Feature Commentary: Confronting Cartels: Military Considerations South of the Border

By Brian Michael Jenkins

Possible U.S. military action against Mexico's drug cartels poses unique challenges. The situation is complicated, and the United States must be prepared for possible counteractions. The cartels are not a single actor. If attacked, they may avoid direct confrontation, accepting temporary losses, anticipating that the United States will not sustain a long campaign. Or Mexico's cartels may respond violently, exploiting U.S. vulnerabilities in Mexico—and possibly north of the border. The government of Mexico is a separate actor. It can assist or undermine U.S. efforts. Past government campaigns against the cartels led to soaring rates of criminal violence. Chaos in Mexico could have serious implications for U.S. homeland security. The United States needs a 'Red Team' to examine a range of scenarios. The article proceeds in six parts: Part I contrasts recent U.S. military actions in the Yemen and Iran with possible military action in Mexico. Part II examines perceptions of the threat. Part III examines how the history of U.S.-Mexico relations will shape the battlefield. Part IV reviews our own experience in combating foreign drug traffickers, offering some preliminary takeaways. Part V examines possible options. Part VI looks at how the cartels might react, how the United States might be forced to respond—and how other adversaries of the United States might attempt to exploit the situation.

Recent public statements from the White House and news media reports suggest that the United States is preparing for military action against Mexico's drug cartels. On January 20, 2025, the president designated six Mexican cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. In the following weeks, the United States deployed several active-duty Army and National Guard units, including a Stryker Brigade combat team and a general support aviation battalion, to combat illegal immigration and drug trafficking.[1] U.S. Navy destroyers were deployed to "restore territorial integrity at the U.S. Southern border" and assist in preventing narcotrafficking and operations against transnational criminal organizations.[2] The destroyers, which will be accompanied by U.S. Coast Guard vessels, will strengthen maritime interdiction capabilities, but they are also armed with Tomahawk missiles, which recently were used in the bombardment of Houthi targets in Yemen.

In February, news media outlets reported that the CIA had increased unarmed drone flights to conduct surveillance of drug cartels in Mexico. In past years, these flights—conducted with Mexico's permission—have assisted in the capture of major drug lords.[3] In May, President Donald Trump confirmed that he had offered to send U.S. troops to Mexico to help its government combat drug trafficking, an offer that Mexico's president had rejected.[4] In August 2025, it was widely reported in the press that the president had directed the Pentagon to prepare options for the use of military force against Mexico's drug cartels.[5]

Prologue: A Chronic, Serious, and Worsening Problem

When the editors of West Point's *CTC Sentinel* invited me to write an essay about possible U.S. military operations targeting Mexico's drug cartels, I was flattered, interested, but hesitant. I regard the *Sentinel* as the most thoughtful and respected forum for discussions of counterterrorism and other irregular modes of conflict currently published.

The topic was one of long interest. I lived in Arizona in the late 1950s and, as a frequently truant high school student, traveled with my father whose sales territory included El Paso, New Mexico, Arizona, and eastern California. I knew every border town from Texas to Calexico. As a graduate student, I studied at the University of Guanajuato in Mexico where I wrote about relations between Mexico and the United States during the Mexican Revolution. The turbulent border became the topic of my later master's thesis and the subject of continuing essays. Undoubtedly, the history of difficult relations between the two countries will have great effect on whatever we do.

My hesitancy derived from the contentious nature of the subject. I am dismayed by the devastating impact of the drug problem. I appreciate the importance and complexity of the issue. And I seldom duck controversial subjects, and tend to speak bluntly. But I feared that whatever I wrote would, in the current political environment, be dismissed or denounced. But my initial reaction of "Why bother?" turned into "Why not try to help?"

The recent rhetoric and actions reflect understandable frustration, which I share. The continuing flow of drugs into the United States is a chronic, serious, and worsening problem. Decades of efforts to reduce the availability of drugs through crop eradication and substitution, interdiction, and U.S. support for suppression efforts abroad have achieved some successes but not victory. Neither have domestic strategies of demand reduction, law

Brian Michael Jenkins is a former Green Beret. In 1972, he initiated one of the nation's first research programs on terrorism. His books and monographs include International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict*;* Aviation, Terrorism and Security*;* Unconquerable Nation*;* Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?*;* The Long Shadow of 9/11*;* Paths to Destruction*; and most recently,* Plagues and Their Aftermath.

A U.S. Army tank is pictured at the border wall in Juarez, Chihuahua state, Mexico, on July 18, 2025. (Mauricio Palos/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

enforcement, incarceration, or partial legalization worked very well. Statistics on illicit drug use depend on surveys, the validity of which can be questioned, but overdose deaths provide a bleak indicator. Deaths from both opioids (heroin and synthetic opioids) and psychostimulants have increased dramatically since 2013.[6] Drug consumption ruins lives, destroys communities, generates criminal activity, and annually costs society hundreds of billions of dollars in health care, social services, criminal justice, and lost productivity.[7]

The problem is getting worse in several respects. The introduction of synthetic drugs such as fentanyl and psychostimulants such as methamphetamine correlates with a sharp increase in use. (Randomized workplace testing show that fentanyl use in the United States doubled between 2020 and 2024.[8]) Synthetic drugs do not require growing crops; they are easier and cheaper to make, more easily smuggled, easy to use, and offer extreme potency. They account for the rise in drug overdose deaths, although these have recently declined. And they bring greater profits to the cartels, which they use to expand their control of drug smuggling worldwide. This poses a threat to the international community. The urgency of the problem cannot be ignored.

How to disrupt the illicit drug traffic and break the growing political power and global reach of the criminal organizations that run it—without making the problem worse—requires a strategic rethink.

The scale of the problem requires the mobilization of national resources to support a sustainable strategy. It will require a whole-of-government effort in which military operations are likely to play a role in a very different kind of conflict, and the armed forces would do a disservice to the president and commander-in-chief by ignoring the challenge. But 'one and done' solutions will not do it—and could backfire.

As we shall see in the following essay, understanding the history of our relations with Mexico is crucial—it will shape the battlefield. We also can learn from past outbreaks of violence on the border.

The United States has long experience in working with foreign partners to tackle drug rings in France and Italy, and in working closely with Colombia and Mexico in taking on their cartels. They offer lessons to be learned. There have been a number of efforts to review what we can do. Former Attorney General William Barr describes one such effort in 2019.[9] There is no need or time to replicate what already has been done.

Whether the United States takes unilateral action or seeks a collaborative approach with Mexico as a partner will be a strategic decision of paramount importance. In my view, Mexico is a problematic, but essential ally. Mexico's current president, Claudia Sheinbaum, will protect Mexico's sovereignty, but seems determined to corral the cartels. It would be worthwhile to elicit her views of strategic approaches and identify common ground.

Content and Organization of the Essay

This essay does not make a case for or against U.S. military operations against Mexico's drug cartels. Instead, it identifies the essential issues the United States should address in planning any direct military action against Mexico's drug cartels. As a former soldier, I accept that military force may at times be necessary and appropriate. Outcomes and possible consequences also need to be considered.

Instead, I argue for a clear exposition of the objectives to be achieved; a comprehensive appreciation of the situation; a thorough review of *all* options; and an assessment of the potential consequences of U.S. actions—in particular, an effort to anticipate surprises and possible responses, including escalation and off-ramps; the formulation of concurrent strategies to augment military efforts in Mexico with increased law enforcement measures at home; and above all, ensure domestic law enforcement preparedness for possible cartel responses, including cyber attacks, and mitigation of actions by the cartels or their U.S. confederates.

Finally, it must include a communications strategy to clearly inform the American public and the people of Mexico about what the United States intends and does *not* intend to do. It should also include a plan to blunt diplomatic maneuvers and psychological operations by foreign adversaries to exploit the situation to undermine U.S. efforts or draw the United States into a distracting and debilitating conflict in Mexico that could erode U.S. capabilities elsewhere in the world. The results of the analysis outlined above will inform the decision whether and how to use military force.

It seems unlikely that a single strike—the destruction of a fentanyl lab or the death of a cartel leader as some have talked about—would suffice to achieve significant results. It could, however, set off a sequence of events, including counterattacks, which would compel further action by the United States. To adequately prepare will require a comprehensive assessment of the capabilities, vulnerabilities, and possible actions by both sides in what will certainly be an asymmetric conflict. In this case, that conflict is even more complex because the cartels are not a single actor, but an assemblage of independent actors that may follow different strategies.

The government of Mexico is another actor. Mexico's attitudes are complicated. Its president dismisses talk of U.S. military action against the cartels as "a movie,"[10] implying that it is not to be taken seriously—perhaps a perilous assumption. Mexico is an intensely nationalistic country and would denounce any U.S. military action as a threat to Mexico's sovereignty and potential threat to its territorial integrity. Others believe that Mexico on its own is too weak and compromised by complicity with the cartels to corral them on its own and consider U.S. military assistance essential.

According to a December 2024 public opinion poll in Mexico, 50 percent of the respondents opposed collaborating with the United States against the cartels, but 46 percent were favorable to the idea. Asked what is the best way the United States can assist Mexico, two-thirds opted for "joint operations," but 24 percent chose "undercover operations by U.S. security agencies."[11] An earlier public opinion poll showed that a third of the respondents approved of deploying U.S. troops on Mexican soil.[12]

The following analysis is divided into six parts. Part I contrasts recent U.S. military actions in the Yemen and Iran with possible military action in Mexico. Part II examines perceptions of the threat. Part III examines how the history of U.S.-Mexico relations and context will shape the battlefield. Part IV reviews our own experience in combating foreign drug traffickers, pointing out some preliminary takeaways. Part V examines the necessity of setting clear objectives, prerequisites to action, and possible options. Part VI looks at what the cartels might do in response to U.S. operations, how the United States might respond—or be forced to respond—to these, how other adversaries of the United States might attempt to exploit the situation, and other consequences of U.S. military action in Mexico.

"Understanding the history of our relations with Mexico is crucial—it will shape the battlefield."

While recognizing that demand reduction and domestic law enforcement are essential components of a national strategy for dealing with the drug traffic, this essay focuses exclusively on U.S. military action in Mexico.

Finally, this essay reflects my personal views. They do not reflect the opinions or conclusions of research at any of the organizations I am affiliated with. They are intended to prompt discussion rather than offer solutions.

Part I: Closer to Home, Higher Risks

We should be cautious about seeing recent U.S. military actions abroad as appropriate precedents for U.S. military action in Mexico. The situation is more complicated, and the risks of blowback are greater. The recent, successfully executed U.S. military actions against the Houthis in Yemen and Iran's nuclear facilities are awesome demonstrations of U.S. military power, but they are hazardous precedents for U.S. military action in Mexico. The United States has the capabilities to successfully carry out military strikes against Mexico's cartels, but the circumstances and geography are different, and the risks of blowback are greater.

It is more than 6,000 miles by air between Iran's Fordow nuclear site and Washington, D.C., and more than 7,000 miles to Yemen. The Houthis could strike back by attacking U.S. military and civilian targets in the region, but their global reach is limited. Iran could retaliate with local attacks on military or economic targets or sponsor terrorist attacks in the United States, but it was a reasonable strategic calculation that the regime in Tehran would avoid escalation. Iran was determined to retaliate in some fashion, but signaled its attack to avoid U.S. casualties and escalation. Iran could have retaliated by attacking oil terminals in the Gulf, but the United States does not heavily rely on Mideast oil, although any protracted interruption of supply would affect global price. Apart from oil, the United States has no economic interests in Yemen or Iran.

Moreover, the intended objective of the recent military operations—to halt Houthi attacks on American vessels in the Red Sea and to seriously disrupt Iran's nuclear program—could be accomplished in a single attack. As things turned out, it required a brief but intense air campaign involving more than 800 airstrikes before the Houthis agreed to suspend attacks on U.S. shipping. The danger has not passed, but both cases may be qualified as successful. It is less clear what a similar 'one and done' attack like that on Iran's nuclear facilities or a campaign like that against the Houthis might

"We should be cautious about seeing recent U.S. military actions abroad as appropriate precedents for U.S. military action in Mexico. The situation is more complicated, and the risks of blowback are greater."

accomplish against the drug cartels in Mexico.

Decisions made by individual cartel leaders, or their lieutenants if the leader is killed or captured, or by other cartels seeking to exploit the situation to expand their empires are less predictable. If attacked once or twice, the cartels could hunker down and avoid provocation, but there is less certainty about that. Faced with continuing U.S. action like the 52-day campaign against the Houthis, the probability of a violent response increases.

Mexico and the United States share a 2,000-mile border. Mexico is not a failed state, but U.S. military intervention and a repetition of the kind of violence seen during Mexican President Calderón's war on the cartels in the 2000s could make Mexico's northern states ungovernable, which is not in the United States' interest. That violence included not only the assassination of Mexican officials, but internal succession battles within cartels following the deaths or arrests of leaders, wars between the cartels, mass murders of ordinary citizens, and a soaring homicide rate that reflected a breakdown in law and order.

The border wall alone will not protect American citizens or U.S. economic interests in Mexico or insulate the United States from the economic and social effects of escalating violence in Mexico. Continuing U.S. operations in Mexico could also divide the American public and provoke domestic tensions and protests. A continuing military engagement could lead to escalating violence, the further erosion of government authority, and the proliferation of armed gangs pursuing wealth and power. Mexico is not about to descend into the abyss of anarchy seen in Haiti, but could create a strip of continuing disorder and violence on our southern doorstep.

It is necessary to identify and prepare for counteractions the cartels might take in Mexico, and potentially in the United States; anticipate surprises; and consider how the United States might respond. The assessment should also take into account how external hostile actors may exploit the conflict to divert the United States into a distracting and debilitating conflict that prevents it from responding to challenges elsewhere. I presume that plans for military operations are being developed or already have been developed. This is more than a decision to launch a salvo of missiles. Declaring war on the cartels requires a grand strategy.

Part II: How Do We Characterize the Threat?

Policymakers and scholars looking at the cartels differ in their descriptions of the threat. Is the threat an ever-changing constellation of criminal business enterprises that profit from exploiting the lucrative market created by U.S. addiction? Or has the foreign supply of illicit drugs reached such levels that it constitutes a threat to national security? Instead of seeing the threat exclusively in terms of drug trafficking, should the threat instead be perceived as one of transnational criminal organizations that in Mexico have acquired the resources and power to wage a criminal insurgency that rivals government authority? Because of the tactics they use to terrorize society and undermine government authority, should drug cartels be categorized as terrorist organizations? And how does doing so benefit suppression?

Core Concerns: The Pernicious Impact of Illicit Drugs

By the beginning of the 20th century, an estimated 27 percent of the male population of China was addicted to opium, with disastrous health and social costs.[13] As of 2023, nearly 17 percent of Americans over 12 years of age were illegal drug users, a percentage that is growing.[14]

There is no question that drugs smuggled into the United States from Mexico continue to have ruinous effects on American society. Drug overdose has become the leading cause of 'injury death' in the United States, surpassing motor vehicle accidents and shootings.[15] In addition to ruined lives, crime related to the distribution, sale, and consumption of illegal drugs destroys communities. It imposes a heavy economic burden on the country and the impacted families. While the utility of military force against Mexican drug cartels can be debated, the pernicious effects of illicit drug use are an open-and-shut case.

Mexico's cartels are the principal benefactors of drug smuggling into the United States. Their profits enable them to take over legitimate business enterprises, increase their penetration and takeover of state institutions in Mexico, expand their control over other criminal activities, and increase their control of international drug trafficking. Using military force against drug cartels is not a new idea. According to former U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper in his memoir, President Trump in 2020 asked Secretary Esper whether missiles could be launched to destroy drug labs in Mexico.[16] The United States provided military assistance to the Mexican army when President Calderón initiated a major offensive on the cartels in 2007, which will be discussed later. Prior to that, the U.S. military was deeply involved in Colombia's war on its drug cartels from the 1980s to the early 2000s.

In those cases, the United States played a supporting role and did not engage in directly attacking the cartels. However, a number of senators and representatives have argued for years that the United States needs to directly engage the cartels to destroy drug labs and eliminate drug lords.

Military force can have utility in certain circumstances. Theoretically, the United States has a range of options for the use of military force against Mexico's cartels, but it must be prepared for possible counteractions by the cartels. What the government of Mexico might do is a separate calculation. The president of Mexico rejected President Trump's proposal to send U.S. troops across the border.[17] It is difficult to predict what Mexico will do if the United States unilaterally decides to intervene. Much will depend on the nature, scale, and duration of the intervention. Open war between the two countries seems highly unlikely. Will Mexico's government become a reluctant, passive ally of the United States or a hostile, uncooperative bystander?

What follows below is a personal appreciation of the situation. As stated before, it makes no recommendation about whether, when, or how to employ U.S. military assets against the cartels. Instead, it lays out the strategic thinking necessary to inform that decision. What are the objectives of any military action? What

"The United States has a range of options for the use of military force against Mexico's cartels, but it must be prepared for possible counteractions by the cartels."

are the options? How might the cartels react? And how might the United States respond? These are preliminary thoughts.

The President's Proclamation

On more than one occasion in his first and second terms in office, President Trump has said that Mexico's "drug cartels are waging war on America" and that it was "time for America to wage war on the cartels."[18]

The president's proclamation "Declaring a National Emergency at the Southern Border of the United States" portrays the situation in language that would justify using military force. Issued on January 20, 2025, the first day President Trump assumed office for the second time, the document was obviously prepared in advance. Some may disagree with its choice of words and tone, but it presents the most comprehensive and clearest depiction of how the White House perceives the problem.

> *America's sovereignty is under attack. Our southern border is overrun by cartels, criminal gangs, known terrorists, human traffickers, smugglers, unvetted military-age males from foreign adversaries, and illicit narcotics that harm Americans, including America.*
>
> *This* ***invasion*** *[bold added] has caused widespread chaos and suffering in our country over the last 4 years. It has led to the horrific and inexcusable murders of many innocent American citizens, including women and children, at the hands of illegal aliens. Foreign criminal gangs and cartels have begun seizing control of parts of cities, attacking our most vulnerable citizens, and terrorizing Americans beyond the control of local law enforcement. Cartels control vast territories just south of our southern border, effectively controlling who can and cannot travel to the United States from Mexico. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have tragically died from drug overdoses because of the illicit narcotics that have flowed across the southern border.*
>
> *This assault on the American people and the integrity of America's sovereign borders represents a grave threat to our Nation.*[19]

The proclamation states that the cartels control "who can and cannot travel to the United States from Mexico." In fact, cartels do control much of the territory south of the border, and they take in significant profits from human smuggling, including the collection of protection money from human smugglers. According to a congressional committee's report in 2023, this amounted to $13 billion in 2021.[20] The measures called for in the proclamation focus exclusively on improving border security.

Designating the Drug Cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations

Mexico's cartels are not terrorist organizations as we ordinarily think of them. They are not primarily motivated by ideology. They are criminal enterprises, interested mainly in profit, not political agendas. But they do employ violent tactics—assassinations, kidnappings, beheadings, bombings, massacres, and mass executions—to create terror. These actions are directed at government officials, law enforcement, judges, political candidates, the public, and rival organizations. And the violence serves a political agenda aimed at increasing their influence over policy, expanding their control over territory and state institutions, and deterring interference in their operations. The drug cartels directly threaten state authority as much as urban guerrillas.

In sum, the definition of a terrorist organization does not have to be stretched too far to encompass the drug cartels. While the cartels meet the basic criteria, personally I thought that labeling drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations would provide only marginal new capabilities in suppressing the drug traffic. Much of the U.S. antiterrorism law in the 1990s and early 2000s was intended to empower investigators and prosecutors with the same capabilities they already had for dealing with organized crime. Calling cartels terrorist organizations, however, puts countering them more in a military lane, which I believe was the primary intention.

Thus far, only a few countries have followed the United States' lead. In response to U.S. pressure, Mexico and Canada have declared some drug cartels to be foreign terrorist organizations as has Argentina. Peru and Ecuador, both of which deal with drug cartels, are reportedly planning to do so.[21] El Salvador did so in 2015. Whether other countries will follow remains to be seen.

Drug Smuggling: A Chronic Problem but Not the Only Issue

The problem is not merely the flow of drugs into the United States. The cartels have acquired enormous wealth and influence in Mexico, and they have expanded their control over drug distribution north of the border, eliminating competition from rivals.[22] Cartels have extensive relations with gangs across the country.[23] As early as 2011, U.S. law enforcement officials noted that Mexican drug cartels had established a presence in 230 American cities for distributing drugs.[24] A 2023 map prepared by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency showed a nationwide presence, in particular by the Sinaloa Cartel and the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG).[25] This has created a powerful criminal enterprise. Just as they have in Mexico, the cartels could use their economic base to take over other criminal activities and legitimate businesses, and increase their political influence in the United States.

Drug smuggling from Mexico and other countries for many years has been a chronic problem. It is in large measure *our* problem because hundreds of thousands of Americans spend over a hundred billion dollars a year on illicit drugs—a lucrative market driven by demand that cartels in Mexico and gangs and dealers in the United States have exploited. The introduction of synthetic opiates, in particular, has made the problem deadlier.

Part of the motivation for the recent imposition of tariffs is explicitly to persuade Mexico to do more to impede the flow of fentanyl into the United States.[26] Mexico's cartels are the leading source of cocaine, methamphetamine, fentanyl, and other synthetic opioids that are smuggled into the United States. Of

"So long as the cartels are able to function as profitable criminal enterprises, there would seem to be little incentive for them to risk provocation by involvement with foreign terrorist groups or terrorist plots in the United States. Direct U.S. military action could alter that calculation."

these substances, owing to its growing use and lethality, halting the smuggling of fentanyl is the current focus of U.S. concern.

The flow of illicit fentanyl and its precursors to the United States is complex and constantly changing. Highly pure fentanyl produced in China may be smuggled in small quantities directly into the United States where drug traffickers can mix it with other drugs.[27] As China in the late 2010s theoretically began to exert greater control over the export of fentanyl, illicit Chinese producers evaded controls by switching to shipping precursor chemicals to cartels in Mexico, which converted them into fentanyl, which is then smuggled into the United States.[28] At the same time, some illicit Chinese producers moved their operations to India, which supplied fentanyl or precursor drugs to the Sinaloa Cartel.[29] Less than one percent of the fentanyl smuggled into the United States reportedly comes through Canada; however, in response to U.S. pressure, Canada has increased its efforts to exert greater control of its border.[30]

Due to corruption and intimidation, Mexico has been unable to effectively control illegal drug production or protect its own people against cartel predation. However, Mexico is not a failed state, and it would be contrary to U.S. interests to push Mexico in that direction.

Cartel-Sponsored Terrorist Activity?

Cartel connections with terrorists also have been mentioned as a third component of the threat. In 2024 congressional testimony, then FBI Director Christopher Wray said that there is "no doubt" that criminals have entered the United States at the southern border, and that "some of the overseas facilitators of the smuggling network have ISIS ties."[31]

The terrorist threat is not hypothetical. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice charged two Iranians, one a member of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, with plotting to carry out terrorist attacks in Washington, D.C.[32] They had approached a DEA confidential source posing as a cartel member. The murder-for-hire killing of an Iranian exile in Washington, D.C., in 1980,[33] 2022 arrests of two Russian mobsters in the United States involved in another Iran-backed murder-for-hire plot in New York directed against a U.S. citizen and critic of the Iranian regime," and the 2024 indictments of ex-cons living in the United States for plotting to assassinate President Trump[34] illustrate Iran's use of criminals as potential operatives.[35]

So long as the cartels are able to function as profitable criminal enterprises, there would seem to be little incentive for them to risk provocation by involvement with foreign terrorist groups or terrorist plots in the United States. Direct U.S. military action could alter that calculation, and the possibility of future cooperation between terrorists and transnational criminal organizations cannot be dismissed.

Part III: History and Context

Understanding the historical terrain and political context is critical in formulating any strategy. This section illustrates how the Mexican American War of 1846-1848 and the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 still affect current attitudes on both sides of the border and also illustrate some of potential consequence of U.S. military action.[a]

The Importance of Context: History Will Shape the Battlespace

Any thorough appreciation of the situation should include a knowledge of the terrain on which the operation is to take place. In contemporary conflict where perceptions count as much as the physical battle, the employment of military force must be matched by effective psychological operations or what is now called cognitive warfare. This requires a thorough understanding of the social and political terrain as well as the physical terrain. History is simply not a sidebar. It will shape the battlespace more than hills and rivers.

Americans north of the border tend to ignore history. Americans south of the border cannot escape the sad reminders of U.S.-Mexico relations. It is therefore critical to understand how the people of Mexico and their government will perceive any U.S. military action. For understandable reasons, the people and government of Mexico are deeply suspicious of U.S. intentions.

Upon achieving independence in 1821, Mexico nominally ruled a vast territory extending from Central America to the northern border of California. In its first three decades, it lost most of it to the United States. Texas declared its independence in 1835, along with several other states of Mexico. Texas remained contested territory until its annexation by the United States in 1845, although the border was still not agreed upon. It lost more territory in the Mexican-American War that followed in 1846-1848. In the last significant engagement of that war, U.S. soldiers and marines assaulted Chapultepec Castle on September 13, 1847, opening the way for the occupation of Mexico City.

The hard-fought Battle of Chapultepec is commemorated on both sides. It inspired the opening line, "From the halls of Montezuma" in the Marines' Hymn. Marines also claim that the red stripe on their trousers symbolizes the casualties suffered during the attack.

Although Mexico lost the battle and the war, leading to a loss of more than half of its remaining territory, including the current U.S. states of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, and parts of Texas, Colorado, and Wyoming, it annually commemorates the stubborn defense of Chapultepec as an example of heroic sacrifice and patriotism. The defenders included cadets of Mexico's military academy, boys as young as 13, who volunteered to stay and fight. Faced with a hopeless situation and ordered to retreat, five cadets refused and instead fought to the death, including one who,

a Parts of this section come from an article the author wrote for *Homeland Security Today* in February 2009. See Brian Michael Jenkins, "Could Mexico Fail?" *Homeland Security Today* 6:2 (2009).

according to the history, wrapped himself in the Mexican flag and jumped to its death rather than see it captured. The Day of *Los Niños Héroes* (The Heroic Children) is still celebrated annually with school children dressed in the uniforms of the 1847 cadets.

Financially strapped, Mexico was obliged to sell another strip of land in southern Arizona in 1853 to satisfy the United States' need for a shorter transcontinental railroad route across the southern part of the country. Military forays by so-called "filibusters"—independent groups of armed adventurers who aimed at taking more Mexican land continued into the late 19th century, and even in the early 20th century, Mexico had to worry about rumblings of U.S. military intervention.

Memories of Yankee aggression, patriotic resistance, and national loss explain Mexico's intense nationalism, its opposition to foreign intervention as a matter of principle, and its sensitivity to cultural discrimination of which there are numerous examples. It is this history that will determine how many Mexicans will view any U.S. military action in Mexico. It will also determine how the government of Mexico responds and indeed could affect its ability to govern the country.

Turbulence on the Southern Border during the Mexican Revolution

Current concerns about Mexico's inability to control violent non-state actors in northern Mexico and its consequences for U.S. national security is not without precedent—and that history is instructive. The Mexican Revolution, from 1910 to 1920, engulfed the entire border region. Mexican revolutionaries found sympathy and support on the U.S. side of the border. They raised money, recruited soldiers, and bought guns in the cities and towns of the Southwest.[36] In an effort to navigate the Mexican turmoil, the U.S. government at times supported the Mexican government or certain rebel factions.[37]

The political turbulence in Mexico precipitated a crime wave in the United States. The distinction between combatant and bandit was situational. Heavily armed, desperate men marauded towns on both sides of the frontier. While some of this violence may have been related directly to the revolution in Mexico as rebel groups looked for money and guns, much of it simply reflected the chaotic situation and breakdown of law and order in Mexico. In late 1914 and 1915, the violence escalated, especially in southern Texas, where the attacks were beginning to take on a political complexion. Seeking to exploit the intense nationalism generated by the revolution, a small group of conspirators in Mexico promulgated the "Plan of San Diego." It called for the recovery of the "lost territories," land that Mexico had been forced to cede to the United States in 1848.

To accomplish this, the conspirators exhorted Mexicans north of the border to overthrow their oppressors and assert their rightful independence. February 20, 1915, was the date set for the uprising. On that day, subscribers to the plan were to rise up in arms, proclaiming the liberty of the Latin race and its independence of Yankee tyranny, "which has held us in iniquitous slavery since remote times," as they put it.[38] The rebels would proclaim the independence of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Upper California. Every white North American over 16 years of age was to be killed. African-Americans were invited to join the movement, in return for which they would receive six states north of those already mentioned. The Apaches and other native American tribes would have their lands returned to them.[39]

Except in the lower Rio Grande Valley, where the Mexican population was subject to the most discrimination, the Plan of San Diego was largely ignored. February 20 came and went without the predicted uprising, but the crime wave escalated. Ordered to investigate the growing lawlessness in the area, General Frederick Funston, commanding the American forces on the border, concluded that the violence was criminal, not political.[40] The Army continued its patrols along the border but refused to assume any responsibility for law enforcement within the states. As the violence increased, Funston did contemplate declaring martial law, but he decided it was too extreme. Still, Army patrols were ordered to treat all armed bands in the area as invaders.[41]

Terrified locals increasingly took matters into their own hands. As shootings and lynchings increased, a worried Funston called for reinforcements. Their arrival confirmed Mexico's suspicions of imminent US military intervention. Washington was fearful that an imprudent move on either side could precipitate a war. While U.S. diplomats worked to resolve the chaotic situation in Mexico, the violence along the border continued.[42]

At the time, "the United States deployed more than half of the mobile forces of the U.S. Army on the border with Mexico."[43] It was not enough to control the situation, forcing the president to federalize and deploy the entire National Guard to reinforce the regular forces. By 1917, the total U.S. military presence on the border (or in Mexico) totaled approximately 150,000."[44]

Various solutions were proposed. The jingoist press called for the annexation of Mexico.[45] Funston suggested that the United States negotiate an agreement with Mexico that would give U.S. troops the right of pursuit into Mexico (as they had in earlier campaigns against the Apaches). One U.S. senator proposed the construction of permanent forts along the Rio Grande.[46] Another official suggested that U.S. forces occupy a strip of land 10 miles wide on the Mexican side of the border.[47] Yet another proposed that a strip of land one mile wide north of the border be cleared of all brush so that troops could monitor movements across the frontier.[48]

History repeats itself with the announced intention on April 28, 2025, to create a 60-foot-wide swath stretching from the Pacific Coast to the east of El Paso as a military zone. The narrow strip of land is being declared a military base, enabling U.S. federal troops to arrest trespassers. This would theoretically allow the U.S. government to directly engage U.S. military forces—who otherwise cannot be used for domestic law enforcement—in halting illegal immigration and drug trafficking.[49]

In 1916, attention shifted to the western part of the southern border, where Pancho Villa blamed his defeat at Agua Prieta, across the border from Douglas, Arizona, on that fact that the Mexican government garrison there had been reinforced by rail through American territory.[50] Surprised by the strength of the defenders, Villa's men were slaughtered in the attack. Determined to get his revenge, Villa launched an attack on Columbus, New Mexico.[51]

In fact, Villa's plan was more strategic. The raid on Columbus would almost certainly provoke U.S. military intervention, which would divide the governments of Mexico and the United States, which were then allied against him. It nearly worked. As General John Pershing crossed the border to pursue Villa deep into Mexico, tensions increased between Mexico and the United States.[52]

The experience of the U.S. Army between 1913 and 1917 illustrates the potential consequences of U.S. military intervention if it provokes wider violence that destabilizes Mexico as well as

the complexities of dealing with multiple non-state actors and the government of Mexico. U.S. intelligence estimates have expressed concerns about this on more than one occasion in recent history. Noting the potential for widespread and potentially violent protests, the CIA concluded in 1988 that although upheaval was unlikely in the near term, the potential for instability persisted.[53]

The concern in 1988 arose from widespread protest following the contested 1988 national elections in Mexico. Observing the escalating violence in Mexico resulting from President Calderón's deployment of the Mexican army to attack the drug cartels (as will be discussed later in this essay), a 2008 assessment prepared by the U.S. Joint Forces Command noted that "the growing assault by the drug cartels and their thugs on the Mexican government could represent a homeland security problem of immense proportions to the United States." The assessment went on to say, "In terms of worst-case scenarios for the Joint Force and indeed the world, two large and important states bear consideration for a rapid and sudden collapse: Pakistan and Mexico."[54] The fact that Mexico was even mentioned with Pakistan was remarkable.

The Joint Forces Command agreed that "The Mexican possibility may seem less likely [than Pakistan], but the government, its politicians, police, and judicial infrastructure are all under sustained assault and pressure by criminal gangs and drug cartels. How that internal conflict turns out over the next several years will have a major impact on the stability of the Mexican state. Any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone."[55]

Although the United States supported the Mexican government's offensive with intelligence and military equipment, differences between the two countries on Mexico's ability and willingness to defeat the cartels so strained relations that it led to the resignation of the American ambassador to Mexico in 2011.[56] As the next section discusses, U.S. military intervention and a chaotic situation in Mexico would involve not only U.S. and Mexican actors, but hostile foreign powers.

Other Actors: Opportunities and the Danger of Meddling by Hostile Foreign Powers

Would U.S. military intervention in Mexico create opportunities for meddling by hostile foreign powers? Throughout the years of the Mexican Revolution, Washington feared that a hostile foreign power would take advantage of the chaotic situation in Mexico to establish military bases, perhaps to wage war on the United States. Most of the concerns focused on the supposed ambitions of Japan to obtain a naval base on the Pacific Coast of Mexico in 1911.[57] The scare, which turned out to be fake news, however, reflected deep-seated anxieties, especially in California, about the so-called "Yellow Peril"—the fear that the Western part of the country would be overrun by Asian immigrants.[58] Initially, these fears focused on the influx of Chinese immigrant laborers in the later 19th century, but shifted to the Japanese following Japan's defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), which displayed Japan's growing military power.

California's press fanned these fears. A 1917 editorial in *The Los Angeles Times* said that there "is no longer any doubt of the desire of Germany to make war upon us" and that a German alliance with Mexico and Japan is a foregone conclusion.[59] German agents, whose objective from 1914 on was to propel the United States into a war with Mexico, which would keep it out of the war in Europe, were also at work. In 1915, German agents plotted with former Mexican President Victoriano Huerta, who had been overthrown in 1914 by revolutionaries with the help of the United States. The Germans offered to help restore him to power, which would inevitably lead to U.S. intervention. American officials were onto the plot, however, and they arrested Huerta as he stepped off a train in El Paso.[60]

When Pancho Villa's forces attacked Columbus, New Mexico, in 1916, German agents on the border instigated calls for immediate U.S. military intervention. The Germans then approached President Venustiano Carranza, who deeply resented the continued presence of Pershing's forces in Mexico, and offered him a deal: If the United States appeared about to enter the war in Europe, Mexico could count on German support to wage war on the United States and recover the lost territories. The Germans suggested that Japan be invited to participate in the alliance.[61]

These terms were laid out in a telegram from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the German ambassador in Mexico. The infamous secret Zimmermann telegram was sent on January 16, 1917, but it was intercepted and decoded by British intelligence, which promptly turned it over to the American ambassador in London.[62]

Here it was, the sum of all fears: a German-Japanese alliance with Mexico to provoke an uprising in the United States and take back the lost territories. It is not clear what troops or other military assistance Germany might have provided Mexico in 1917, or whether or not Japan was interested in joining a war against the United States. When the telegram was reported in the press, Zimmermann publicly admitted that he had sent it. One suspects that, while Germany would have liked to see the United States and Mexico in a war, the telegram might have been intended primarily to keep the Americans worried about their southern flank. But Carranza had little appetite for war with the United States, and President Woodrow Wilson was determined to avoid war with Mexico. Wilson and Carranza settled their differences, Pershing's column was withdrawn, and on April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany.[63]

With the end of the revolution, the turbulent conditions on the border settled down, but some of the same sorts of problems that emerged between 1910 and 1920 arose in later years. There were concerns about German agents in Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s, and after World War II, there were worries about Soviet agents and Communist subversion.[64] The 1960s and 1970s were marked by domestic campaigns in Mexico aimed at suppressing left-wing subversives and small guerrilla groups inspired by Castro's revolution in Cuba. Declassified documents show that Mexico's efforts were allegedly supported by the CIA.[65] (The U.S. Consul General in Guadalajara was kidnapped by one of Mexico's guerrilla groups in 1973.[66])

During the last two decades, conspiracy theorists in the United States have circulated stories of secret Chinese military bases in Mexico and Canada. According to one version, 300,000 Chinese troops are secretly based in Canada and 600,000 are based in Mexico, including over 10,000 armored vehicles parked at a site south of Laredo, Texas.[67] None of these stories have been confirmed, but the rumors persist.

Fake news and alarming rumors were certainly present in the early years of the past century, but they pale in comparison with the volume, speed, and sophistication of today's information

operations. Warfare itself has increasingly become a matter of manipulating perceptions. With ample funds at their disposal, drug cartels, if they chose, would be able to mobilize sophisticated public relations and subversive campaigns. In recent years, we have also seen the growing role and cross-border influence exercised by activist groups. Mexico is not some remote battlefield, and any action against the cartels will inevitably overlap with other bilateral issues and agendas, including deportations and tariffs. Finally, the two countries have a long and often unfortunate history that will shape the portrayal and perception of any future action.

This challenge comes with all military engagements abroad and is not an argument against doing anything. Rather, it points to the requirement of being fully cognizant and prepared for a broader array of circumstances and contingencies beyond determining the location of a drug lord or drug lab.

Part IV: Lessons to be Learned from America's Forever War on Drugs

The U.S. experience in dealing with drug trafficking is instructive. We are not in entirely new territory. Over the years, the United States has acquired considerable experience in efforts to reduce drug trafficking abroad. Some of what the United States is doing or thinking about doing have historical precedents. They also illustrate possible results. There are lessons to be learned.

While U.S. officials continued to worry about Soviet subversion and Marxist guerrillas in Latin America, who in the late 1960s were moving into the cities and adopting terrorist tactics, communities in the United States were increasingly worried about growing domestic consumption of illegal drugs, especially by young people–even high school students. Cannabis was the principal recreational drug.

While running for president, Richard Nixon found a receptive audience when he promised voters that, if elected, he would end the flow of illicit drugs entering the United States.[68] This reframed the drug issue from a problem of domestic consumption and law enforcement to a drug supply problem. As the principal source of cannabis consumed in the United States at the time was from Mexico, America's drug epidemic in the 1960s was portrayed as mostly Mexico's fault.

Connecting Mexico with drug consumption piled on the earlier myths that deadly marijuana "rolled in cigarettes" accounted for the "bravery" of the Mexican bandits who defied the United States, as the Ogden Standard reported in 1915 to its readers in Utah.[69] In the years that followed, the newspaper's headline was reinforced by the belief that cannabis had been introduced into the United States by Mexican immigrants fleeing the revolution.

The drug problem evolved over the years. In the early 1970s, concern focused on increased recreational drug use, and especially on growing heroin use among U.S. military personnel in Vietnam. In the early 1980s, attention shifted to the growing problem of crack cocaine, which offered a cheap, intense high, but destroyed lives and devastated communities.

After more than 50 years and billions of dollars, the fact that the United States is still dealing with widespread drug addiction, accompanying crime and other social problems, and the difficulty in impeding the flow of drugs into the country is a sobering reminder that this is a chronic problem—there are no silver bullets.

Operation Intercept. Ostensibly to curtail drug smuggling from Mexico, in 1969 the United States initiated "Operation Intercept," which mandated the thorough inspection of every vehicle crossing the border into country. The inspections created massive delays at ports of entry and seriously disrupted trade. It ended after 20 days. The objective of Operation Intercept was not to detect more smuggled cannabis, but rather to coerce Mexico's government to agree to closer cooperation with the United States in curtailing drug trafficking.[70] Mexico agreed to a joint crop eradication effort, which the United States supported with intelligence and material assistance.[71]

"The U.S. experience in dealing with drug trafficking is instructive. We are not in entirely new territory. Over the years, the United States has acquired considerable experience in efforts to reduce drug trafficking abroad. Some of what the United States is doing or thinking about doing have historical precedents. They also illustrate possible results. There are lessons to be learned."

Severing the French Connection. In 1971, President Nixon announced that America's "public enemy number one" was drug abuse, and fighting it required the United States "to wage a new, all-out offensive."[72] The 'war on drugs' officially began. Mexico remained a major front, but not the only theater in the war on drugs. The first major success came in France where in the early 1970s U.S. authorities worked closely with their French counterparts in shutting down the "French Connection," a drug smuggling operation that brought opium from Turkey and refined it into heroin smuggled into the United States. This was an example of an effective international police operation.

Poppies as a source of illegal opium had been cultivated in Mexico for decades. With the French supply chain cut, Mexican traffickers took advantage of the disruption to quickly become the leading source of heroin for the U.S. market.[73] The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) was created in 1973 to improve U.S. efforts at home and abroad to control illicit narcotics. DEA agents operating in Mexico collected intelligence and ran air surveillance programs to spot large plantations. In some instances, their involvement reportedly went beyond assistance and they became frontline operatives in a dangerous environment, which we will come to in a moment. In 1982, President Ronald Reagan authorized utilization of military resources for interdiction of the illegal drugs,[74] which was mainly directed at the Colombian cartels producing and distributing cocaine—they still are.

The kidnapping and murder of Camarena. In 1985, Enrique Camarena, a U.S. DEA employee in Mexico, was kidnapped by the Guadalajara Cartel. Outraged by the kidnapping, President Reagan demanded an all-out effort to locate and rescue the agent. To underscore the urgency, Reagan followed Nixon's example and reduced cross border traffic to a trickle.[75] It did not save the agent,

whose body was found a month later, but it led to a crackdown by Mexican authorities and a number of arrests of key figures in the Guadalajara Cartel who were responsible for the crime. Further investigations, arrests, and trials were conducted in the United States. The splinters of the shattered Guadalajara Cartel led to the emergence of other cartels that steadily spread across Mexico.[76]

Italy and the Pizza Connection. U.S. authorities worked closely with the Italian government against the mafia in the 1980s and 1990s. As with the French Connection, this was an international police operation that involved sharing of intelligence. American interest derived from the "Pizza Case," a large-scale heroin smuggling operation involving the Sicilian Mafia that sold heroin through pizza parlors in the United States.[77] The anti-mafia campaign in Italy provoked a mafia counteroffensive that included bombings in public places and assassinations of high-ranking officials and ordinary policemen. These led to changes in Italian law that gave investigators more authority, and ultimately the mafia, or *cosa nostra*, was subdued by law enforcement means. That does not mean organized crime disappeared in Italy. The Mafia, Camorra, 'Ndrangheta, and other Italian criminal organizations are all still active, but they keep a lower profile while infiltrating the legitimate economy.

Colombia and the Medellin Cartel. In the 1980s, Pablo Escobar, the leader of the Medellin Cartel in Colombia, carried out an escalating campaign of terrorism aimed at halting the extradition of arrested cartel leaders to the United States.[78] In November 1984, the cartel's operatives, calling themselves the "Extraditables," detonated a car bomb in front of the U.S. embassy in Bogotá. They also assassinated government officials in Colombia and murdered a witness in the United States. In 1988, the Extraditables kidnapped the son of a former president of Colombia and a candidate for mayor of Bogotá at the time, in order to pressure the government to halt further extraditions. (As an aside, I was a consultant to the family in the negotiations in this case.) He was released unharmed. In 1989, as part of an assassination plot against a candidate for president, the Extraditables bombed an Avianca passenger plane, killing all 107 on board.[79]

Escobar's violent campaign was opposed by the Cali Cartel, which led to a bloody battle between the two criminal groups, and the Cali Cartel providing information to the government that facilitated in the dismantling of the Medellin Cartel. With the Colombian government's permission, the United States deployed special operations units to Colombia and assisted the Colombians with intelligence that led to Escobar's death in a shootout in 1993. The United States also assisted in dismantling the Cali Cartel.[80]

The takeaways from the Colombian experience are the Medellin Cartel's terrorist campaign, which extended into the United States; the close cooperation between the U.S. and Colombian authorities; the divisions it caused between the two rival cartels; and the death of Escobar, which led to the demise of the Medellin Cartel.

Plan Colombia. From 1999 to 2006, the United States again worked closely with Colombian authorities in "Plan Colombia," a second campaign against Colombia's drug cartels. Pressure on Colombia's cartels and increased interdiction efforts led to a shift in smuggling routes. Instead of smuggling drugs directly from Colombia across the Caribbean to the United States, drug traffickers opened up the land route via Central America and Mexico, leading to the rise of the Mexican drug cartels. This, as we shall see, complicated the challenge to Mexico's government.[81] Colombia's cartels continued to exercise a near monopoly on the cocaine traffic, but Mexican cartels reportedly have been infiltrating Colombia's cocaine industry.[82]

Mexico's War on the Cartels. Felipe Calderón, Mexico's president from 2006 to 2012, initiated the government's most intensive offensive against the cartels, and therefore merits a more detailed discussion.[83] The United States supported Calderón's use of the Mexican armed forces to combat cartel violence in 2007. Calderón's principal objective was not the reduction of drugs flowing into the United States—he said that "it's not a war against the narco-traffickers as such."[84] Instead, he sought a reduction in the violence associated with organized crime—the turf war killings between rival cartels, the kidnappings and murders carried out by gangs seeking capital to enter the drug traffic, and the intimidation of ordinary citizens from *campesinos* to corporate executives faced with extortion by the gangs.

Above all, the fear generated and power acquired by the cartels in some Mexican states, including the president's home state of Michoacan, had become so great that it represented a direct challenge to the political authority of the federal government itself. Gone were the days when government officials could keep the peace by resolving disputes and controlling the distribution of *plazas* (territories and smuggling routes) to the cartels.

As Calderón later wrote in his memoirs:

> *The fundamental phenomenon that not only generates violence and insecurity, but also puts the Mexican state itself at risk is state capture, something I observed upon becoming president and something I had previously glimpsed in Tamaulipas, Baja California, Sinaloa, and Michoacan. Organized crime was taking over entire towns and cities. In many places, the police were completely tainted by corruption. Police forces, accustomed or trained to accepting bribes from criminals in exchange for letting them act, offered no resistance ..., first in the remote rural areas, then in towns, later in cities, and finally in entire states, with the complicity of some governors.*[85]

To Calderón's horror, the reality was that the drug cartels had, through bribery and intimidation backed by ruthless violence, created an atmosphere of narco-terror. Prosecutors, police, the courts, elected political officials, reporters, corporate executives faced with extortion, and protection rackers were terrified. The government did not define limits of criminality. The cartels defined the limits of policy and public discussion—what could and could not even be discussed.

It was mortal combat. Even before he took office, President-elect Calderón was informed that his own life and the lives of his family were at peril. Intelligence from multiple sources indicated that the leaders of the Gulf Cartel, one of Mexico's oldest criminal organizations, had decided that Calderón's ascension to the presidency "is highly inconvenient for their interests" and therefore planned to assassinate him.[86] In response to the threat, special security measures were implemented to protect him.

What Calderón did not know at the time was that the man he appointed to be his Secretary of Public Security, and therefore in charge of the Calderón's own security, was himself working for the Sinaloa Cartel. U.S. authorities arrested him in Dallas in 2019. He was subsequently sentenced to 38 years in prison.[87]

David Cristobal Barraza Sainz, known as Commander "Nitro" within the Sinaloa State Police, was shot and killed while traveling in his vehicle in Sinaloa, Mexico, on July 15, 2025. He was the 43rd police officer to be killed in the preceding 10 months of violence in Sinaloa, as a result of the internal conflict between factions of the Cartel de Sinaloa. (Stringer/Anadolu via Getty Images)

That made the challenge not one of suppressing crime, but an existential battle for ultimate control of the Mexican state. Having little confidence in the state authorities or federal police, President Calderón turned to the military, which previously played a minor role in combating the cartels. The government adopted a "Kingpin Strategy," which rather than incarcerating thousands of low-level cartel members, targeted the cartel leaders themselves.[88] The FBI had adopted a similar strategy in attacking the gangsters in the 1930s and later the mafia.

The United States saw Calderón's determination and willingness to cooperate with it as an opportunity to make significant progress against drug trafficking and negotiated the "Mérida Initiative," or "Plan Mexico," which was inspired by the earlier Plan Colombia. According to the agreement, the United States authorized $1.6 billion to support the initiative. Most of the funds were allocated to Mexico, with smaller portions going to Central American and Caribbean participants. The biggest portion of the funding for Mexico financed its purchase of helicopters and other aircraft provided by the United States. The rest went for advanced technology to increase inspection capabilities and provide more secure communications.[89]

Money was also allocated to efforts aimed at reducing the illegal flow of weapons acquired in the United States and smuggled to the cartels. This has been a frequent complaint by Mexico. One utility of declaring the cartels terrorist organizations is that the sale and smuggling of weapons to the cartels can be regarded as providing material support to a terrorist organization, which carries a potential 20-year sentence as opposed to five- to 10-year sentences for weapons and smuggling charges.

The assistance approved by Congress under the Mérida Initiative was doled out slowly. According to a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, more than two years after the agreement was signed, less than two percent of the promised aid had been dispersed.[90] The biggest portion—41 percent of the total—went to U.S. manufacturers of Bell and Blackhawk helicopters for the Mexican police and armed forces.[91] Congress held back 15 percent of the funds until Calderón could assure that alleged violations of human rights by Mexico's army and police were being investigated.[92] U.S. bureaucracy was slow; procedures on Mexico's side were often opaque.

Despite the slow start, Calderón's campaign took down some major figures. Of 37 cartel *capos* identified by Calderón, 18 were captured and six were killed.[93] The destruction of the cartels' hierarchies led to even higher levels of violence as aspiring successors within the organizations and rival groups fought to take over. It set off the bloodiest years in Mexico since the revolution. Mexico's homicide rate tripled; 100,000 people were killed, another 20,000 people disappeared.[94]

The cartels murdered more than a hundred police officers and assassinated numerous Mexican government officials and candidates for local office, mostly at the local level.[95] It is argued that the predominance of local officials who were killed reflected the changing nature of Mexico criminal organizations from limited competition between a handful of cartels to a larger number of competing cartels and aspiring gangs engaged in drug trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion, acquisition of local government

contracts, and other criminal activities.

Calderón himself suggests that traditionally, drug traffickers corrupted or intimidated government officials in order to transport drugs that were headed for the United States through their jurisdictions unmolested. However, as cartels and associated gangs became more engaged in more local criminal activity (local drug dealing, kidnapping, extortion), it required securing a continued presence—dominating territory as opposed to passing through. This required corrupting local authorities and terrorizing local populations. It resulted in increased violence.[96]

It also reflected the shift from a single party that had dominated politics from the federal to the local level for decades to the multiple competing political groups competing today.[97] The 2024 elections—the bloodiest since the Mexican revolution—saw the killings of scores of political candidates.[98]

Calderón's war theoretically continued under his successor, President Enrique Pena Nieto, but the objective shifted from bringing down cartel leaders to bringing down the overall level of violence. The effort effectively ended with the election of President Lopez Obrador who formally ended the program. It was replaced by the "U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Agreement," which is discussed below.

Corruption in high places continued to impede progress. Calderón had relied on the armed forces instead of police, which he viewed as compromised, but the military men were not entirely immune to corruption. According to George Grayson's analysis of Calderón's war on the cartels, during his presidency, at least 13 military officers, including four generals, were accused of aiding the drug traffickers. Some lower-ranking officers were sent to prison, but only one of the four generals.[99]

There were parallel efforts to bring corrupt officials to trial in the United States. As mentioned earlier, in December 2019, U.S. authorities arrested President Calderón's Secretary of Public Security and head of the newly created, more powerful federal police force. He was charged with taking bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel while he was in office. He was convicted and in October 2024 was sentenced to 38 years in prison.[100] In May 2025, as a result of a civil suit against him by Mexico, a court in Florida ordered him and his wife to pay more than $2 billion in damages to the Mexican government.[101]

In October 2020, the United States arrested Mexico's former Minister of Defense under Calderón's successor (2012-2018) as he arrived in the United States for a visit. He was charged with directly colluding with the cartels—drug trafficking and money laundering.[102] The arrest caused outrage in Mexico. Attorney General William Barr decided that pursuing the case was not worth "scuttling any prospects of cooperation with the Mexicans" and returned the minister to Mexico.[103] In return, the United States asked that President Obrador not proceed with legislation that would neuter the U.S. DEA's ability to operate in Mexico.[104]

Under continuing pressure from the United States to bring corrupt officials to justice, the new government in Mexico in July 2025 issued an arrest warrant for the former head of the security forces in Tabasco who allegedly had assisted the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG).[105]

While the cartels counted on accomplices in high places, it is reported that between 2000 and 2016 as many as 150,000 Mexican soldiers defected to work for the cartels. Defecting members of Mexico's elite airborne special forces group joined the Gulf Cartel as enforcers. They later created their own a cartel, the Zetas, known for their brutality. The group has since fragmented.[106]

The Bicentennial Framework

The 2021 "U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities" (intended to mark Mexico's two centuries of independence) readjusted the objectives of the Mérida Initiative, repeating some of its lofty language, but the objective of Mexico was reduction of violence in Mexico, which did occur, and the reduction of smuggling drugs, in particular synthetic opioids, into the United States, which did not occur. The pandemic, U.S. arrests of Mexican officials, contentious border issues, and U.S. investigations of suspicions that Obrador's 2006 presidential campaign received financial aid from the cartels[107] undermined cooperation.

Key Takeaways

These are mere vignettes of past U.S. experience. Case studies would yield valuable lessons learned. Nonetheless, they indicate some relevant takeaways.

U.S. involvement in investigations of the French Connection and Pizza Connection centered on international law enforcement operations with French and Italian authorities. The United States played a more active role in supporting police and military operations in Mexico and Colombia, but stopped short of unilateral military action.

The United States has an agreement and mechanisms in place to work with Mexican authorities, but some criticize these as covers that allow continued Mexican inaction while the situation worsens. Despite there being avenues in place to work with Mexican authorities, the problem has remained the same, and many would argue has gotten worse.

Sharing operational intelligence on organized crime with any foreign entity risks leaks and compromise of intelligence sources. These risks are judged as extremely high in Mexico.

Short-term efforts such as "Operation Intercept" and President Reagan's deliberate 1982 slowdown of cross-border traffic have been used to enlist Mexico's cooperation. This economic strong-arming is not that different from today's threats of high tariffs to induce Mexico's cooperation in reducing the flow of fentanyl. In the case of Colombia, active engagement continued from the 1980s to the present, although it has become more complicated in the past few years. In Mexico, U.S. involvement in local control efforts (crop eradication) and operations against the cartels has continued since the late 1960s, with ups and downs.

Although it might have been prudent for Pablo Escobar in the 1980s and Mexico's cartels in the 2000s to avoid a direct confrontation with the government, they responded violently and viciously against both local and U.S. targets. While the local government bore the brunt of the violence, in both Mexico and in Colombia, Americans were targeted, which led to greater U.S. involvement. Italy in the 1980s also saw a violent reaction by one family in the mafia. Faced with Calderón's crackdown, Mexico's cartels reacted with assassinations and large-scale killings. The takeaway is that in Italy, Colombia, and Mexico, faced with threats, mafia *capos* and drug lords ordered targeted and indiscriminate violence. Operational planning must anticipate this possibility.

The efforts mentioned above brought mixed results. Battles were won, criminal enterprises were brought down, but new formations

"The Mexican cartels are not a single actor. They will respond individually. Although well-armed, they lack conventional military power, but they could exploit hard-to-protect U.S. vulnerabilities in Mexico and possibly in the United States—and there are many."

arose, and competitors took their place. None of these campaigns can claim "victory." That term may be inappropriate in dealing with criminal activity. No one expects the police to declare victory over crime. The use of military force may raise expectations that are likely to be unfulfilled.

The power of Mexico's cartels has grown over the past five decades as they have moved downstream to increasingly control the distribution of illicit drugs in the United States and expanded their operations and control internationally. They have shown themselves to be adaptive in exploiting opportunities, for example, in taking over the heroin traffic when European connections to the United States were disrupted, in setting up new networks for cocaine smuggling as pressure on Colombia's cartels increased, and in exploiting synthetic drugs.

Part V: U.S. Military Actions in Mexico—Objectives, Prerequisites, and Options

Part V argues for a clear statement of the objective and a comprehensive assessment of the capabilities and actions of the actors. It then lays out a preliminary list of U.S. options.

Objectives and Goals

In the cases mentioned above, the goal of the United States was to assist foreign governments in reducing the flow of illicit drugs that ultimately reached the United States and to deprive adversaries of financial gains arising from the drug traffic. In the current situation in Mexico, several possible objectives are indicated.

One goal is to reduce the flow of fentanyl, the deadliest drug, into the United States. As noted already, President Trump has said that this is also one of his goals in imposing high tariffs on imports from Mexico (and Canada). This can be accomplished by coercing the government of Mexico to take greater measures to disrupt illicit drug production and distribution as well as human trafficking.

Reducing the flow of *all* illicit drugs into the United States would require destroying the existing cartels and preventing new ones from arising. In light of the previous Mexican-led effort to subdue the cartels, achieving that ambitious objective may be beyond the capacity of the Mexican authorities. U.S. military operations could assist in the short term, but permanently suppressing the drug traffic would require a long-term commitment and include significant reduction of U.S. demand.

The presidential proclamation quoted at the beginning of this review also points to the role of the cartels in facilitating the entry of criminals and terrorists into the United States. Stopping that would require either persuading the cartels themselves to end this aspect of their activity or face the consequences of U.S. military intervention, or dismantling the cartels themselves so that they can no longer facilitate illegal immigration.

These are strategic objectives. We also have to ask, what is the objective of any specific military action and how would it contribute to the overall strategic objective?

Intelligence Considerations

In the case of cooperating with Italian authorities against the mafia, the United States was able to share information collected through FBI and NYPD investigations and intelligence operations in the United States while Italy shared information collected by its intelligence services and investigations in Italy.[108] In Plan Colombia, in addition to sharing information, the United States deployed sophisticated intelligence gathering assets in Colombia itself, which provided vital information about targets as well as operational resources to assist the Colombian forces.[109]

The United States has sophisticated technological intelligence capabilities and human intelligence assets on the ground in Mexico as well. Targeting drug infrastructure facilities would be possible, although new facilities may pop up again soon after in another location. Targeting individuals always poses a challenge.

Connecting intelligence from all sources requires a purpose-created fusion center that provides an overall landscape of the cartels, their operations, organizational structure, relations with each other, *modus operandi*, and anticipated reactions. We probably have better intelligence on the established cartels than we do on the hundreds of little cartels (*carterlitos*) and other criminal gangs that operate under the umbrella of the major groups, and yet these gangs may be the least predictable, most violence-prone actors.[b]

The United States has to anticipate that the cartels may be aware of some of our sources of information, and that under pressure, they will eliminate them. Some may be or could become double agents who provide disinformation that lures us into attacking their local competitors or that results in attacking targets that turn out to be wedding parties, thereby creating widespread hostility.

The Necessity of a Comprehensive Assessment

The mission of a comprehensive assessment is to compare U.S. military capabilities with those of other countries or groups of countries or non-state actors in order to identify a complete spectrum of threats or opportunities.

U.S. military action against Mexico's cartels would be an asymmetric confrontation with non-state actors—the drug cartels—engaged in criminal activities. The United States can, of course, bring overwhelming military power to bear, but against what? There will be few lucrative military targets in the traditional sense of that term. Destroying drug laboratories and pill mills may cause only temporary disruptions, and not permanent damage unless they (and the replacement facilities, which are likely to be better hidden) are continually attacked. Targeted killings of cartel leadership will not be easy and the effects not easily predictable. There also will be constraints. The risk of civilian casualties will have to be minimal in order not to alienate Mexico's population and government. History

b According to a 2021 Crisis Management Group report, "Crime in Pieces; The Effect of Mexico's 'W0ar on Drugs,' Explained," at least 543 armed groups operated in Mexico between 2009 and 2020.

suggests that one-off attacks may win applause from a domestic U.S. audience, but they are largely symbolic and are unlikely to permanently disrupt operations.

Will the United States focus its efforts on one cartel or opportunistically attack all? If all are attacked, what will be the sequencing? Will missile and drone strikes suffice, or must U.S. forces be deployed on the ground?

The Mexican cartels are not a single actor. They will respond individually. Although well-armed, they lack conventional military power, but they could exploit hard-to-protect U.S. vulnerabilities in Mexico and possibly in the United States—and there are many. The U.S. State Department says that 1.6 million U.S. citizens—expat employees and retirees—live in Mexico.[110] In 2023, nearly 37 million U.S. citizens traveled to Mexico as tourists.[111] Thousands of U.S. companies, from major manufacturers to small *maquiladoras*, operate in Mexico, returning goods and profits to the United States totaling hundreds of billions of dollars annually. Interruption of this trade could have a serious impact on the U.S. economy. It was estimated in 2019 that a border closure could cost the United States $130 billion a year and affect nearly a million U.S. jobs.[112]

If military operations commence, it may not simply be the United States versus the cartels. Mexico is a separate actor, a sovereign state. Reflecting the history of contentious relations between the United States and Mexico, Mexico's government and its people are nationalistic, oppose foreign intervention on principle and historically in practice, and will be suspicious of Washington's ultimate goals. Mexico is unlikely to seek a military confrontation with the United States. It may be an imperfect ally, but it could turn hostile, creating operational problems and diplomatic difficulties for the United States at many levels.

It is not clear how ongoing deportations and tariff negotiations may affect, or may be affected by, concurrent U.S. military operations. Cartels may enlist desperate deportees. Economic distress in Mexico could further expand their recruiting reservoir.

As noted earlier, other states, including U.S. competitors such as China, could also get involved and take advantage—in indirect, asymmetric, or direct ways—of any conflict or dispute between the United States and Mexico. This could include actions in Mexico, or in support of Mexico, or actions abroad that aim to take advantage of U.S. focus on Mexico.

What Realistically Can Be Achieved with Available Military Options?

A number of military options have been mentioned. These include:

Threats to support coercive diplomacy. Using threats of military action and higher tariffs has kept pressure on Mexican authorities to take more vigorous action against the cartels. It appears to have worked. Since February 2025, the government of Mexico under President Sheinbaum has arrested more than 700 people connected with organized crime, and later in February 2025, the country extradited 29 cartel chieftains wanted by the United States, including one of the bosses involved in the 1985 murder of Enrique Camarena.[113]

Military resources to improve interception. The United States has already deployed U.S. military assets in an effort to improve interdiction at sea and on the Mexican border. Illegal border crossings are currently negligible.[114]

Increased direct assistance. The United States could offer more material and technical assistance to Mexico's underfunded law enforcement establishment. The problem here is corruption. The United States could also try to expand its cooperation with the Mexican army. The Mexican army, however, is a conservative, closed establishment, usually suspicious of and generally cool to U.S. engagement. Finally, the United States could discreetly assist Mexican authorities with intelligence that would enable them to operate more effectively against the cartels, but the problem here is the disturbing degree of penetration of Mexico's criminal intelligence and law enforcement by the criminals themselves. Indeed, some U.S. officials have in the past refused to share sensitive source intelligence with Mexican authorities. Following the arrest in the United States of Mexico's former minister of defense over drug charges, Mexico passed a law limiting intelligence sharing with U.S. authorities, especially the DEA.[115]

Interdiction of fentanyl and precursors into Mexico. U.S. military assets could be used to interdict fentanyl precursor supplies into Mexico, although monitoring Mexico's imports would be a daunting task. Given the volume of Mexico's trade with China specifically, the United States would be looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

Destruction of facilities. Military operations can be aimed at destroying drug manufacturing infrastructure—laboratories, processing, pill-making facilities, or storage sites. This will achieve short-term disruptions, unless the campaign is relentless.

Decapitation operations. U.S. Special Operations capabilities may be deployed to capture or kill cartel leaders in a non-permissive environment. Missiles, drone strikes, and special operations personnel may be used, as they have been against terrorist organizations, to carry out captures or targeted killings of cartel leaders.

Large-scale military intervention. A large-scale military intervention is not an attractive option, but cartel responses to other U.S. actions could lead to deployment of U.S. forces to defend vital targets, protect or evacuate U.S. nationals, rescue U.S. hostages, conduct sustained operations against selected cartels, or to stabilize the country if Mexico were to collapse into anarchy.

Unilateral Action or Partnership?

Whether the United States pursues any specific military course of action unilaterally or seeks a collaborative effort with Mexico is another option. The drug traffic is not exclusively a Mexican or a U.S. problem. It is a *mutual* problem. The drug cartels pose different but overlapping threats to both Mexico and the United States. That gives both countries powerful incentives to overcome mutual suspicions and cooperate in formulating mutually reinforcing and beneficial strategies and actions. We should not underestimate the obstacles, frustrations, and operational difficulties—and risks of any alliance. On the other hand, even imperfect collaboration may offer better chances of success.

These and other military options are only one component of a broader strategic campaign, which should include: international diplomatic efforts (e.g., could China and India be persuaded to more effectively curb fentanyl exports to Mexico?); intensified domestic law enforcement operations; and other activities to accompany any military action abroad. These include surges in interdiction efforts, disruption of domestic distribution networks, interrupting money laundering, freezing assets, and suppressing any flow of weapons into Mexico from the United States. It could also include exposing corrupt Mexican officials (or communicating threats to do

so) as well as cyber warfare and psychological operations aimed at disrupting cartel operations.

Part VI: Response-Counter Response Dynamics and Potential Implications

This final part addresses what the cartels might do in response to U.S. military action; this will depend very much on the magnitude and duration of U.S. operations. It then considers how the United States might respond or what it might be compelled to do in certain circumstances. This part also looks at how other adversaries of the United States may exploit the situation to advance their interests.

What Might the Cartels Do in Response to U.S. Military Action?

This is a more difficult question. Informal discussions that I have had with law enforcement and former military officers indicate a wide range of possible actions by the cartels. They also emphasize that the cartels are not a unified force. They will make independent decisions.

The cartels are criminal enterprises interested in profit, not ideological goals or political agendas beyond ensuring their ability to operate without government interference. They exercise power through bribery and violence. In Mexico, they behave as terrorists, but they are not military organizations and lack the capacity and experience to defend themselves in a traditional military contest. They are drug traffickers, not military strategists. They will want to avoid a direct fight. We saw how quickly the cartel blamed for the March 2023 kidnapping and deaths of American medical tourists in Matamoros delivered those responsible and issued an apology letter.[116] However, that does not mean that, if faced with continuing military action and an existential threat to their existence, the cartels will not respond violently, as did Italy's mafia and Colombia's and Mexico's cartels.

One thing is certain. Faced with U.S. military action, they are not likely to retire and move to Miami. They will attempt to protect themselves and their 'business operations' and find ways of blunting (or surviving) U.S. military operations. Some may opt for purely defensive measures, hunkering down, dispersing and concealing their facilities, adopting security measures to protect their leadership.

They have experience digging tunnels and are reported to have received technical advice from Hamas.[117] They literally may go underground. They also may do what Hamas has done and relocate their facilities, putting them in urban areas, next to schools or hospitals where the use of missiles will risk heavy civilian casualties. They may also use decoys and disinformation to lure U.S. attacks on purely civilian targets.

The possibility that one cartel, in return for immunity, may agree to provide intelligence about its rivals or other assistance should not be dismissed, although the United States will have to be wary of disinformation and traps that cause an embarrassing disaster (for example, bombing a wedding party rather than a conference of drug lords).

The cartels may use their influence—bribes and threats—to increase official opposition to U.S. action among Mexico's leaders, or at least, prevent active cooperation. But they may also try to do things to put Mexico and the United States at odds. For example, they may orchestrate mass protests against the United States, which could force the Mexican government to stand against its people on behalf of the United States. Bribery and corruption of U.S. officials and soldiers are also possibilities.

"One lesson of President Calderón's action against the cartels was that dismantling cartel leadership resulted in higher levels of violence in Mexico as the situation became more chaotic."

The cartels may calculate that the United States cannot sustain military operations in Mexico for any lengthy period of time, leading to a strategy of saving themselves through cooperation that directs the United States to go after their competitors in a messy fight. When the United States withdraws, which will inevitably happen, the smart cartels will have a greater share of the action.

If the United States continues to go after the cartels, they may respond with "warning shots." These may take the form of threats and demonstration attacks on U.S. business facilities or American expats in Mexico. If the confrontation escalates, the U.S. expat population in Mexico could be at risk of kidnappings and other hostage situations, or potentially mass shootings. As mentioned, in 1973, a left-wing group kidnapped the U.S. consul general in Guadalajara to demand the release of imprisoned comrades. Other U.S. citizens have been kidnapped in Mexico and held for ransom by ordinary criminals. Americans held hostage abroad have often posed politically perilous crises for the U.S. government.

Rapid insertions of special operations forces to capture or kill cartel leaders occur quickly. A continuing presence of U.S. military personnel raises different risks. Individual U.S. service members if in Mexico for any period of time, may be lured into places where they could be abducted or murdered. Cartels could attempt to suborn soldiers, not simply because they may be useful as sources of information, but to embarrass the U.S. armed forces and discredit the effort.

U.S. military action versus cartel threats and terrorist attacks on U.S. targets in Mexico could normalize a tit-for-tat situation, not unlike that which existed between Israel and Hamas or Hezbollah for many years, requiring repeated U.S. military incursions. One lesson of President Calderón's action against the cartels was that dismantling cartel leadership resulted in higher levels of violence in Mexico as the situation became more chaotic.

Mexico's cartels are connected to a vast underworld distribution and sales network in the United States. This potentially could become a source of criminal operatives. Colombia had to deal with *sicarios*—hired assassins—often teenagers, who carried out killings as cartel enforcers, but they also killed government officials and rival cartel members.[118] Over the years, Colombia's *sicarios* have become better organized and are a virtual paramilitary force today.[119] The equivalent of *sicarios* in the United States could target American military personnel or the families of U.S. commanders, or of military personnel in Mexico.

There is also the much-feared (and perhaps exaggerated) possibility that the cartels might smuggle terrorists into the United States. The concern derives from a 2011 plot between Iranian operatives connected with the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, one of whom was a naturalized dual national of Iran and the United States, to assassinate the Saudi

ambassador in Washington. The plot was uncovered when the Iranian attempted to enlist an undercover U.S. intelligence source posing as an associate of a Mexican drug cartel.[120]

The plot demonstrates Iran's by now well-established willingness to recruit foreign criminal elements to carry out terrorist operations abroad. It does not illustrate the cartels' willingness to become involved in foreign terrorist operations, although cartels have solicited hit men to carry out murders in the United States.[121] There are also reported links of commercial connections between Mexico's cartels and Hezbollah and possible links to other Middle East terrorist groups.[122] Concrete public evidence of the latter is lacking.[123]

There is no public evidence of linkages between Mexico's gangs and foreign terrorist organizations, and it is to be hoped that gang leaders are smart enough not to imperil their highly profitable businesses by engaging in activities that would unleash an all-out U.S.-led effort to destroy them. But there is always the possibility that a cartel or criminal gang might feel it can successfully carry out an operation through proxies or cutouts to avoid being identified, or that it could be tempted by a huge cash offer to take the risk, or that under pressure it might in desperation be willing to take the risk, or simply may consider itself invulnerable to U.S. retaliation. While differences in the objectives of Mexico's cartels and other foreign terrorist organizations would seem to preclude such relationships, continuing U.S. military action and *in extremis* situations could alter strategic calculations.

In sum, there are vulnerabilities and capabilities that give the cartels potential courses of action. These are more likely to occur in an escalating war. Again, these are preliminary notions. The conclusion here is that the United States needs a red team to catalogue potential cartel counteractions.

What Would the United States Do in Response to These Actions?

One also needs to think about how the United States might respond to any of these potential actions—hostage situations, a terrorist campaign, murders, destruction of property. A sophisticated cartel strategy could be to provoke the United States into an unsustainable escalation that is counter to current U.S. foreign policy goals and a distraction from domestic goals and other foreign threats.

It is not unimaginable to foresee sending American forces in to protect or evacuate American nationals—an enormous logistics and security operation—or to rescue Americans held hostage. Further military strikes might be considered as a means of forcing the release of hostages, the strategy adopted by Israel in dealing with Hamas. Such actions could stoke anti-American sentiments and make it increasingly impossible for Mexico's government to cooperate with the United States.

One way to anticipate possible surprises and consider both escalation and potential off-ramps in advance is in strategic games. For many years, the Joint Staff, Studies, Analysis, and Game Division (SAGD) has conducted "war games" to consider how various adversaries around the world might respond during armed conflict. If this has not already been done, the SAGD should consider such an exercise to explore how Mexico's drug cartels (and the government of Mexico) might respond to U.S. military action against the cartels. This is different from a comprehensive assessment in that it creates an interactive situation in which independent role players respond to each other. It is a way to identify potential surprises in advance. A simulation representing various interests: the U.S. government (reflecting input from the Department of Defense, Department of State, Homeland Security, FBI, etc.); the government of Mexico; and at least several separate teams representing drug cartels. External role-players could also be added to represent foreign powers potentially interested in distracting the United States in an ongoing conflict in Mexico.

The Dire Prospects of a Failed State Next Door

Nothing on the political horizon indicates that Mexico is heading for another revolution or that its vigorous political system is on the brink of collapse. The current concern to the United States is the apparent inability or unwillingness of Mexico's authorities to suppress the drug gangs that infest the country. The threat comes from the proliferation and growth of drug cartels and criminal gangs, their immense profits from drug trafficking, their diversification into other illicit activities including migrant smuggling, their role as Mexico's fifth largest employer,[124] their increasing penetration of the legitimate economy,[125] their increasing extortion of major corporations,[126] and their influence and state capture through bribery and terror.

Over a period of decades, Mexico's drug cartels have spread throughout the country. Despite heavy losses from death or incarceration, the number of people employed by the cartels increased by 60,000 members between 2012 and 2022.[127] Their power appears to have only increased. As indicated previously, U.S. authorities worry that Mexico could become a failed state. Some believe that it is already a narco-state.

Nominal state authority still exists. Local political leaders continue to be elected. Police continue to deal with petty crime. Commerce continues. Superficially, northern Mexico appears normal. A failed state does not necessarily have to look like gang-ridden Haiti, the endless conflicts in Somalia, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But untouchable crime bosses protected by heavily armed private armies points to an alternate hierarchy of power.

To preserve its own authority, the government can try to contain the violence and protect the population, root out the most egregiously corrupt officials, and appease its powerful northern neighbor. But past efforts to destroy the cartels have resulted in unsustainable levels of violence. In sum, the government can treat the conditions; it cannot cure the malady.

From Mexico's perspective, U.S. drug consumption is the source of its problem. From a U.S. perspective, Mexico's cartels pose a direct threat to U.S. national security. The economic distortions in Mexico and the challenges to political authority they pose to governance are Mexico's problems. Neither government, however, can ignore its neighbor.

The two countries share a 2,000-mile border—the 10th-longest international land border in the world.[128] (The longest is the U.S. border with Canada.) The populations of the two countries are intermingled. More than 37 million persons born in Mexico or of Mexican origin live in the United States,[129] some of them descendants of families that were here before their territory became the United States;[130] 34 percent of the Mexican immigrants are U.S. citizens.[131] In addition to 1.6 million U.S. expats living in Mexico, tens of millions annually visit Mexico, which is equivalent to almost a fifth of Mexico's population.[132]

Any prolonged disruption of trade would significantly affect both countries. The economies and supply chains of the two countries

are deeply integrated. Roughly five million American jobs are tied to trade with Mexico.[133] More than a fifth of all fruit and vegetables consumed in the United States come from Mexico.[134] Loss of the U.S. market would be a catastrophic blow to Mexico's economy. And it would have significant effects north of the border.

U.S. military intervention, even if intended to be limited in scale and of short duration, could trigger reactions that require further military operations or escalation, which in turn could destabilize the government of Mexico, or at least lead to increases in violence that erode governability in the northern Mexican states. Apart from the decade of the Mexican Revolution, the United States has no experience living next to chaos, although events in Juarez during the Calderón offensive provide some perspective.

And it may be as difficult now as it was in 1915 to prevent the violence from spreading across the border if Mexican drug traffickers decide to engage in terrorist operations in the United States. The United States could seal the border, but that would have serious adverse consequences on both sides of the frontier.

The challenge for U.S. military planners will be how to reduce the threat posed by Mexico's drug traffickers without making the situation worse.

Divisions in the United States Will be Fomented and Exploited

It is a virtual certainty that sustained U.S. military intervention in Mexico would provoke popular protests in Mexico, and probably in the United States as well. Previous counterdrug campaigns by the Colombian and Mexican armed forces have prompted complaints of human rights abuses. Depending on the nature of the U.S. operations, there is no reason to think they would not happen in the case of unilateral U.S. military operations in Mexico as well.

There have been news media reports about China financing anti-Israel protests in the United States.[135] Russia is also reportedly using fake social media accounts and artificial intelligence to deepen U.S. divisions on the Middle Eastern war. U.S. and Mexican officials should be prepared for intense foreign information campaigns. Drug cartels may run their own propaganda operations.

A Final Note

The fact that the United States has been engaged in the "war on drugs" for more than a half-century while national rates of drug misuse and drug trafficking have increased suggests caution about what can be achieved. That caution does not justify indifference or inaction. While it is true that U.S. addiction levels create the demand, Mexico's cartels are flooding the market with fentanyl and other synthetic drugs that are powerful, cheaper to make, and easier to smuggle. The United States cannot reduce the drug problem without reducing demand when drugs are so readily available. Drug consumption is also increasing in Mexico, providing a further incentive for cooperation.

In the 19th century, China fought and lost two opium wars with the British and French, and as a consequence was unable to prevent British merchants from importing opium into China. Nor could China's government halt spreading use of the drug. Consumption skyrocketed. By the end of the century, it is estimated that 40 million people, about 10 percent of China's population were addicts, contributing to the country's social and economic decline.[136] This, too, is a cautionary tale. CTC

Citations

1 Wes Shinego, "Pentagon Deploys Stryker Brigade, Aviation Battalion to Southern Border," DOD News, March 1, 2025.
2 Henry Ziemer, "Why Are Destroyers Deploying to the Southern Border," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 3, 2025.
3 Josh Marcus, "How a covert U.S. drone program in Mexico led to arrest of drug kingpins like El Chapo," *Independent*, February 28, 2025.
4 "Trump confirms he offered to send U.S. troops to Mexico to help with cartels," Reuters, May 4, 2025.
5 Laura Seligman, Vera Bergengruen, and Brett Forrest, "Trump Orders Pentagon to Prepare to Target Latin American Drug Cartels," *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2025.
6 "Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States 2002-2022," National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, March 2024.
7 "Economic impact of addiction," EBSCO, n.d.
8 Ray A. Smith, "Surprise Tests Flag Fentanyl Use at Work," *Wall Street Journal*, September 4, 2025.
9 William P. Barr, *One Damn Thing After Another: Memoirs of an Attorney General* (New York: William Morrow, 2022), p. 369.
10 Demian Bio, "Mexican President Dismisses Possible 'Soft Invasion' By U.S. Troops As 'A Movie': 'We Will Always Defend Our Sovereignty,'" *Latin Times*, November 29, 2024.
11 "Poll: Mexicans divided regarding idea of US intervention against cartels," Mexico News Daily, December 24, 2024.
12 "Mexicans Back Military Campaign Against Cartels," Pew Research Center, June 20, 2012.
13 Lin Lu, Yuxia Fang, and Xi Wang, "Drug Abuse in China: Past, Present, and Future," *Cellular and Molecular Neurobiology* 28:4 (2008).
14 "Highlights for the 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health," Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.
15 "Drug Overdose Deaths," National Center for Health Statistics, last reviewed August 2, 2024.
16 Mark Esper, *A Sacred Oath: Memoirs of a Secretary of Defense During Extraordinary Times* (New York: HarperCollins, 2022).
17 Lucinda Elliott, "Sheinbaum says she rejected Trump's offer to send troops to Mexico," Reuters, May 8, 2025.
18 "President Donald J. Trump Declares War on Cartels," Trump-Vance Campaign, December 22, 2023.
19 "Declaring a National Emergency at the Southern Border of the United States," The White House, January 20, 2025.
20 "'Now nobody crosses the border without paying:' Senior Border Patrol agents described unprecedented cartel control at Southwest border," Homeland Security Committee | Republican, U.S. House of Representatives, December 14, 2023.
21 "Ecuador declares Cártel de los Solas a terrorist group," MercoPress, August 15, 2025.
22 "National Drug Threat Assessment 2024," U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, May 24, 2024. See also Jeff Arnold, "Mexican cartels wiped out competition US fentanyl market: DEA," NewsNation, May 21, 2024.
23 Juan Carlos Gachúz Maya, "U.S.-Mexico Drug Trafficking: Globalization, Cooperation and Challenges," *Revista de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional* 5:1 (2019).
24 Ricardo C. Ainslee, "Testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Management of the Committee on Homeland Security," U.S. House of Representatives, March 31, 2011.

25 Leon Boyer, "The impact of Mexican cartels on U.S. law enforcement: Understanding the threat," Police 1, September 11, 2023.
26 "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Amends Tariffs on Imports from Canada, Mexico and China," The White House, February 1, 2025. The document makes it explicit that the additional tariffs are to hold the three governments accountable to their promises of "halting illegal immigration *and stopping poisonous fentanyl and other drugs from flowing into our country*." [Italics added]
27 George Serletis, "Deadly High-Purity Fentanyl from China is Entering the U.S. through e-commerce Channels," U.S. International Trade Commission, September 2019.
28 Vanda-Felbab Brown and Fred Dews, "The fentanyl pipeline and China's role in the U.S. opioid crisis," Brookings podcast, October 1, 2024.
29 "Fentanyl Flow to the United States," U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, January 2020.
30 Mariel Ferragamo, "How Does Fentanyl Reach the United States," Council on Foreign Relations, March 4, 2025.
31 Luke Barr, "FBI director warns of 'dangerous individuals' coming across southern border," ABC News, March 11, 2024.
32 "Two Men Charged in Alleged Plot to Assassinate Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States," U.S. Department of Justice, October 11, 2011.
33 Ira Silverman, "An American Terrorist," *New Yorker*, July 28, 2002.
34 "Two Eastern European Organized Crime Leaders Convicted of Murder-For-Hire Targeting U.S. based Journalist On Behalf of The Iranian Government," U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, March 20, 2025.
35 "Justice Department Announces Murder-For-Hire and Related Charges Against IRGC Asset and Two Local Operatives," U.S. Department of Justice, November 8, 2024.
36 Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2023).
37 The challenges to the U.S. Army on the Mexican border during the Mexican Revolution has been extensively written about. Among the many books I have relied on are John S. D. Eisenhower, *Intervention: The United States and the Mexican Revolution, 1913-1917* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995); Hernández, *Bad Mexicans*; Mark M. Matthews, *The US Army on the Mexican Border: A Historical Perspective* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2007); Leon C. Metz, *Border: The U.S.-Mexico Line* (El Paso: Mangan Books, 1989); Benjamin T. Smith, *The Dope: The Real History of the Mexican Drug Trade* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021; and Eileen Welsome, *The General and the Jaguar: Pershing's Hunt for Pancho Villa* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2006). I have also gone back to my own work on the topic, which I began more than 60 years ago while a student at the University of Guanajuato in Mexico. See Brian Michael Jenkins, "The Border War: A Study in United States-Mexico Relations during the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920," Master's Thesis, UCLA, 1964.
38 Charles H. Harris, III and Louis R. Sadler, *The Plan de San Diego: Tejano Rebellion, Mexican Intrigue* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).
39 "The Plan of San Diego, 1915," Digital History, 2021.
40 Brian Michael Jenkins, "Could Mexico Fail?" HSToday Magazine, February 2009. See also Jenkins, "The Border War."
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid. See also Brent A. Orr, *Borderline Failure: National Guard on the Mexican Border, 1916-1917* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: United States Army Command and General Staff College, 2011).
45 Jenkins, "Could Mexico Fail?"
46 Charles C. Cumberland, "Border Raids in the Lower Rio Grande Valley–1915," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 57:3 (1954), citing Senator Morris Sheppard from Texas to President Woodrow Wilson, November 4, 1915.
47 Ibid., citing Attorney General Thomas W. Gregory to Secretary of War Lindley Miller Garrison, September 30, 1915.
48 Ibid., citing Gregory to Garrison, October 26, 1915.
49 Morgan Lee, "Militarized zones now make up 1/3 of southern border, stirring debates," Military Times, July 5, 2025.
50 Jenkins, "Could Mexico Fail?"
51 Welsome.
52 Jenkins, "Could Mexico Fail?
53 "Mexico: Assessing the Potential for Short Term Instability," Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, August 10, 1988.
54 "The JOE 2008 Joint Operating Environment Challenges and Implications for the Future Joint Force," U.S. Joint Forces Command, 2008.
55 Ibid.
56 Kennon Pearre, "The Resignation of Ambassador Carlos Pascual," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 24, 2011.
57 Eugene Keith Chamberlin, "The Japanese Scare at Magdalena Bay," *Pacific Historical Review* 24:4 (1955).
58 Elichiro Azuma, "Japanese Immigrant Settler Colonialism in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands and the U.S. Racial-Imperialist Politics of the Hemispheric 'Yellow Peril,'" *Pacific Historical Review* 83:2 (2014).
59 William Deverell and Anne Hyde, *Shaped by the West: A History of North America since 1850* (Oakland, CA: University of California, 2018), p. 126.
60 "Huerta's Arrest May Break Up Revolution," *Stockton Independent*, July 5, 1915.
61 Barbara Tuchman's *The Zimmermann Telegram: American Enters the War1917-1918* (New York: Random House, 1958) remained the authoritative work on the topic for more than half a century until 2012 when Thomas Boghardt published *The Zimmermann Telegram: Intelligence, Diplomacy, and America's Entry into World War I* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012). Boghardt had access to classified German and cryptology files that Tuchman did not have, but their conclusion remains the same that the telegram was authentic. However, Boghardt also shows that its author was operating primarily on his own initiative.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Rafael Fernández, "A Playground for International Spies—A look at Mexico," ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America, July 4, 2024.
65 "Fifty Years of Silence: Mexico Faces the Legacy of Its Dirty War," National Security Archive, December 20, 2024.
66 "Telegram 3082 From the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State," Foreign Relations of the United States. Volume E-11, Part, Documents on Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, 1973-1976, May 5, 1973; "The Risk of a Lonely Drive: The U.S. Consul General in Guadalajara Describes His Kidnapping," Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training," n.d.
67 "The Chinese Are Coming! The Chinese Are Coming!" Medium, November 23, 2013.
68 Justin M. Reid, "'An Exercise in International Extortion': Operation Intercept and Nixon's 1969 War on Drugs," Master's Thesis, Chapman University, December 2022.
69 Chelsea Whyte, "The Mexican hypothesis debunked: How marijuana really came to the US," *New Scientist*, September 22, 2023.
70 Ibid.
71 Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), pp. 44-45.
72 "Public Enemy Number One: A Pragmatic Approach to America's Drug Problem," Nixon Foundation, June 29, 2016.
73 Smith, *The Dope*, p. 231.
74 "Drug Control: Issues Surrounding Increased Use of the Military in Drug Interdiction," U.S. Government Accounting Office, April 29, 1988; Keith B. Richburg, "Reagan Order Defines Drug Trade as Security Threat, Widens Military Role," *Washington Post*, June 7, 1986.
75 George Russell, "Mexico Slowdown on the Border," *Time*, March 4, 1985.
76 James H. Creechan, *Drug Wars and Covert Netherworlds: The Transformations of Mexico's Narco Cartels* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021), pp. 134-138.
77 "Pizza Connection," History, FBI, n.d.
78 Ibid., pp. 156-157. See also Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), pp. 62-78.
79 Bowden.
80 Ibid.
81 Felipe Calderón, *Decisiones Difíciles* (New York: Debate: 2020), p. 308.
82 Lorena Baires, "Mexican Cartels Expand Their Presence in Colombia," *Diálogo*, August 20, 2024.
83 John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, *Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, Inc., 2012). This series of essays remains the most authoritative work on this period.
84 Daniel Hernandez, "Cálderon's war on drug cartels: A legacy of blood and tragedy," *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 2012.
85 Calderón, p. 306.
86 Ibid., pp. 148-149.
87 "Ex-Mexican Secretary of Public Security Genaro Garcia Luna Sentenced to Over 38 Year Imprisonment," U.S. Attorney's Office, October 16, 2024.
88 Creechan, p. 77.
89 "The Merida Initiative: Expanding the U.S./Mexico Partnership," U.S. Department of State, September 19, 2011.
90 "Letter to the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the Committee

on Foreign Affairs, Status of Funds for the Mérida Initiative," U.S. Government Accountability Office, December 3, 2009.
91 Diana Villiers Negroponte, "The Merida Initiative: Time for a Healthy Public Debate," Brookings, November 6, 2007.
92 "Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, FY2008-FY2011," Congressional Research Service, September 20, 2021.
93 George W. Grayson, *The Cartels: The Story of Mexico's Most Dangerous Criminal Organizations and Their Impact on U.S. Security* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), pp. 99-103.
94 Ibid. For an analysis of the homicide rate, see also Brianna Madison Canning, "The Mérida Initiative of the Violence of Transnational Criminal Organizations in Mexico," Honors Thesis Paper, Bowdoin College, 2021. Madison Canning's analysis shows that the rapid rise in homicides preceded the implementation of the initiative and, according to the source of the statistics, continued to increase or remained high.
95 Creechan, p. 155.
96 Calderón, p. 313.
97 Marco Alcocer and Megan Erickson, "Criminal Dynamics and Violence Against Government Officials in Mexico," marco-alcocer.com, n.d.
98 Will Grant, "The Mexican state where candidates are gunned down as they push for votes," BBC, May 22, 2024.
99 Grayson, pp. 110-114.
100 "Ex-Mexican Secretary of Public Security Genaro Garcia Luna Sentenced to Over 38 Years' Imprisonment."
101 Jeff Arnold, "'Supercop,' wife ordered to pay $2.4B to Mexican Government," NewsNation, May 23, 2025.
102 Drazen Jorgic and Diego Oré, "'The Godfather': Mexico's ex-defense chief helped ship tons of cocaine and heroin, charges say," Reuters, October 16, 2020.
103 Barr, *One Damn Thing After Another*, p. 374.
104 Ibid.
105 Parker Asmann, "Former Mexico Official's Alleged CJNG Ties Spur International Manhunt," InSight Crime, July 24, 2025.
106 Parker Asmann, "Mexico's Zetas: From Criminal Powerhouse to Fragmented Remnants," InSight Crime, April 6, 2018.
107 Alan Feuer and Natalie Kitroeff, "U.S. Examined Allegations of Cartel Ties to Allies of Mexico's President," *New York Times*, February 22, 2024.
108 Therea M. Catino, "Italian and American Cooperative Efforts to Reduce Heroin Trafficking: A Role Model for the United States and Drug-Suppling Foreign Nations," *Penn State Law Review* 8:3 (1990); Peter Stoler, "The Sicilian Connection," *Time*, October 15, 1984.
109 Bowden.
110 Heather Sullivan, "More U.S. citizens moving to Mexico for lower cost of living, scenery, culture," Fox26 Houston, February 21, 2025.
111 "Number of United States citizens traveling to Mexico from 2002 to 2024," Statista, July 31, 2025.
112 Kadee Russ and Aaron Sojourner, "The Mexican Border and U.S. Trade: What Would Be the Impact of a Border Closure?" Econofact, April 13, 2019.
113 Santiago Pérez and José de Córdoba, "Mexico Extradites 29 Jailed Drug Bosses to U.S., Including Killer of DEA Agent," *Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 2025.
114 Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "Unlawful crossings along southern border reach new historic low," CBS News, July 1, 2025.
115 Stephen Coulthart and Guillermo del Mercado, "Uncertain Times Ahead for U.S.-Mexico Intelligence Cooperation," Lawfare, January 21, 2025.
116 Josh Campbell, David Shortell, Fidel Gutierrez, Karol Suarez, and Elizabeth Wolfe, "Cartel suspected of American kidnappings issues apology letter," CNN, March 10, 2023.
117 Pat Droney, "Urgent alert: IDF warns Hamas assisting cartels in constructing tunnels between Mexico and San Diego," Law Enforcement Today, September 17, 2024.
118 Lucas Reynoso, "When drug lords exploit poverty and youth: Four decades of child hitmen in Colombia," *País*, June 21, 2025.
119 "Military Precision in Crime: The Training and Tactics of Colombian Sicarios," SOFREP, August 12, 2023.
120 "Two Men Charged in Alleged Plot to Assassinate Saudi Ambassador to the United States."
121 "Member of Mexican Sinaloa Cartel Pleads Guilty to Drug Conspiracy and to Soliciting the Murder of a Federal Witness," U.S. Attorney's Office, Middle District of Tennessee, December 7, 2009.
122 Daniel Valencia, "The Evolving Dynamics of Terrorism: The Terrorist-Criminal Nexus of Hezbollah and the Los Zetas Drug Cartel," Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2014.
123 Justin M. Moeykens, "An Assessment of Likelihood: Potential Cooperation between Mexican Cartels and al Qaeda or ISIS," Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, June 2018.
124 Jorge Vaquero Simancas, "Study reveals organized crime is the fifth-largest employer in Mexico," *País*, September 22, 2023.
125 Alfredo Pena, "Drug cartels are distorting Mexico's economy by hitting big corporations—'we are hostages,'" *Fortune*, July 31, 2024.
126 Ibid.
127 Rafael Prieto-Curiel, Gian Maria Campedelli, and Alejandro Hope, "Reducing cartel recruitment is the only way to lower violence in Mexico," *Science*, September 21, 2023.
128 "Length of longest international land borders worldwide," Statista, January 23, 2025.
129 Mohamad Mosliman, Luis Noe-Bustamante, and Sono Shah, "Facts on Hispanics of Mexican origin in the United States, 2021," Pew Research Center, August 16, 2023.
130 Ibid.
131 Jeanne Batalova, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, October 8, 2024.
132 Sullivan; "Tourism In Mexico Statistics 2025: All You Need To Know," GoWith Guide, May 5, 2025.
133 Adrienne Arsht, "Beyond the border: Your briefing on US-Mexico Commerce," Atlantic Council Newsletter, January 31, 2025.
134 Ty Kreitman, "Ask an Economist: Why key agricultural trade partners are important for the farm sector and food prices," *TEN Magazine*, July 15, 2025.
135 Mathilda Heller, "US pro-Palestinian activist paid $75k to protest, funding traces back to Chinese Communist Party," *Jerusalem Post*, August 7, 2025.
136 "Objects of Addiction: Opium, Empire, and the Chinese Art Trade," Harvard Art Museums, 2024. See also W. Travis Hanes III and Frank Sanello, *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002) and Stephen R. Platt, *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018).