geographically unbounded war against “foreign nations, foreign organizations, or foreign persons” trafficking fentanyl or fentanyl-related substances. Easily read to encompass military action in China, in addition to Mexico.

[Section 1009 of H.R.8070](#): This amendment to the House FY25 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) directs the Department of Defense to, among other things, provide “a description of operational plans to militarily defeat Mexican drug cartels with varying levels of coordination and cooperation with the Mexican government.” It is a straightforward attempt to have DoD draw up plans that can be put in motion under a different administration. It should be stripped from the final bill.

[H.R.1564](#), [S.698](#), and [S.1048](#), designating cartels foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs): While not authorizing military force directly, the designation of TCOs as terrorists helps build the rhetorical case for military action. FTO designation could also unfairly extend penalties for “material support” to everyday people who make payments to criminal organizations because they are forced to, to U.S. businesses that work with Mexican businesses being extorted by TCOs, or even to U.S. citizens who purchase drugs for personal use.

[H.R.3205](#), Project Precursor Act: Title II of this bill directs the executive to seek to amend the international Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to recognize fentanyl as a chemical weapon. It misrepresents fentanyl as a weapon of war, helps build the rhetorical case for a military response to drug trafficking, and, if passed and implemented, would undermine the landmark and highly successful CWC. A diverse coalition of 22 organizations [spoke out against this bill](#) following its passage out of HFAC in spring 2023.

How Congress Can Counter the Push for War in Mexico

Some members have responded to the rising possibility of U.S.-Mexico conflict with legislation that curtails the president’s ability to act unilaterally or put U.S.-Mexico relations on a wartime footing. These bills and resolutions should be supported as immediate counter-measures, and members should vocally rebuke efforts to

march the United States into hostilities in Mexico. They must be reinforced, however, by farther-reaching legislation that effectively addresses the harms caused by illicit fentanyl and other synthetic drugs, disrupts the [flow of weapons](#) to TCOs, and strengthens the levers Congress has to rein in unilateral executive military action. Congress must recognize that the most effective way to reduce drug overdose deaths is through public health-oriented and evidence-based policies, including access to treatment and harm reduction interventions within the United States, not military action in foreign countries.

Opposing unilateral march to war, and protecting communities from its immediate fallout:

- [H.Res.763](#), **Resolution reaffirming U.S. respect for Mexico’s sovereignty and condemning calls for military action in Mexico without Mexico’s consent and congressional authorization.**
- [H.R.3610](#), **Neighbors Not Enemies Act:** Repeals the [Alien Enemies Act](#), which currently empowers the president to detain and deport non-citizens in times of a declared war or presidentially proclaimed invasion; Trump has [promised](#) to invoke this act for [mass deportations](#), and it’s all too easy to imagine its misuse in any “war” with cartels in Mexico.

Disarming cartels by disrupting firearms traffic from the United States:

- [H.R.6618](#), **Americas Regional Monitoring of Arms Sales Act:** Reform bill that moves small arms transfer authority back to the State Department (following the Trump administration’s decision to place this authority within Commerce), and increases congressional review and oversight of small arms exports.
- [H.R.8427](#) and [S.2926](#), **Stop Arming Cartels Act:** Prohibits further production and transfer of .50 caliber rifles (widely used by cartels) and strengthens regulations on existing supply of these weapons.

Addressing the overdose crisis:

- [S.1950](#), **Temporary Emergency Scheduling and Testing of Fentanyl Analogues Act (TEST Act):** Allows the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to place new fentanyl-related substances (FRS) in Schedule I for up to four years, during which time the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Health and Human Services (HHS) would have to conduct a scientific and medical evaluation of each substance, publicly report the findings, and deschedule or reschedule FRS where appropriate.
- [H.R.3375](#) and [S.1785](#), **Stop Fentanyl Overdoses Act of 2023:** Improves surveillance and detection of fentanyl and enhances evidence-based public health approaches to opioid overdose and substance use disorders.
- [H.R.2400](#) and [S.1165](#), **The Reentry Act of 2023:** Allows Medicaid to cover health services during the last 30 days of incarceration and create better linkages to community-based care during reentry.
- [H.R.1359](#) and [S.644](#), **Modernizing Opioid Treatment Access Act (MOTAA):** Waives provisions of the Controlled Substances Act (CSA) requiring qualified practitioners to obtain a separate registration from the DEA to prescribe and dispense methadone. It also would allow DEA-registered addiction specialist physicians to prescribe methadone for the treatment of Opioid Use Disorder and patients to pick up this medication in pharmacies.
- [S.4286](#), **Comprehensive Addiction Resources Emergency Act (CARE):** Would authorize \$125 billion over ten years to prevent substance use disorder while expanding access to evidence-based treatments and recovery support services.

Strengthening Congress’ oversight and authorization of U.S. military force

- [H.R.4928](#), **National Security Reforms and Accountability Act:** Title I of this bill creates new pathways for Congress to restrain a unilateral march to war by the executive, including an automatic funding cutoff for unauthorized military actions.