

# THE WATCH



## TAKING THE FIGHT TO TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS

v7

**BRANCHING OUT**  
CARTELS DIVERSIFY SCHEMES

**NEW APPROACH**  
MEXICO SIGNALS TOUGHER STANCE

**UNMANNED ASSAULT**  
U.S. ADAPTS TO DRONE THREAT

## THE WATCH //

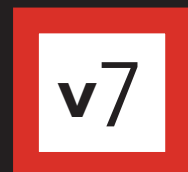
### TAKING THE FIGHT TO TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS

“The bonds between USNORTHCOM and our Mexican military partners are strong, resilient and focused on expanding our combined capability to defend and secure North America.”

#### **GEN. GREGORY M. GUILLOT**

Commander, U.S. Northern Command  
and North American Aerospace Defense Command,

during a June 2025 visit to command headquarters by Mexican Secretary of National Defense Gen. Ricardo Trevilla Trejo and Mexican Secretary of the Navy Adm. Raymundo Pedro Morales Ángeles



# Features

6

**Expanded U.S. Powers Target Latin American Criminal Organizations**

12

**Mexican President Signals New Approach to Security Relationship with the U.S.**

20

**Branching Out**

Latin American drug cartels expand into other illegal schemes

28

**Aerial Assault**

U.S. adapts to UAS threat along southern border

34

**Reliable Neighbors**

Mexican delegation lends hand to fight California wildfires

38

**Concurrent Movements**

Mexico, U.S. work to achieve operational compatibility

42

**Organized Crime Crackdown**

Mexican forces eliminate kingpin of Jalisco New Generation Cartel

46

**The Fentanyl Pipeline**

Chinese chemical companies, cartels team up to fuel deadly epidemic

52

**Sifting Fact from Fiction**

Russia's propaganda machine sets sights on Latin American drug cartels

62

**Lessons Learned**

As U.S. counters transnational criminal organizations, what do Latin American operations teach?

## DEPARTMENTS

Impressions **5**

Innovation **18**

World View **58**



## ABOUT THE COVER

The fight against transnational criminal organizations has many facets. Battles are being waged to prevent everything from the cross-border trafficking of drugs, humans and weapons to international financial schemes that include money laundering.

## DEAR READERS:

**T**he United States, its allies and partners are waging a fight against what the commander of U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), who is responsible for protecting the U.S. homeland, calls a threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. Transnational criminal organizations, or TCOs — from violent Mexican drug cartels to Latin American gangs — imperil the health and safety of people throughout the Western Hemisphere.

In this issue, we explore the threats posed by these criminal groups and, more importantly, we highlight the bilateral, multilateral and global cooperation that aims to thwart them. The U.S. took a key step in 2025 by designating 13 organizations — Mexican cartels and violent Latin American gangs — as foreign terrorist organizations. An executive order expands the available means to deliver consequences against the cartels, to include the use of anti-terrorism authorities that have been applied to organizations such as the Islamic State group, al-Qaida and Hamas.

Meanwhile, our Mexican partners have brought their own resources to the fight, conducting operations against cartels and placing renewed emphasis on intelligence gathering and cooperating with the U.S. But the challenges are getting more complex as cartels diversify their operations beyond drug trafficking to include everything from human trafficking to illegal logging and fuel theft.

TCO violence extends beyond gunbattles in the streets. This volume explains how the U.S. is adapting to unmanned aerial systems operated by cartels along the Mexico-U.S. border. “Drug-related violence has escalated in recent years as rival cartels fight for control of lucrative drug and migrant smuggling routes and demonstrate a growing willingness to directly engage Mexican security forces,” Gen. Gregory M. Guillot, commander of USNORTHCOM and North American Aerospace Defense Command, told congressional leaders in February 2025.

Those Mexican forces have proved to be reliable partners, delivering humanitarian aid while fighting California wildfires and conducting mirrored military operations with their U.S. counterparts to secure the border.

Such bilateral cooperation brings optimism, but the TCO challenge is global. The scourge of the opioid fentanyl, which causes thousands of deaths each year in the U.S., has roots in China, from where precursor chemicals are shipped to Mexican drug cartels.

The spread of false information also plays a role in transnational crime, so we analyze how Russian disinformation campaigns in Latin America paint a distorted picture of U.S. counter-TCO efforts. And finally, we report on the valuable lessons learned by the U.S. and its partners through successful counter-TCO operations in places like Brazil, the Caribbean, Colombia and Ecuador.

The fight against TCOs is ongoing, and the resolve to end their terror grows each day. We hope you enjoy this issue, and we invite you to join the Watch community at Contact Us – The Watch ([thewatch-journal.com/contact](http://thewatch-journal.com/contact)).

Regards,

**Jason M. Rueschhoff**  
Brigadier General, USAF  
Director of Operations  
USNORTHCOM



# THE WATCH

## Homeland Defense

Volume 7 2026

### USNORTHCOM LEADERSHIP

GREGORY M. GUILLOT  
General, USAF  
Commander

JOSEPH F. JARRARD  
Lieutenant General, USA  
Deputy Commander

MICHAEL SIMMERING  
Major General, USA  
Chief of Staff

### CONTACT US

# THE WATCH

The Watch  
HQ USNORTHCOM  
250 Vandenberg St., Suite B016  
Peterson SFB, CO 80914-3808

email:

[n-nc.peterson.n-ncj3.mbx.  
the-watch@mail.mil](mailto:n-nc.peterson.n-ncj3.mbx.the-watch@mail.mil)

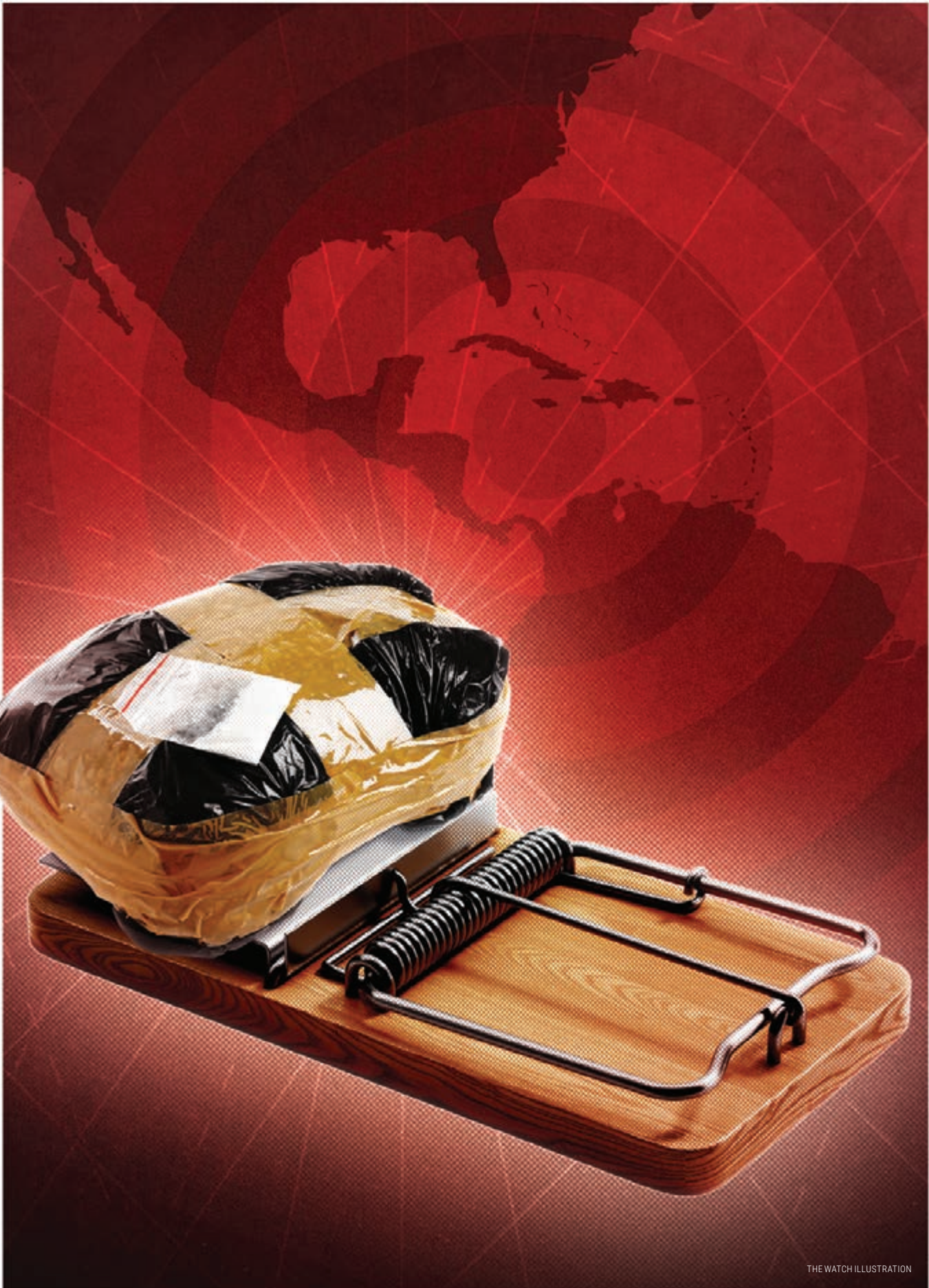
The Watch is a professional military journal published by United States Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) for foreign partners and allies to include senior military leaders, government officials and academic professionals. The goal of the publication and website is to strengthen U.S. security partnerships and provide an international forum to address global homeland defense issues and challenges.

The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the policies or points of view of USNORTHCOM or the United States government. The Secretary of War has determined that publication of this journal is necessary for conducting public business as required by the Department of War by law.

ISSN 2577-0098 (print)



Mexican Soldiers display their national flag while patrolling the Guatemala-Mexico border on the Suchiate River in March 2025 as part of stepped-up enforcement efforts to curb cartel violence. Dubbed the Ring of Fire operation by Guatemalan President Bernardo Arévalo, the border enforcement involves the militaries of both countries and is meant to stem violence spilling over from southern Mexico's Chiapas state, where the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel are fighting for control. The Soldiers, backed by armored vehicles, patrolled stretches of the border near the Pacific Ocean. AFP/GETTY IMAGES



THE WATCH ILLUSTRATION

## EXPANDED U.S. POWERS

# TARGET LATIN AMERICAN CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS

THE WATCH STAFF

PHOTOS BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**T**he United States State Department implemented an executive order from President Donald Trump in early 2025 designating eight transnational criminal organizations, or TCOs, as foreign terrorist organizations, or FTOs. This expanded the government's legal authorities to purge the deadly drug cartels from the U.S. The State Department added another five Latin American TCOs to the FTO list in 2025. The directives outlined how these organizations pose a significant threat to U.S. security through drug trafficking, violence and intimidation.

The order expands the available means to deliver consequences against the cartels, to include the use of anti-terrorism authorities that have been applied to organizations such as the Islamic State group, al-Qaida and Hamas. The FTO designation also allows the U.S. government to prosecute those who provide "material support or resources" to these groups, even if they are outside U.S. borders.

"Terrorist designations expose and isolate entities and individuals, denying them access to the U.S. financial system and the resources they need to carry out attacks," the State Department's February news release stated. "As a result of actions taken today, all property and interests in property of those designated today that are in the United States or that are in possession or control of a U.S. person are blocked, and U.S. persons are generally prohibited from engaging in transactions with them."

The initial designation covers Aragua Train (Tren de Aragua) in Venezuela, Mara Salvatrucha (or MS-13) in El Salvador and six groups based in Mexico: the Gulf Cartel (Cártel del Golfo), Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación), New Michoacan Family (La Nueva Familia Michoacana), Northeast Cartel (Cártel del Noreste), Sinaloa Cartel (Cártel de Sinaloa) and United Cartels (Cárteles Unidos). One of the oldest, the Sinaloa Cartel, was founded in the late 1980s as a

marijuana smuggling operation.

The gangs added in September through December are Barrio 18, Cartel de los Soles, Clan del Golfo, Los Choneros and Los Lobos. Barrio 18 is most active in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Cartel de los Soles is based in Venezuela, while Los Choneros and Los Lobos are based in Ecuador. Clan del Golfo is based in Colombia.

"The Cartels have engaged in a campaign of violence and terror throughout the Western Hemisphere that has not only destabilized countries with significant importance for our national interests but also flooded the United States with deadly drugs, violent criminals, and vicious gangs," Trump said in his executive order, issued January 20, 2025. "The Cartels functionally control, through a campaign of assassination, terror, rape, and brute force nearly all illegal traffic across the southern border of the United States."

"Terrorist designations expose and isolate entities and individuals, denying them access to the U.S. financial system and the resources they need to carry out attacks."

~ U.S. State Department directive

### A HISTORY OF KILLING

The cartels have a long history of using violence to protect their territories and businesses. That includes assassinations. "Thousands of Mexicans — including politicians, students, and journalists — die in the conflict every year," the Council on Foreign Relations, a U.S.-based think tank, reported in February 2025. "The country has seen more than 460,000 homicides since 2006, when the government declared war on the cartels."

News media and think tanks have recorded about 200 Mexican politicians killed in the past 20 years. In the run-up to the 2024 election alone, dozens of local political candidates were murdered. “The risk of violence and assassination are so high that many feel they have no choice but to campaign alongside armed guards or wear flak jackets and move around in armored cars,” Reuters reported in May 2024. “Security analysts say the killings are mostly linked to drug cartels seeking to influence local elections.”

The cartels also have used death threats in extortion schemes as they drain money from the avocado, chicken, lime and tortilla industries. The cartels have murdered to gain control of illegal gold mining, logging and fishing operations as they diversify their business models. The FTOs also are heavily involved in human smuggling for sex trafficking and forced labor. Those who try to escape are often killed; their deaths a warning to others.



A bus burned by organized crime groups sits along a two-lane road to El Aguaje, Mexico.

## CHARGES SWIFTLY FILED

Since the day the State Department designated eight transnational criminal organizations as FTOs, the Justice Department has moved swiftly to file material support charges. On February 20, 2025, federal prosecutors announced charges against 13 alleged high-ranking leaders of MS-13, accusing them of directing criminal activities, including murder, in Mexico, the United States and other countries over the past two decades. On April 23, the Justice Department unsealed charges against a high-ranking member of Tren de Aragua after his arrest

in Colombia. On May 13, Justice officials said they had charged six alleged leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel with material support, narcoterrorism and drug trafficking.

On May 16, the department revealed charges against a Mexican national and alleged human smuggler for allegedly providing material support, including grenades, to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. Additional charges included conspiracy to possess a controlled substance, human smuggling and trafficking firearms. On June 18, the U.S. sanctioned five top members of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel for drug trafficking and cited their involvement in killings. The sanctions froze any assets they have in the U.S. and prohibited U.S. citizens from doing business with them.

On July 26, the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned Cartel de los Soles (Cartel of the Suns) as a specially designated global terrorist organization that provides material support to FTOs.

“The FTO designation does more than just allow military strikes — presidents have launched attacks without it, like against the Houthis in Yemen. Instead, it expands the U.S. military’s intelligence-gathering abilities and helps prosecutors target a wider range of cartel associates, including logistics staff, money launderers, and hit men’s supervisors,” organized crime expert Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution, a U.S.-based think tank, told Newsweek magazine.

## NEW RED LINES IN 2025

Gary J. Hale, a policy expert who worked in law enforcement and intelligence for the U.S. federal government for 37 years, told The Watch in an email that new U.S. policies are changing the battlefield in the war on drugs. “Trump’s ‘America First’ policy reasserts U.S.-Mexico geographical border boundaries and draws new red lines against anyone, particularly the Mexican cartels, who would harm or kill U.S. citizens” or target their property or interests.

“When a person, entity or organization is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, the entity becomes legally converted into an enemy combatant, an organized group of soldiers that are a threat to the U.S.,” Hale said.

The 13 Latin American crime groups designated as terror organizations in 2025:

**Barrio 18 — Central America:** The organization was formed by young Mexican and Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles as the 18th Street Gang. As Barrio 18, it has spread to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, where it has attacked security personnel, public officials and civilians, the State Department says. Barrio 18 has a vicious rivalry with MS-13. “According to the United Nations, these two



A Soldier enters a bullet-riddled home with the initials of the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas state, Mexico.

gangs have turned the Central American northern triangle into the area with the highest homicide rate in the world,” a 2013 Justice Department report on gang violence noted.

**Cartel de los Soles — Venezuela:** Cartel de los Soles is a criminal group connected to the Venezuelan government, the U.S. government says. The group is “responsible for terrorist violence throughout our hemisphere as well as for trafficking drugs into the United States and Europe,” a State Department news release said in November. Top officials in the Venezuelan military have been tied to the organization and its involvement in the international drug trade.

**Clan del Golfo — Colombia:** Clan del Golfo is a Colombian neo-paramilitary group and the country’s largest drug cartel. Its main source of income is cocaine trafficking.

**Gulf Cartel — Mexico:** The Gulf Cartel operates along the eastern end of the U.S.-Mexico border, transporting drugs, guns and immigrants into the United States in what is the most direct path from Central and South America. The cartel has been around for decades but has split in recent years, leading to factional fighting. The cartel’s former leader, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, who is in a Mexican prison after serving time in the U.S., recruited Mexican military members in the 1990s to form a group known

as Los Zetas, which eventually formed their own drug trafficking cartel. The Northeast Cartel is a remnant of Los Zetas.

**Jalisco New Generation Cartel — Mexico:** This cartel, based in the west-central Mexican state of Jalisco, is known for its extremely cruel violence. It grew quickly,

“Trump’s ‘America First’ policy reasserts U.S.-Mexico geographical border boundaries and draws new red lines against anyone, particularly the Mexican cartels, who would harm or kill U.S. citizens.”

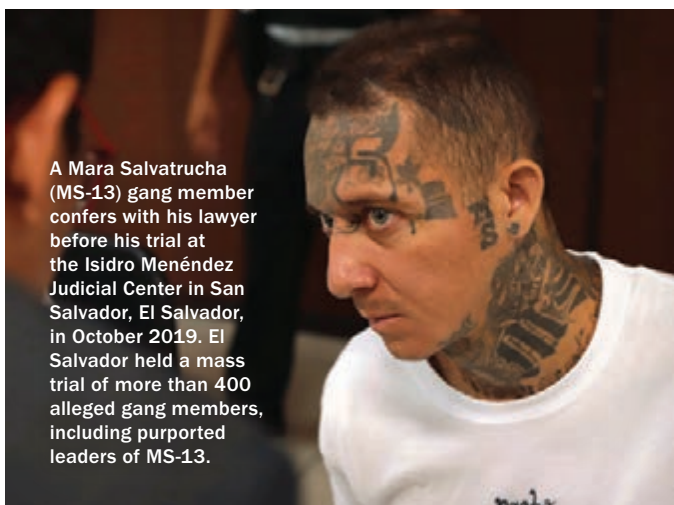
~ Gary J. Hale, policy expert

using a franchise-type arrangement with local gangs.

The cartel has cannibalized some of its victims, Mexico News Daily reported, and other media said cartel members had burned the face off a rival United Cartels leader. The Jalisco New Generation Cartel also has used drones and rocket-propelled grenades to attack enemies, Mexican news media reported.



A pickup truck with the initials CDN, for Cartel del Noreste (Cartel of the Northeast), is covered with bullet holes after a gunbattle between Mexican security forces and suspected cartel gunmen in Villa Unión, Mexico, in December 2019.



A Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang member confers with his lawyer before his trial at the Isidro Menéndez Judicial Center in San Salvador, El Salvador, in October 2019. El Salvador held a mass trial of more than 400 alleged gang members, including purported leaders of MS-13.

While drug trafficking remains its most profitable illegal activity, the cartel is one of the most diverse in its criminal pursuits. That includes extortion of the avocado, chicken, lime and tortilla industries, as well as fuel theft and timeshare sales fraud.

**Los Choneros — Ecuador:** Los Choneros is an organized crime syndicate that originated in the cities of Chone and Manta in Manabí province in the 1990s. The gang has been linked to the Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco New Generation Cartel. Los Choneros has “attacked and threatened public officials and their families, security personnel, judges, prosecutors, and journalists in Ecuador,” said the State Department news release announcing the group’s FTO designation. Ecuador, in cooperation with the United States, extradited the gang’s leader, Fito Macías, to the U.S. in July. He was the first Ecuadorian citizen extradited from Ecuador to the U.S.

**Los Lobos — Ecuador:** Los Lobos, or “The Wolves,” began as a splinter group of Los Choneros but split with them in 2020. Los Lobos is involved with contract killings, extortion and the sale and distribution of drugs. “Their ultimate goal is to control drug trafficking routes through Ecuador by terrorizing and inflicting brutal violence on the

Ecuadorian people,” the State Department said. Both Los Lobos and Los Choneros are known for rigging improvised explosive devices in cars and carrying out terrorist bombings in major cities. Authorities implicated Los Lobos in mid-October when explosive devices were detonated on two bridges in Ecuador. The country’s interior minister described the attacks as retaliation after a major military operation against illegal miners.

**MS-13 — El Salvador:** The group started in Los Angeles in the 1980s in areas made up mostly of Salvadoran civil war refugees. Salvadorans deported by the U.S. spread the gang back to El Salvador. The gang now controls large areas of that country, recruiting members by force and extorting others. In the United States, MS-13 is known for its cruel violence and street-level drug sales.

The gang has faced severe headwinds in El Salvador since President Nayib Bukele launched an assault on street gangs in March 2022. Salvadoran officials say more than 80,000 people have been arrested since then for gang ties, The Associated Press reported.

**New Michoacan Family — Mexico:** Based in west-central Mexico, this group is known for producing synthetic drugs and illegal mining, but it also is known for hijacking the region’s avocado supply chains and extorting farmers, often driving them from their land after demanding “cuotas” — protection fees. The gang’s demands are backed by threats of violence or death. It also has bribed police in many areas, analysts say.

The New Michoacan Family was formed as a splinter group in 2011 after the original Michoacan Family lost power in 2010 with the birth of the Knights Templar Cartel and the falsely reported death of the Michoacan Family’s former leader, Nazario Moreno González. In reality, Moreno González had switched his allegiance to the Knights Templar Cartel and led the group until he was killed by Mexican military forces in March 2014.

**Northeast Cartel — Mexico:** The Northeast Cartel, what’s left of Los Zetas, operates along the eastern end of the U.S.-Mexico border, transporting drugs, guns and immigrants into the United States. The cartel has retained a small portion of what Los Zetas once ruled. The cartel’s base is Nuevo Laredo, the busiest commercial port of entry on the U.S.-Mexico border. The cartel is also known for extortion and vicious attacks against military members and police.

**Sinaloa Cartel — Mexico:** One of Mexico’s oldest drug cartels, the Sinaloa Cartel dates to the late 1980s and is based in the mountains of the state by the same name in northwest Mexico. It initially focused on smuggling marijuana into the United States. Sinaloa now transports an array of different drugs into the U.S. using boats, planes,



Police officers and journalists stand beside part of a haul of 1.8 metric tons of methamphetamine in Madrid in May 2024. Spanish police said they dismantled a major methamphetamine distribution network of Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel.

migrants and cross-border tunnels. Sinaloa's leader, 78-year-old Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, was arrested in El Paso, Texas, in July 2024, setting off internal fighting between those loyal to Zambada and sons of the cartel's best-known former leader — Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, who was already serving a life sentence in the United States. This civil war "is now intensified, and the [Claudia] Sheinbaum administration has intensified pressure on the Sinaloa Cartel and its various branches," Felbab-Brown told The Watch. "So, there is an almost turmoil within the Sinaloa Cartel, one effect of which may be that there is smaller production of fentanyl."

Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is up to 50 times stronger than heroin, is one of Sinaloa's most lucrative businesses, and it's blamed for tens of thousands of deaths each year in the U.S. Sinaloa imports the precursor chemicals from China.

Sinaloa is also considered perhaps the most corrupting criminal organization in Mexico. Genaro García Luna, once hailed as the architect of Mexico's war on drug cartels, was sentenced to 38 years in a U.S. prison in October 2024 for taking millions of dollars in bribes to shield Sinaloa Cartel drug traffickers.

**Tren de Aragua — Venezuela:** The Tren, which means "train" in Spanish, was formed more than a decade ago by hard-core criminals in a prison in the central state of Aragua. It quickly expanded into other parts of Latin America and the United States as more than 8 million people fled Venezuela's economic upheaval.

Law enforcement officials in countries such as Chile, Colombia and Peru — all of which have many Venezuelan migrants — have accused the group of heinous crimes, including the beheading and burying alive of victims. Alleged Tren de Aragua members have been linked to several high-profile U.S. crimes in 2024, including the slaying of nursing student Laken Riley in Georgia. Riley's killer, José Antonio Ibarra, was convicted of murder and nine other charges and was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

While Tren de Aragua started out in drug trafficking, its main businesses now involve human trafficking, migrant smuggling, sexual exploitation and forced labor. U.S. authorities say Tren de Aragua launders its money through cryptocurrencies and poses a threat in various parts of the United States.

**United Cartels — Mexico:** Also known as La Resistencia (The Resistance), United Cartels was initially formed with gunmen from the Gulf Cartel, the Knights Templar Cartel, the Michoacan Family and the Sinaloa Cartel to fight Los Zetas in Michoacán and Jalisco. In recent years, United Cartels has been in a bloody war with the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. ▣



Authorities escort Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, former boss of the Sinaloa Cartel, from a plane to a caravan of SUVs at Long Island MacArthur Airport, New York, in January 2017.

# MEXICAN PRESIDENT SIGNALS NEW APPROACH TO SECURITY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE U.S.

## THE WATCH STAFF

**M**exican President Claudia Sheinbaum has been in office for more than a year, and her administration has demonstrated a willingness to confront transnational criminal organizations, or TCOs, and strengthen security along the country's 3,145-kilometer border with the United States while retaining national sovereignty, a key principle of Mexico-U.S. relations. Already, observers of Mexico have noted successful operations against TCOs, including the powerful Sinaloa Cartel, and a renewed emphasis on intelligence gathering, shutting down cartel financial networks and cooperation with U.S. agencies. Sheinbaum has also moved 10,000 troops to the Mexico-U.S. border, which has seen illegal crossings plummet to their lowest level on record.

The new direction in Mexican security policy is a clear shift from the "hugs, not bullets" strategy toward cartels pursued by Sheinbaum's predecessor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who left office in October 2024. Sheinbaum "has come in with a renewed energy to try and tackle organized crime. I think that comes from the fact that she recognizes that that insecurity is now a No. 1 concern among the Mexican electorate," said Henry Ziemer, an associate fellow in the Americas program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington, D.C., think tank. "She's under more pressure to deliver real tangible gains, and so I think she's had a much more assertive posture." A renewed focus on homeland defense and border security in the U.S. has also played a role. Sheinbaum has spoken regularly with U.S. President Donald J. Trump, who has praised her early performance on border security. "There will be continued cooperation on the Border as it relates to all



Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum has cooperated with the United States in a battle to stem the illicit activities of Mexican drug cartels. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

aspects of Security, including Drugs, Drug Distribution, and Illegal Immigration into the United States," Trump said in a Truth Social post on July 31 after he spoke with Sheinbaum. Sheinbaum characterized it as "a good call" in a post on X. Observers, including the U.S. president, have noted that while Sheinbaum has prioritized working closely with the U.S., she has firmly defended Mexico's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The changing nature of the Mexican-U.S. security relationship extends beyond presidential rhetoric. In recent months, both countries' militaries and law enforcement agencies have worked closely together to intensify the fight against TCOs. In February 2025, U.S. Special Forces Soldiers traveled to Mexico to conduct training exercises for six weeks at the Mexican military base in San Luis Carpizo in Campeche state. Their arrival was approved by the Mexican Senate. Ziemer, the CSIS analyst, said the Mexican government's openness to allowing U.S. troops on its soil, historically a problematic issue in Mexico, was a positive step in the relationship, while upholding Mexico's sovereignty. "Approving this training in Mexico was trying to show that Mexico was willing to cooperate and willing to partner with the United States on security ... but also making sure that it went through the appropriate channels ... was still sending that message that 'look, we are going to continue to do this by our rules.'"

Even more signs of cooperation abound. The California National Guard and the Mexican Secretariat of National Defense (DEFENSA) have announced that they've signed a letter of intent to work together under the State Partnership Program (SPP). They will collaborate on shared initiatives,



including disaster response and joint training exchanges. The SPP is designed to strengthen enduring partnerships across the globe and build partner capacity.

In June 2025, officials from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives met with Mexico's Secretariat of Security and Civilian Protection in Mexico City. The roundtable, hosted by the U.S. State Department, brought more than 100 Mexican officials to meet with U.S. law enforcement representatives to discuss ways to curb arms trafficking.

The discussions culminated in the announcement of the "Mission Firewall: United Against Firearms Trafficking Initiative." This initiative will disrupt illicit weapons trafficking across the Mexico-U.S. border. Key objectives include facilitating Mexico's expansion of the use of eTrace and ballistic imaging technology to all 32 Mexican states, advancing information-sharing platforms and increasing bilateral investigations and prosecutions.

In another example of increasing military compatibility, Mexico announced the purchase of a C-130J-30 Super

Hercules for the Mexican Air Force with a November 2028 delivery expected. Mexico will be the first operator of the Super Hercules among Latin American militaries. "It's the closest security cooperation we've ever had, maybe with any country, but certainly in the history of U.S. and Mexico relations," U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in a September 2025 joint Mexican-U.S. statement released after Rubio's visit to the country.

Mexican military forces and U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), along with other U.S. commands, also are focusing on information and intelligence sharing in counter-TCO exercises. The militaries have stepped up cooperative maritime interdictions and are achieving operational compatibility on a tactical level. Recent exercises include:

- **Joint Readiness Training Center Exercise:** Brigade Combat Teams train at Fort Polk, Louisiana, to conduct large-scale operations on a decisive action battlefield against a near-peer threat with multidomain capabilities.
- **Tradewinds:** U.S. Southern Command and U.S. allies conduct a Caribbean-focused, foreign military interaction, maritime interdiction, ground security and interagency field training exercise. The scenario focuses on counter-TCO operations to

Mexican Navy Sailors attend a review by Sheinbaum at Campo Marte in Mexico City in October 2024. The Secretariat of the Navy's Naval Infantry has been active in the fight against transnational criminal organizations. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum also has put boots on the ground, ordering 10,000 Mexican Soldiers to the U.S. border and moving aggressively against cartels, fentanyl production and illegal migration. This was bolstered by a similar number of troops on the U.S. side and an unprecedented shift of U.S. military resources to the border.



A military transport and surveillance vehicle is parked in a newly designated national defense area in June 2025 along the southern U.S. border in El Paso, Texas. The U.S. has poured unprecedented military assets along the 3,145-kilometer border with Mexico since early 2025. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

enhance regional collaboration, stability and threat response effectiveness.

- **Amalgam Eagle:** The USNORTHCOM exercise focuses on the compatibility of U.S. and Mexican forces, using multiple scenarios to conduct air intercept and ground controller operations, execute command and control in air domain training, and conduct combined homeland defense operations.
- **Jaguar Strike:** The USNORTHCOM exercise trains U.S. forces and partners in multiple training scenarios to conduct intelligence analysis and collection in support of tactical operations in a joint and binational environment. U.S. and partner nation forces work on operational support, maneuver, and command and control tasks.
- **Fuerzas Amigas:** The USNORTHCOM exercise focuses on disaster response to build a military-to-military partnership between U.S. Army North and the Mexican military.
- **North American Maritime Security Initiative (NAMSI):** The exercise tests NAMSI protocols during combined maritime security operations to increase regional compatibility, capacity to conduct operations with military law enforcement, military security operations, search and rescue activities, maritime disaster response and maritime environmental protection while operating at multinational or binational levels.
- **Operation Fenix:** The USNORTHCOM-Mexico bilateral amphibious exercise tests maritime littoral operations, including maritime interdiction, air/ground planning, fire support planning, reconnaissance and surveillance, unmanned aerial systems operations and amphibious night operations.

Training to effectively counter TCOs is important, but degrading their ability to move and hide money can be just as detrimental to their operations. In June, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned three Mexico-based financial institutions it said helped launder millions in cartel cash. The measures “effectively cut off” the banks from access to U.S. financial markets. The Associated Press (AP) reported the move would shut down certain money transfers between the flagged banks and U.S. banks. CIBanco, Intercam Banco and Vector Casa de Bolsa were identified by U.S. officials as part of the continuing U.S. push to stem fentanyl smuggling. The banks “have collectively played a long-standing and vital role in laundering millions of dollars on behalf of Mexico-based cartels and facilitating payments for the procurement of precursor chemicals needed to produce fentanyl,” then-Deputy Treasury Secretary Michael Faulkender told reporters, the AP said. The Mexican government, notably La Unidad de Inteligencia Financiera (UIF), the country’s financial intelligence unit, has collaborated closely with Washington on this front. In May 2025, the Treasury Department announced sanctions against two Mexican nationals and three business entities

associated with drug trafficking and fuel smuggling, an investigation involving UIF.

Special forces training and stopping weapons trafficking are only a part of the developing Mexico-U.S. strategy. Sheinbaum also has put boots on the ground, ordering 10,000 Mexican Soldiers to the U.S. border and moving aggressively against cartels, fentanyl production and illegal migration. This was bolstered by a similar number of troops on the U.S. side and an unprecedented shift of U.S. military resources to the border. In June, U.S. Customs and Border Protection announced just 25,228 total “encounters” nationwide, the lowest monthly figure in the agency’s history. Of those arrests, only 6,072 occurred along the southwest border — a 15% drop from the previous record low earlier in 2025.

In recent months, both countries’ militaries and law enforcement agencies have worked closely together to intensify the fight against TCOs.

In addition to increased military presence on the border, Mexico also has created an elite civilian investigative and special operations force to fight the TCOs. Intelligence gathering, Sheinbaum has said, is a key step toward weakening cartels. She has directed Omar García Harfuch, secretary of security and human protection, to establish the new National Operations Unit, known by its Spanish initials UNO. The unit was slated to have 800 members by the end of 2025 in three branches in different parts of Mexico, according to the AP. Harfuch gained international attention when he was the police chief of Mexico City for his success in tackling crime in the country’s largest city. Mexican officials told the AP that the unit was created to better support the increased attention to TCOs.

The most aggressive actions taken so far by Sheinbaum included militarized raids on TCOs, including two on the powerful Sinaloa Cartel, which funnels much of the fentanyl into the U.S. In December 2024, Mexican security forces confiscated a record amount of fentanyl in a series of operations targeting Sinaloa, announcing the seizure of 1,110 kilograms of fentanyl, the equivalent of about 20 million doses of the deadly drug. The raids also resulted in the arrest of two Sinaloa fentanyl cell leaders as well as the seizure of chemical precursors, scales and mixers, according to the Mexican government. In July, Mexican security forces destroyed two drug labs and seized nearly 5,000 kilograms of methamphetamine in Sinaloa. The operation, conducted by elements of the Mexican Navy, National Guard and other security forces, also captured chemical precursors and other equipment totaling nearly \$70 million.



Mexican and U.S. pressure on the cartels has yielded results. “We’ve seen a lot more seizures of fentanyl ... we’ve seen a lot of dramatically reduced migration numbers at the U.S. border, which means that forces on both sides of the border can allocate more time to narcotics interdiction, so I think that’s an important dynamic,” Ziemer, the CSIS analyst, said.

Much of the recent collaboration has grown from long-standing relationships between the Mexican and U.S. militaries. Staff talks are routine and have ramped up since USNORTHCOM has expanded operations at the border and maritime approaches. Senior military leaders from Mexico and the United States met in May and June to coordinate strategy and deepen ties. The Mexican secretaries of national defense and the Navy visited USNORTHCOM headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In May, the commander of the Mexican Army met with the U.S. Army South’s commander in Tucson, Arizona, along with 60 senior military officials representing both countries. “This visit reflects the

**A Mexican Naval Infantry Corps Marine bounds forward during fire and movement drills at the Exercise Rim of the Pacific 2024 at Marine Corps Base Hawaii. Mexican Marines have been at the forefront of the fight against cartels. U.S. NAVY**

enduring trust and open communication between our nations’ militaries,” USNORTHCOM and North American Aerospace Defense Command Commander Gen. Gregory M. Guillot said at the June event in Colorado. “Mexico is an essential partner in the defense of North America, and engagements like this ensure our efforts are aligned and effective.”

Senior military officials from Mexico and the U.S. also gathered in May in Tucson to hone strategies to combat TCOs. Gen. Norberto Cortés Rodríguez, then commander of the Mexican Army, said “this mechanism will improve the coordination and cooperation to confront transnational criminal organizations, and highlights the importance of strengthening relations between both armies,” according to a U.S. Army news release. ■



# MEXICAN FORCES SPENDING MILLIONS ON TECH TO FIGHT CARTELS

The Watch Staff

**A**uthorities in the Mexican state of Chihuahua are spending millions of dollars in a high-tech fight to curb the illicit activities of transnational criminal organizations. At the heart of this push is the Sentinel Tower, a 20-story building nearing completion in Ciudad Juárez, the Latin Times online newspaper reported in May 2025.

An artist's rendering shows the soaring Sentinel Tower that is part of a high-tech push to crack down on Mexican cartels.

STATE OF CHIHUAHUA VIA YOUTUBE

When finished, the surveillance network that will operate from the building – the tallest in the El Paso, Texas-Juárez region – will have at its disposal high-tech surveillance equipment, including facial-recognition software, license plate readers and 4,400 mobile cameras.

A helipad is atop the tower, which is part of an \$84 million investment. "This tower will be our command center," Chihuahua Public Safety Director Gilberto Loya Chávez said during a media tour, according to Border Report, a U.S. news website. "As we build this platform, we also are installing arches (with security technology) over every major highway coming in and out of the state and its 13 largest cities."

Authorities say the technology already has yielded results. "This is the result of using technology so the police can respond with more efficiency and with more 'information,'" said Luis Aguirre, chief of staff for the Chihuahua police, according to Border Report. Surveillance data is being used to rescue kidnapping victims and build legal cases against suspects.

The tower is the core of Plataforma Centinela, a broader surveillance network that spans 13 major municipalities and includes over 2,700 smart monitoring points.

# CHIAPAS POLICE TO USE ARMED DRONES IN CARTEL FIGHT

The Associated Press



Police and federal authorities in Chiapas, Mexico, display a drone with a semiautomatic rifle mounted below it. GOVERNMENT OF CHIAPAS

**P**olice in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas unveiled a fleet of armed drones in June 2025 that they say will better position them against the heavily armed drug cartels vying for control of their border with Guatemala. Although the cartels are armed with automatic weapons and increasingly use drones to drop improvised explosive devices, Mexican authorities are meeting the challenge.

The drones could be equipped to carry guns or fight fires, Chiapas Security Secretary Óscar Aparicio Avendaño said. He did not explain what the rules of engagement would be for police using an armed drone. Authorities shared a photo of a drone with a semiautomatic rifle mounted below it.

In other states, like Michoacán, police have begun experimenting with ways of combating cartel drones that drop explosives, such as jamming signals or firing nets to catch them.

Chiapas has struggled with competition between Mexico's two most powerful cartels, Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation, as they fight for control of lucrative smuggling routes along the Guatemalan border for drugs, migrants and guns. The state has seen mass displacements of people, including hundreds who fled into Guatemala in 2024 to escape cartel violence.

# A LOOK AT THE LATEST U.S. COUNTER-DRONE TECHNOLOGY

The Watch Staff

**AS** technology for unmanned aerial systems (UAS), or drones, evolves rapidly, U.S. companies remain at the forefront in countering them. In April 2025, DZYNE Technologies of Irvine, California, unveiled its latest counter-UAS (c-UAS) system for European allies: the Dronebuster 4-EU.

The Dronebuster is a hand-held, nonkinetic device that sends electromagnetic signals to disrupt or disable UAS navigation and control. It also can spoof or simulate global navigation satellite signals, potentially ordering the drone to return to its starting point or shift direction. Weighing 2.25 kilograms, it has an effective range of 1 kilometer. DZYNE's detect, track, identify, mitigate kit upgrades the Dronebuster unit by adding a wearable detection and identification capability while retaining its portability.

## OTHER PORTABLE C-UAS SYSTEMS:

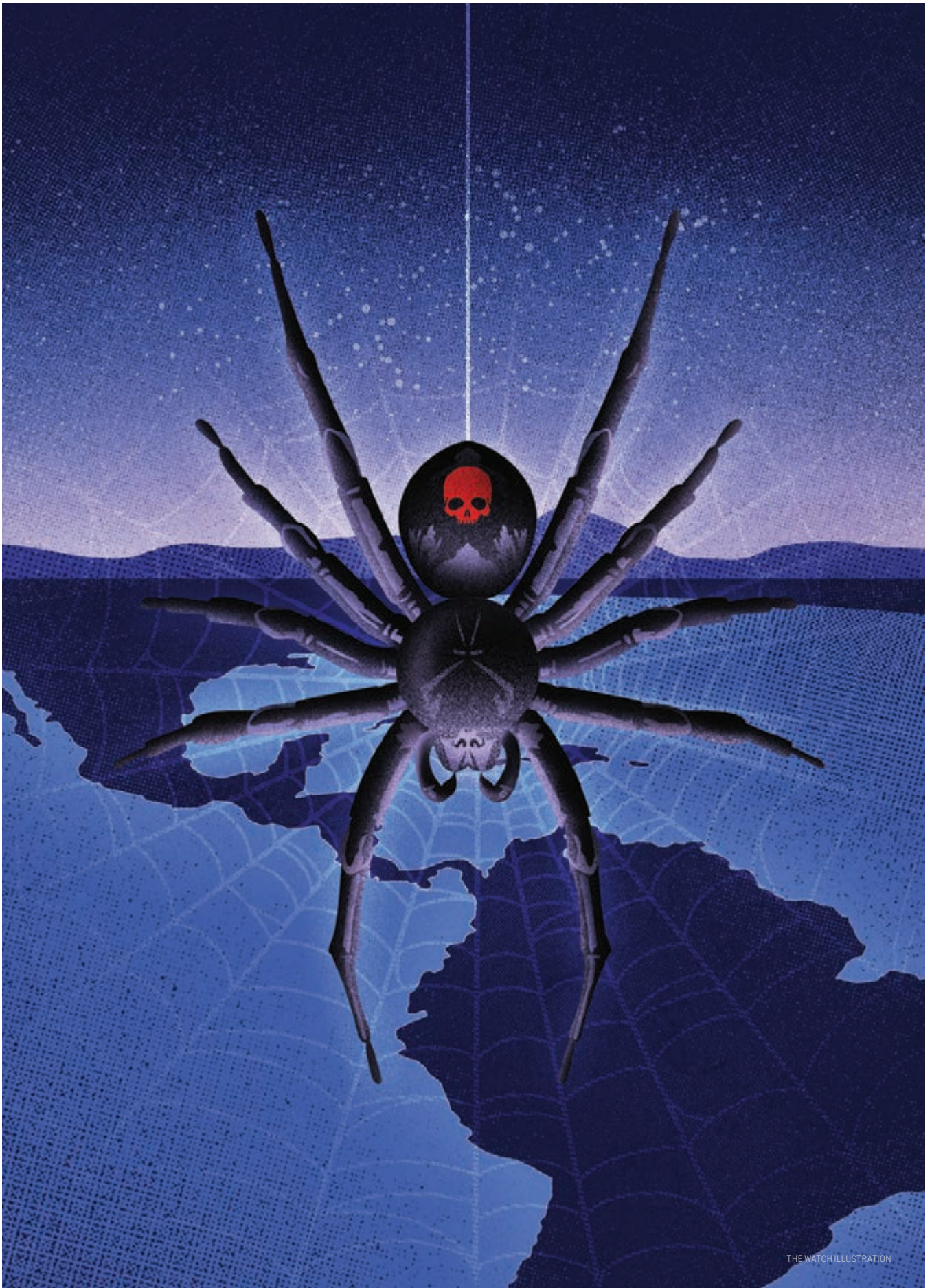
- **DedroneDefender:** Another rifle-shaped c-UAS weapon made by a U.S. company, Dedrone Holdings, which was bought by Axon in October 2024. The DedroneDefender is billed as a "smart jammer" powered by artificial intelligence.
- **FIM-92 Stinger:** An infrared homing surface-to-air missile made by U.S. defense contractor Raytheon. The Stinger can be shoulder-fired or mounted and has a range of up to about 4.57 kilometers. The missile is 1.5 meters long, 7.1 centimeters in diameter and weighs 10 kilograms.

- **DroneGun:** A compact, lightweight and durable gun made by Australian company DroneShield. The DroneGun Mk4 can disrupt control, video and navigation signals across multiple frequency bands. It weighs 3.2 kilograms, and the startup time is less than 3 seconds.
- **EDM4S SkyWiper:** A portable electronic warfare device developed by the Lithuanian company NT Service. It has been used widely by the Ukrainian Armed Forces against Russian drones.
- **SMASH 2000L:** An advanced smart scope made by the Israeli company SmartShooter. The scope is mounted on an M4A1 rifle and can automatically target and disrupt drones. Marine and Army units have placed orders for the SMASH 2000L scopes, which already have been deployed in the field by NATO allies and U.S. Special Forces. Marine units will start getting them in fiscal year 2026.

U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Kristopher Runyon aims a Dronebuster Counter-Small Unmanned Aircraft System during a patrol along the Rio Grande in Texas.

PVT. ADRIANNA DOUGLAS/U.S. ARMY





THE WATCH ILLUSTRATION



# BRANCHING OUT

**Latin American drug cartels expand into other illegal schemes**

## THE WATCH STAFF

**L**atin America's transnational criminal organizations, or TCOs, have been diversifying, finding new ways to make money in addition to producing, selling and transporting illicit drugs. The many tentacles of their businesses extend to human trafficking and migration; illegal logging, fishing and gold mining; protection rackets; counterfeit drugs; fuel theft; and timeshare fraud.

Their work could be seen at the corner grocery store. TCOs are deeply entrenched in Mexico's avocado production, sales and transportation. At some farms, they control all aspects of Mexico's No. 1 export crop. They're also charging many avocado and lime farmers by the acre for "protection services."

TCOs have embraced cybercrime, using the internet and other technology to move people across borders for sexual or labor exploitation and to control the migration of thousands into the United States. They use cyber tools to launder money, track drug shipments and communicate securely. The groups leverage online platforms and the dark web to facilitate the sale of illicit goods and services.

The U.S. State Department in February 2025 implemented an executive order designating eight TCOs as foreign terrorist organizations, or FTOs, and broadening U.S. legal authorities to punish the drug cartels. That designation, and subsequent designations, apply to Aragua Train (Tren de Aragua) in Venezuela, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) in El Salvador,

and six groups based in Mexico: Gulf Cartel (Cártel del Golfo), Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación), New Michoacan Family (La Nueva Familia Michoacana), Northeast Cartel (Cártel del Noreste), Sinaloa Cartel (Cártel de Sinaloa) and United Cartels (Cárteles Unidos). In September through December, the State Department added five more Latin America-based groups to the FTO list: Barrio 18, Clan del Golfo, Cartel de los Soles, Los Choneros and Los Lobos.

Looking for ways to disguise their merchandise and transport it more easily, TCOs moved into making counterfeit drugs.

But long before the orders were issued, these criminal organizations set out to expand their empires, changing the way they did business. Follow the money and you can trace the outlines of their business plan.

At first, the cartels grew their business empires by focusing on what they knew best: drugs. In the 1970s, cocaine use was growing, and marijuana and heroin were also huge moneymakers. In the decades since, that has spread to fentanyl, methamphetamine, MDMA (ecstasy) and other designer drugs, which are responsible for nearly all fatal drug



poisonings in the U.S., the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration says.

Looking for ways to disguise their merchandise and transport it more easily, TCOs moved into making counterfeit drugs. TCOs also pushed for new trade routes and new modes of transportation. Among the more elaborate means of moving drugs were low-profile boats or even narco-submarines. These semisubmersible or “nearly fully” submersible vessels could more easily evade detection by visual, radar, sonar or infrared systems.

A narco-sub first was reported in September 2000, when Colombian anti-narcotics police discovered a half-built vessel in a Bogotá, Colombia, warehouse, the Spanish newspaper *El País* reported. It was 36 meters long, 4 meters high, and would have had the capacity to transport 15 metric tons of cocaine. By the 2020s, narco-subs were far more common. In October 2024, in a complex and risky helicopter maneuver, Mexican Sailors intercepted a narco-sub that held about 2,200 kilograms of narcotics, officials said.

But drugs were always a high-risk, high-reward business, and without the legal guardrails that legitimate businesses faced, TCOs looked for new opportunities. “Drug cartels have diversified their operations since their inception,” security analyst David Saucedo told *USA Today* in 2024. “Many of them started as criminal organizations whose main activity wasn’t drug trafficking.”

The Mexican National Guard protects local farmers as they plant pine saplings in a recently deforested area in the San Miguel Topilejo borough of Mexico City in August 2023. Illegal logging is prevalent in the borough. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## HARVESTING ‘GREEN GOLD’

About as far as one could get from drug production and trafficking are Mexico’s lucrative avocado farms. Nicknamed “green gold,” the avocado has seen profits soar since 1997, when the United States authorized the purchase of Mexican avocados in accordance with the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA.

U.S. imports of Mexican avocados have grown exponentially since then. Nearly 1.1 billion kilograms of Mexican Hass avocados, worth \$3.52 billion, were imported into the United States during the July 2023-June 2024 growing season, the Avocado Institute of Mexico reported.

But TCOs have hijacked avocado supply chains and extorted farmers, sometimes driving them from their land with demands for unsustainable protection fees or “cuotas.” The fees can range from \$135 to \$500 per hectare monthly, *USA Today* reported in July 2024. The TCOs’ demands are often backed by threats of violence or even death.

Lime farmers also are facing extortion. In October 2024, Mexico sent 660 Soldiers and National Guard officers to Michoacán to protect lime growers being

extorted by cartels. In August 2024, more than half of lime packing warehouses in Michoacán closed briefly after growers and distributors said Los Viagras and other cartels demanded a cut of their income.

### **MIGRATION AND MONEYPACKING**

Tren de Aragua, a Venezuela-based TCO, largely has focused on human smuggling, especially of migrant women and girls, for sex trafficking, debt bondage and extortion. Other smuggled immigrants become victims of forced labor. Those who try to escape are often killed, and Tren de Aragua spotlights their deaths as a warning to others.

Tren de Aragua, the Sinaloa Cartel and other TCOs likely view migrants as just one of many commodities to be smuggled, since the practice is highly profitable, with low risk. The TCOs exploit migrants' desperation to reach the United States and may provide not only transportation but also faked documents. This could include stolen passports with photos, falsification of travel or ID documents, or genuine passports or visas procured with faked documents.

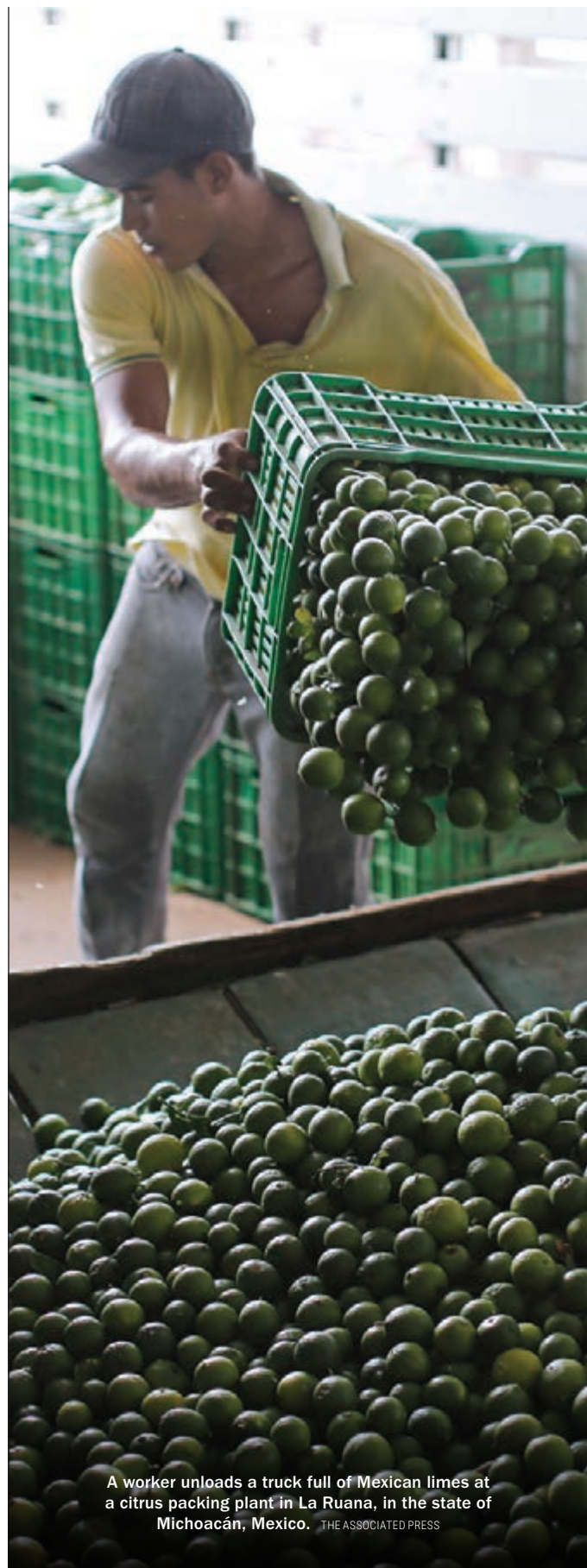
"Because these services are illegal, the criminals have tremendous power, while the migrants are left vulnerable. Many migrants are abused or die on the way to their destination, and many are abandoned en route without resources," according to a TCO fact sheet by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Gary J. Hale, a policy expert who worked in law enforcement and intelligence for the U.S. federal government for 37 years, estimates that various Mexican TCOs have made nearly \$100 billion moving migrants through Mexico over the past 20 years, or \$5 billion annually. "Migrant smuggling remains a generally easy and profitable endeavor," Hale told The Watch in an email. Hale says the United Nations World Drug Report estimates Mexican TCOs make about \$12 billion annually in drug profits.

Hale co-wrote a research paper for Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy that said most migrant smuggling through Mexico is likely "sponsored by organized crime syndicates or TCOs that facilitate the organization and formation of caravans through the use of social media applications such as Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms. TCOs and other entities announce the formation of a caravan, gather all those interested, and charge them 'smuggling fees' for being taken to the U.S. border or to destinations in the interior." With the U.S. crackdown on illegal immigration, "TCOs will adopt a 'wait and see' approach to future migrant smuggling operations," Hale told The Watch.

### **FISH, FORESTS AND GOLD**

Natural resources are big business, and that attracts TCOs. The criminal gangs have entrenched themselves in illegal fishing, logging and gold mining. It's much



A worker unloads a truck full of Mexican limes at a citrus packing plant in La Ruana, in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

“Because these services are illegal, the criminals have tremendous power, while the migrants are left vulnerable. Many migrants are abused or die on the way to their destination, and many are abandoned en route without resources.”

– TCO fact sheet by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



Migrants walk across the Darién Gap from Colombia to Panama in May 2023 in hopes of reaching the United States. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



easier to turn a profit when you pay no attention to legal or environmental requirements.

In a 2022 report for the Brookings Institution, a U.S.-based think tank, organized crime expert Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown outlines how Mexico's fishing and logging industries are increasingly controlled by TCOs that supply China. The report, titled "China-linked wildlife poaching and trafficking in Mexico," reveals that "organized crime groups across Mexico, especially the Sinaloa Cartel, seek to monopolize both legal and illegal fisheries along the entire vertical supply chain. Beyond merely demanding a part of the profits, they dictate to legal and illegal fishers how much the fishers can fish, insisting that the fishers sell the harvest only to the criminal groups, and that restaurants, including those catering to international tourists, buy fish only from the criminal groups." As a result, the report concludes, Mexican natural resources are increasingly under threat from organized crime and wildlife traffickers.

Among the species poached in Mexico and smuggled to China are sea cucumbers, totoaba, abalone and sharks, the report says. The criminal gangs often trade poached species in exchange for

The Justice Department in June 2024 charged Los Angeles associates of the Sinaloa Cartel with conspiring, along with criminal Chinese banks, to launder drug money like the confiscated cash shown here. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

precursor chemicals for illegal drugs such as fentanyl and methamphetamine. It's an easy way for TCOs to get around money laundering laws and regulations.

"There is also poaching still of jaguars and of various parrots, but it's sometimes difficult to distinguish which of these are being poached for the market in Mexico and which are being sent abroad," Felbab-Brown told The Watch. "It also appears that there is a growth in consumption ... of wildlife products as prestige by the narcos themselves, whether this is keeping live pets or keeping skins, jaguar products."

On land, TCOs have turned to the forests for profit. According to a 2025 U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime report, "Forest Crimes: Illegal deforestation and logging," criminal organizations in Central America "have reinvested drug trafficking proceeds into legal and illegal land acquisition. These groups also are involved in forest clearance, creating pasture for cattle, and soy and palm oil plantations. They also finance accompanying infrastructure from landing

strips to irregular roads, all of which affects the integrity of forests and biodiversity. This process has been dubbed ‘narco deforestation.’”

TCOs often ignore the legal requirements placed on legitimate businesses, so they are probably logging without a legitimate license, mixing illegally harvested timber and/or protected species with legally harvested wood, and logging much more than the law allows. This “not only weakens environmental protections but also undercuts legitimate forestry businesses and fuels deforestation and biodiversity loss,” the U.N. report says. Restoring such forests, if it’s even possible, would take decades, scientists say.

TCOs also have become major players in illegal gold mining. Another U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime report, “Minerals Crime: Illegal Gold Mining,” says criminal organizations “have embedded themselves in gold supply chains to such an extent that they now pose a serious global threat. These groups are constantly adapting to enable and hide their operations. They exploit advances in transportation, finance, communications, and quickly adopt digital tools including cryptocurrencies. Many of these networks

are well integrated into international trade, allowing them to launder proceeds and move illegal gold with relative ease.”

These illegal gold mining operations pose a multitude of threats, the report says: profits being used to fund other illegal activities; expansion of territories controlled by criminal organizations; the spread of government corruption; violence and extortion; environmental destruction; and human rights violations. “One thing is clear: The level of violence is growing exponentially” at gold mining sites controlled by criminal organizations, Melina Risso of the Igarapé Institute, a Brazilian think tank, told Mongabay, an environmental news website.

### TACO SHOP PROTECTION RACKETS

The average Mexican consumes about 75 kilograms of tortillas annually, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported in March 2023, so it’s not surprising that

**A bag of counterfeit fentanyl-laced oxycodone pills. Fentanyl, sometimes in lethal doses, can be placed in tablets of counterfeit prescription drugs.**

SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY VIA REUTERS CONNECT



TCOs would want a share of the action. Now, thousands of small tortilla shops — *tortillerías* — are being forced to pay protection fees. “There is no licit or illicit business activity in Mexico that is not directly or indirectly touched and financially affected by Mexican TCOs,” Hale said.

At least 15% of *tortillerías* — about 20,000 storefront businesses — are being extorted, according to Mexico’s National Tortilla Council, a trade group. A decade ago, the practice was far less common, the group said.

In Cuernavaca, the capital of the state of Morelos in Mexico, some gangs are demanding as much as \$900 a month from tortilla makers, The Washington Post newspaper reported in May 2024. But the gangs’ control of the tortilla industry does not stop at the storefronts, the Post report says. Criminal organizations control the water system in some areas where corn is grown, and they favor their own farms; trucks transporting corn to shops are robbed along the way, and some drivers must pay extortion fees; some crime groups control the supply of corn and even gas tanks to tortilla shops; and some tortilla deliverymen have been forced to sell drugs.

### FUEL THEFT, TIMESHARES AND WI-FI

For more than a decade, TCOs have been siphoning oil with illegal pipeline taps. Pemex, Mexico’s state-owned petroleum corporation, reported more than \$1 billion in losses in some years.

The cartels have honed a sophisticated strategy for the thefts. “This includes tactics such as bribing Pemex employees and local officials for information, drilling precise illegal taps into pipelines, and using modified tanker trucks to transport stolen fuel for distribution in black market networks,” the USA Today newspaper reported in July 2024.

In a more recent scam, drug cartels have branched out to timeshare fraud targeting older Americans. The FBI said in a 2023 alert that scammers contacted people who were trying to sell their timeshares in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. The scammers said they had a buyer lined up, but the seller needed to pay taxes or other fees before the sale could proceed. Once the money was paid, the scammers disappeared.

One of the more mundane moneymaking sidelines for a drug cartel was Wi-Fi service in Michoacán. Local media dubbed the set-up “narco-antennas,” which involved stolen equipment set up in various towns. Los Viagras cartel charged about 5,000 people inflated prices of 400-500 pesos (about \$21.50 to \$27) a month, the Michoacán state prosecutor’s office said, according to The Associated Press.



Then-U.S. Attorney Damian Williams speaks about a drug trafficking case during a news conference in New York in September 2024. A drug network packaged potentially deadly synthetic opioids into pills disguised as common prescription drugs and sold them online through fake drugstores. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

So, why pay the higher price? Prosecutors said people were told “they would be killed if they did not.” No deaths were reported, and the scheme was broken up in December 2023.

### THE FUTURE OF NARCO CRIME

TCOs already are using cybercrime to control illegal immigration, launder money, sell and track drug shipments, and evade police and military units. The trend will continue and expand, Hale said.

“Cybercrimes such as cyber extortions are expected to grow globally,” Hale told The Watch, “with Mexican TCOs already performing cyber kidnappings and other extortion crimes by exploiting the vulnerabilities of the internet and ignorance of smartphone users that have had their cellphones breached.”

Hale expects Mexican and Chinese TCOs to expand their criminal alliances and increasingly use artificial intelligence to hack and extort Americans.

“A likely scenario would be for Mexican TCOs to agree to receive taskings or targeting from Chinese criminals, both entities of which operate in collusion or coordinate directly with their host governments,” Hale told The Watch in an email. “This would see the use of Mexican cyberextortion call centers to target U.S. military or defense personnel, particularly Hispanics with extended family in Mexico or China, or any Spanish or Chinese speakers, in an attempt to obtain U.S. technology or secrets. Mexican TCOs already possess formidable paramilitary capability that is likely to grow.”



THE WATCH ILLUSTRATION

# AERIAL ASSAULT

**U.S. adapts to  
UAS threat along  
southern border**

## THE WATCH STAFF

**T**he threat from unmanned aerial systems (UAS) operated by transnational criminal organizations, or TCOs, along the Mexico-United States border is clear and growing, a senior U.S. official told Congress in July 2025.

“Nearly every day, transnational criminal organizations use drones to convey illicit narcotics and contraband across U.S. borders and to conduct hostile surveillance of law enforcement,” Steven Willoughby, acting director of the Counter Unmanned Aircraft Systems Program Management Office in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), told the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary. It was only a matter of time, Willoughby said, before TCOs would deploy UAS, also known as drones, to attack U.S. law enforcement or military targets.

Willoughby used data to back up his stark assertions. In the last six months of 2024, more than 27,000 drones were detected within 500 meters of the U.S. southern border, operating nearly 60,000 unique flights, the majority of which were conducted at night or at restricted altitudes, he said. The growing potential of TCO-directed UAS crossing the border between Mexico and the U.S. has drawn the attention of U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), which is charged with homeland defense. Its sister command in Colorado Springs, Colorado, North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), is responsible for providing “continental detection, validation, warning and aerospace control” of airborne threats to North America, including unmanned aircraft systems, according to its website. In March 2024, USNORTHCOM and NORAD Commander Gen. Gregory M. Guillot told another Senate committee that at least 1,000 unauthorized drone incursions occur along the border each month. Guillot said

the rate of drone activity along the border alarmed him when he assumed command in early 2024.

Cartels direct a lot of that traffic. During the last six months of 2024, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents, along with other agencies, seized more than 544 kilograms of fentanyl, methamphetamine and other narcotics transported by UAS, Willoughby said. The marked upswing in activity, he testified, is a “clear indicator that TCOs are adopting the use of drones into their tactics as a means of surveilling and evading CBP agents and officers and other law enforcement.”

Since the end of 2024, much has changed along the 3,145-kilometer land border. In January 2025, the U.S. government declared a national emergency at the border after several years of record levels of illegal migration. The order blamed TCO activities that include drug and human trafficking, environmental degradation and extortion — practiced by the Mexican cartels — for much of the disorder. Shortly afterward, the U.S. government designated eight TCOs as foreign terrorist organizations, or FTOs. The designation included six Mexican cartels and criminal organizations in Venezuela and El Salvador. The State Department added a further five Latin American TCOs to the FTO list in 2025.

Part of the executive order addressed UAS activity. It directed the secretary of transportation and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to consider waiving all Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and FCC regulations or policies that hinder the DHS from countering drones within 8 kilometers of the southern border.

The deployment of active duty troops to the southern border has brought key resources to the fight against cartel drones. U.S. Soldiers with the 10th Mountain Division were

Members of the Mexican National Guard arrive to secure the Izaguirre Ranch in Teuchitlán, Jalisco state, Mexico, in March 2025. Mexico and the United States have deployed military assets such as the Mexican National Guard to deter illicit unmanned aerial system intrusions across the border. AFP/GETTY IMAGES



deployed to Arizona in February 2025 to set up ground-based radar installations to detect low-flying drones. “The team’s primary role is to operate ground-based radars and feed critical intelligence to U.S. Customs and Border Protection,” stated a USNORTHCOM news release.

Soldiers operated two types of radar originally developed for the battlefield: the AN/TPQ-53 Quick Reaction Capability Radar, used to identify the origin and impact points of indirect fire such as rockets and mortars, and the AN/MPQ-64 Sentinel radar system, which tracks low-flying aircraft and drone activity across wide areas. The systems have been adapted for homeland defense, the

team’s primary motivation is helping to save lives and make America safer.” The approximately 10,000 U.S. troops stationed along the border — Mexico has roughly the same number providing security on the other side — also have provided a deterrent. The U.S. Army’s Stryker Brigade, a mobile, quick-reaction mechanized unit equipped with monitoring and surveillance technology, further increases domain awareness of TCO-operated UAS.

Mexico also has bolstered its counter-UAS (c-UAS) capabilities. The Secretariat of National Defense (DEFENSA) announced in May 2025 that it was spending \$86 million to buy advanced technology to deter attacks by drone or mines on Mexican security forces. The c-UAS technology will be deployed in a military region including the states of Aguascalientes, Colima, Jalisco, Nayarit and Zacatecas. In April 2025, DEFENSA announced the formation of a drone squadron to detect, monitor and defend against cartel activity in Michoacán.

Mexico also fostered a technological partnership between the Mexican Air Force’s Research and Technological Development Group and the Aeronautical University in Querétaro and the Center for Research in Optics. Public universities near Military Air Base No. 1 in Mexico state also are involved in the development of a national drone production program to help Mexico combat cartels with its own drone

“Using these systems to detect illegal activity ensures the border stays sealed, and the status quo is maintained.”

— U.S. Army Capt. Christopher McNamara

release stated. The unit’s mission is clear. “We’re defending both the American public and the American way of life,” the radar platoon’s leader, U.S. Army Capt. Christopher McNamara, said in the release. “Using these systems to detect illegal activity ensures the border stays sealed, and the status quo is maintained. But really, I think our

hardware and operating systems.

Senior U.S. military officials told Congress in April 2025 that Mexican cartels were stepping up the use of UAS for smuggling and, even more troubling, for monitoring U.S. troops on the border. “We know that cartels have used [UAS] for unauthorized surveillance to assess our troop size, our movements, to solicit and enable attacks from other vectors. We know that they have used drones for kinetic attacks,” said U.S. Navy Rear Adm. Paul Spedero Jr., Joint Chiefs of Staff vice director for operations, in testimony before the House Military and Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on April 29.

Mexican cartels also have used drones to attack rival TCOs and Mexican security forces. The extreme violence perpetrated by TCOs makes drones an inexpensive and lethal tool to intimidate and control civilians and endanger security forces. The Jalisco New Generation Cartel, one of those designated as an FTO, is regarded as a pioneer in using drones to attack criminal enemies. The Sinaloa Cartel, another FTO, attacked Mexican Army and National Guard troops in separate incidents in January and February 2025, killing a National Guardsman and injuring two Soldiers.

Guillot testified before the House Armed Services Committee in April 2025 that it was crucial to modify the

rules of engagement along the border to defend U.S. troops from UAS threats. It would “allow us to shoot down or bring down drones that are surveilling over our deployed and mobile troops ... not just that are in self-defense, but anything that’s surveilling and planning the next attack on us within five miles of the border,” Guillot said, according to The War Zone, a military affairs website.

## The extreme violence perpetrated by TCOs makes drones an inexpensive and lethal tool to intimidate and control civilians and endanger security forces.

In June 2025, the U.S. government published an executive order outlining the new rules of engagement for counter-drone measures. Titled “Restoring American Airspace Sovereignty,” the document states that “immediate action is needed to ensure American sovereignty over its skies” and outlines the UAS threat to the U.S. homeland.

“Criminals, terrorists, and hostile foreign actors have intensified their weaponization of these technologies, creating new and serious threats to our homeland,” the



**U.S. Army Soldiers with the 10th Mountain Division operate ground-based radar in Texas near the border with Mexico in May 2025. The radar platoon monitored illegal migration and drug smuggling to assist Customs and Border Protection agents. U.S. NORTHERN COMMAND**



**U.S. Army Sgt. John Murray, an infantryman assigned to Joint Task Force-Southern Border, deploys a Black Hornet 4 unmanned aerial sensor drone along the southern border at El Paso, Texas, in July 2025.** U.S. ARMY



order stated. “Drug cartels use UAS to smuggle fentanyl across our borders, deliver contraband into prisons, surveil law enforcement, and otherwise endanger the public. Mass gatherings are vulnerable to disruptions and threats by unauthorized UAS flights. Critical infrastructure, including military bases, is subject to frequent — and often unidentified — UAS incursions.” The order required relevant agencies to implement the directive by September 2025.

The order creates a Task Force to Restore American Airspace Sovereignty to be led by the assistant to the president for national security affairs or a designee. “The Task Force shall review relevant operational, technical, and regulatory frameworks and develop and propose solutions to UAS threats, as appropriate and consistent with applicable law, and shall make recommendations on the implementation of all actions identified in this order,” the order stated.

It also directs the FAA to develop rules to restrict UAS flights over military bases and critical infrastructure like power plants, dams and bridges, to supplement Notices

---

**U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Kristopher Runyon, assigned to Joint Task Force-Southern Border, prepares to patrol along the Rio Grande with a Dronebuster counter-small unmanned aircraft system near Eagle Pass, Texas, in June 2025.** U.S. ARMY

to Airmen and Temporary Flight Restrictions to accommodate geofencing measures to disable UAS traffic.

The far-reaching policy changes explicitly cover the southern border. DHS, the attorney general and the secretaries of war and transportation were asked to advise President Donald J. Trump “whether the northern and southern land borders; large airports; Federal facilities; critical infrastructure; and military installations, facilities, and assets should be designated as covered facilities or assets under 6 U.S.C. 124n and 10 U.S.C. 130i and whether any changes to law would be necessary relating to such designation.”

Reclassifying the borders as, essentially, a vital infrastructure asset or a military base would expand counter-UAS measures. Deploying more border sensors “is critical to detect and track cartel ‘narco-drone’ activity” but won’t eliminate the threat, Dr. Caitlin Lee, a UAS and counter-UAS expert at the Washington, D.C., think tank Rand Corp., told The Watch in an email. “Fielding kinetic and non-kinetic counter-drone systems to actually engage and disable narco-drones is an important next step,” Lee said.

So far, cartels only have used drones with explosives for kinetic operations south of the border, but that could change as the U.S. fight against TCOs intensifies, Lee said. The executive orders have helped clarify and codify the stakes, she said. ☐

# — RELIABLE NEIGHBORS

Mexican delegation lends hand to fight California wildfires

SECRETARIAT OF NATIONAL DEFENSE (DEFENSA)

**D**ue to the wildfires that broke out in Los Angeles, California, and elsewhere on the West Coast of the United States, the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs requested support from the Secretariat of National Defense (DEFENSA) to establish a humanitarian aid delegation named “Cehui” (meaning to extinguish in Nahuatl, a language indigenous to Mexico) to put out the fires.

For this reason, two Mexican Air Force heavy

transport aircraft — a C-130 Hercules and a C-27J Spartan — left Mexico on January 11, 2025, carrying 36 military personnel from DEFENSA and 38 civilians, including two from the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, 29 from the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR) and seven from National Civil Protection Coordination. As the Cehui delegation prepared to depart Military Air Base No. 1 in Santa Lucía, state of Mexico, Secretary of National Defense Gen. Ricardo Trevilla Trejo encouraged them to successfully execute their mission.



Mexican Secretary of National Defense Gen. Ricardo Trevilla Trejo addressed the humanitarian aid delegation before it traveled to California to fight fires. DEFENSA



THE WATCH ILLUSTRATION

“Humanitarian aid is an activity that has demonstrated solidarity, work carried out by exalting the humanism that characterizes the people of Mexico.”

~ Mexican Secretary of National Defense Gen. Ricardo Trevilla Trejo



A Mexican Army Soldier, right, supports recovery efforts after wildfires broke out in California. DEFENSA



The Mexican humanitarian aid delegation arrived in California to help fight wildfires in January 2025. DEFENSA

When they arrived at Los Angeles International Airport, the contingent was greeted by California Gov. Gavin Newsom and the Mexican consuls of Los Angeles and Sacramento. Once at base camp, the Mexican delegation trained with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and coordinated activities from January 14-24 at sites across the state. The team:

- Inspected 451 collapsed structures.
- Located nine biological clues about possible fire victims and one deceased person.
- Built 150 meters of firebreak and widened another 1,400 meters.
- Searched 19 fire hot spots over more than 24 kilometers.
- Extinguished 19 fires.

The Mexican delegation was organized into two teams. MEX-1 (CONAFOR) extinguished fires by building and widening firebreaks and man-

aging fuels with chain saws. MEX-2 (DEFENSA) carried out search and rescue activities in the southern area, including inspecting structures, locating bodies and biological evidence, recovering valuables, and building firebreaks, ditches and barricades.



The Cehui delegation returned home on January 25 and was received with a ceremony at which Mexican Secretary of National Defense Gen. Ricardo Trevilla Trejo recognized their effort, experience, capacity and skills with the following message: “Humanitarian aid is an activity that has demonstrated solidarity, work carried out by exalting the humanism that characterizes the people of Mexico.”

The DEFENSA personnel demonstrated their capabilities and support in emergency situations, regardless of nationality or location. These actions strengthen the bilateral relationship between Mexico and the U.S. ▣



THE WATCH ILLUSTRATION

# CONCURRENT MOVEMENTS

## Mexico, U.S. work to achieve operational compatibility

SECRETARIAT OF NATIONAL DEFENSE (DEFENSA)

**M**exico shares political, economic and social interests with the United States, as well as challenges primarily related to regional security and defense. In November 2016, Mexico, through the Secretariat of National Defense (DEFENSA), established with U.S. Northern Command a mechanism called the Bilateral Military Cooperation Roundtable (BMCR). This formal and efficient mechanism allows for military cooperation in accordance with the vision, objectives and strategic priorities of the constitutional principles of Mexico's foreign policy and with the approval of the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs.

The objective of the BMCR is for the armed forces of both countries to achieve operational compatibility as defense partners and to strengthen cooperation in the protection of North America. This mechanism is aimed at addressing issues and matters of mutual interest, such as force development, training, capability, regional security and defense of North America, as well as border security.

The roundtable operates through border commander boards, regional border commander boards and border contact meetings at the military

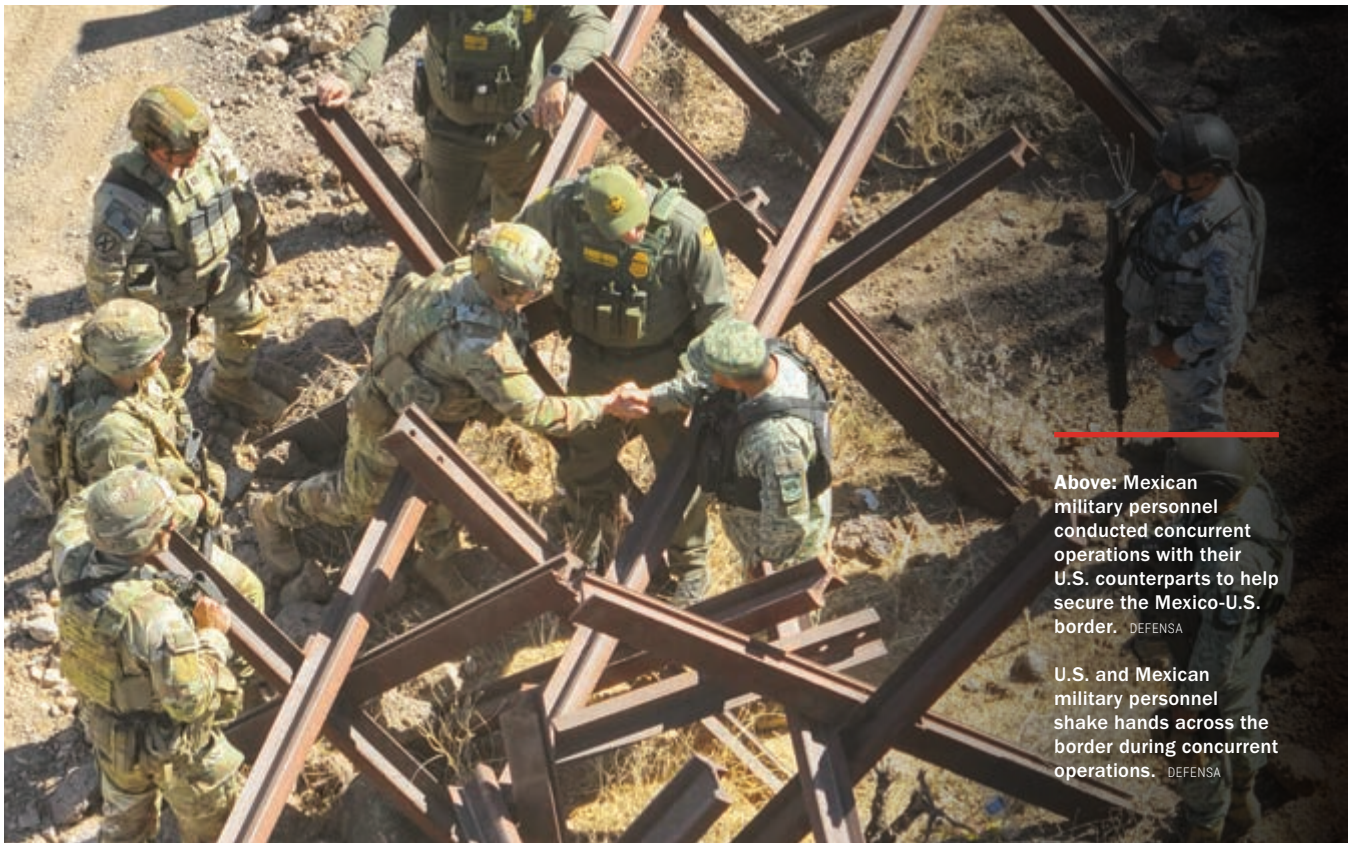
zone level between personnel from DEFENSA and their counterparts from U.S. Army North and representatives of U.S. security agencies. This also allows for the exchange of information to improve security cooperation along the Mexico-U.S. border to coordinate efforts to inhibit organized crime, including drug, arms and money trafficking through concurrent, mirrored operations.

Concurrent ground and air operations are simultaneous and coordinated actions carried out by military units of the Mexican Army, Air Force and National Guard in coordination with personnel from Joint Task Force-Southern Border and the U.S. Border Patrol.

Concurrent ground and air operations are simultaneous and coordinated actions carried out by military units of the Mexican Army, Air Force and National Guard in coordination with personnel from Joint Task Force-Southern Border and the U.S. Border Patrol. Each force operates



**U.S. Soldiers with the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team assigned to Joint Task Force-Southern Border prepare for a concurrent patrol exercise with Mexican military personnel in Nogales, Arizona. Personnel from the Mexican and U.S. militaries conducted concurrent operations to reduce the illegal flow of people and drugs coming across the border. SGT. CHASE MURRAY/U.S. ARMY**



Above: Mexican military personnel conducted concurrent operations with their U.S. counterparts to help secure the Mexico-U.S. border. DEFENSA

U.S. and Mexican military personnel shake hands across the border during concurrent operations. DEFENSA

within its own territory, respecting the authority and interests of both countries.

These operations serve to exchange intelligence, inhibit the activities of transnational organized crime and cooperate in common border security objectives. They are carried out under the principles of reciprocity, shared and differentiated responsibilities, and mutual trust and respect for sovereign decisions and territories. Their purpose is to dismantle organized crime surveillance points, stop the crossing of irregular migrants, and prevent the trafficking of drugs

to the U.S. and weapons to Mexico.

Bilateral military cooperation is strategic for both countries. This type of mechanism has made it possible to implement actions that reduce crime along the border, limit the operational capacity of transnational criminal organizations and promote cooperation on security matters along the shared border. Strengthening bilateral relations demonstrates the commitment to jointly curtail transnational organized crime and protect the national interests of both countries. **III**

# ORGANIZED CRIME

# CRACKDOWN

**Mexican forces eliminate kingpin of Jalisco New Generation Cartel**

## THE WATCH STAFF



The Mexican military executed a watershed operation in February 2026 when its Special Forces killed the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, nicknamed “El Mencho.” The killing of El Mencho dealt a major blow to the cartel, also known by its Spanish acronym, CJNG, and demonstrated a higher level of proficiency in Mexico’s fight against organized crime.

The cartels have wreaked violence against Mexican citizens while funneling billions of dollars’ worth of dangerous narcotics around the world, including the United States. Mexican Secretary of National Defense Gen. Ricardo Trevilla Trejo said the operation was meticulously planned by the Special Forces and the Mexican National Guard’s Special Immediate Reaction Force. “It is definitive that they fulfilled their mission ... And what was demonstrated? The strength of the Mexican state. There is no doubt about that,” Trevilla said at a news conference.

The operation, which involved six helicopters and a Mexican Air Force T-6+ Texan II warplane, tracked the drug lord to the resort community of Tapalpa in the western coastal state of Jalisco, where El Mencho had traveled to spend time with his family and a mistress. With intelligence provided by the U.S. military, El Mencho’s girlfriend was tracked on February 20 to a compound in the Cabañas La Loma neighborhood, which had been called out by the U.S. Treasury Department in 2015 for its ties to the cartel. Once authorities confirmed that El Mencho was at the residence, Mexican authorities began planning the operation, according to The New York Times newspaper.

On February 22, Mexican military forces established a perimeter and responded with overwhelming force once one of El Mencho’s bodyguards opened fire. Eight cartel members died in the initial firefight while El Mencho and several associates fled to nearby woods, where they continued to battle security forces, including firing a rocket launcher that damaged one of the helicopters. The helicopter landed at a nearby airport, and no one was injured. Meanwhile, Mexican Special Forces continued the attack, killing El Mencho

“What I think is the watershed moment is that they did go after El Mencho. He is the top guy, and if Mexico is willing to go after him, there is really no one else they are not willing to go after.”

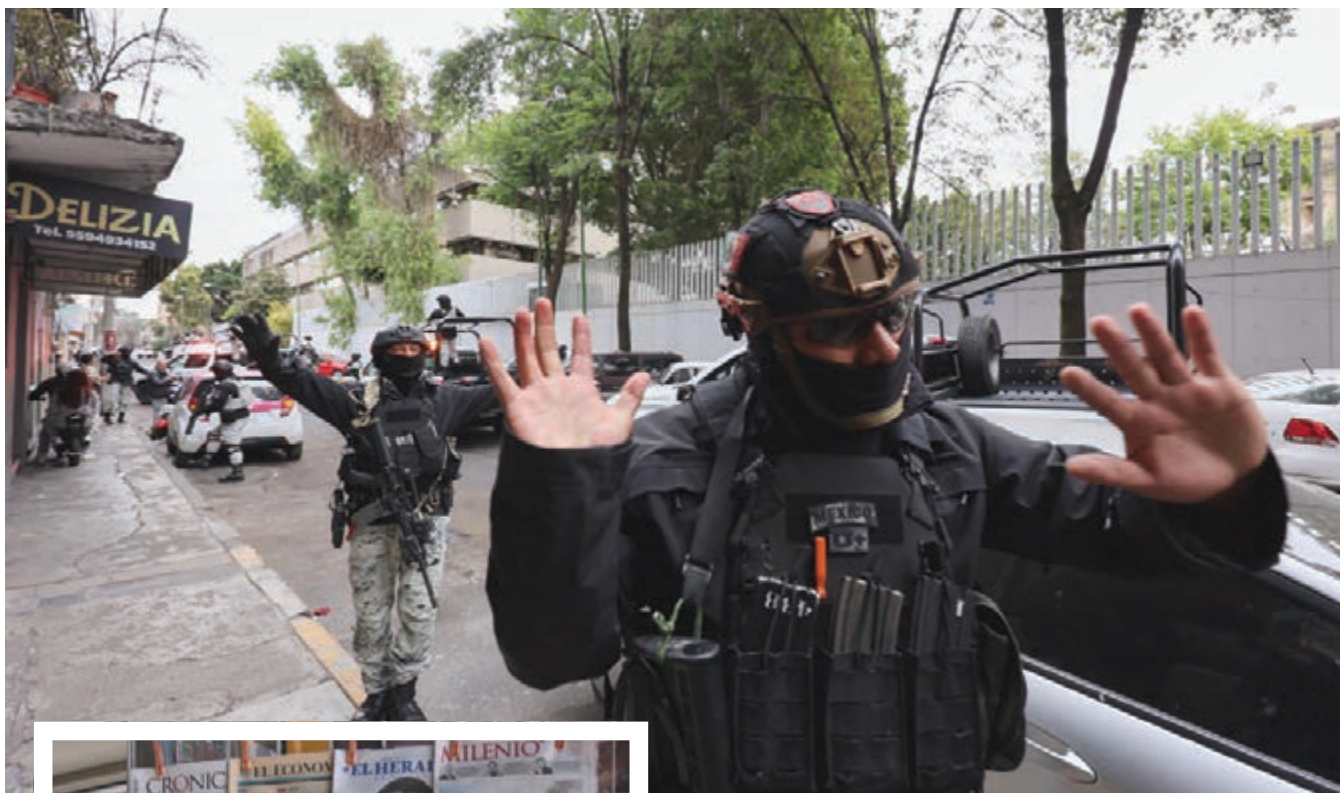
~ *Stefano Ritondale, chief intelligence officer for Artorias*

and seriously wounding two of his associates, both of whom died while being airlifted to a hospital. Two other members of what Trevilla called El Mencho’s close circle were arrested. Authorities recovered three rocket launchers, grenades, 10 long guns, two handguns and ammunition, Trevilla told reporters.

The operation demonstrated a new willingness by the Mexican government to go after a cartel leader previously viewed as untouchable because of his



THE WATCH ILLUSTRATION



National Guards remove pedestrians near the General Prosecutor's headquarters in Mexico City on February 22, 2026, after the death of the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, known as "El Mencho." THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Newspapers are displayed for sale in Mexico City on February 23, 2026, a day after the Mexican Army killed El Mencho in a resort community where he was spending time with family members and a mistress. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

propensity for violence, said Stefano Ritondale, chief intelligence officer for Artorias, a New York-based provider of AI-driven threat and geopolitical risk intelligence. "What I think is the watershed moment is that they did go after El Mencho. He is the top guy, and if Mexico is willing to go after him, there is really no one else they are not willing to go after," Ritondale told The Watch.

Oseguera had a long history of violence. Born in 1966 to a poor family of avocado farmers in Aguililla, a town of 15,000 in western Michoacán state, Oseguera illegally crossed the border into the U.S. as a young man and soon began selling drugs, including methamphetamine, a narcotic just being introduced to the U.S. in the 1980s. Arrested in 1992 in Sacramento, California, Oseguera was deported three years later after serving his prison sentence, according to the Times. Back in Mexico, Oseguera

joined the police force in Jalisco state and quickly began collaborating with the Milenio Cartel. Before long, he quit his police job to become a hit man for the cartel. Oseguera's rapid rise through the cartel's ranks accelerated after his marriage to the cartel boss's sister.

The Jalisco New Generation Cartel's formation began in 2011 through a pattern of extreme violence marked by 35 burned and bound bodies left in two semitrailer trucks in Veracruz. The violence and reach of CJNG continued to widen as it defeated the Milenio Cartel in a bloody war. From 2013 to 2017, the cartel expanded its operations from four Mexican states to 20. The cartel also diversified its operations to include extortion, illegal migrant smuggling, and investing in hotels, casinos and racetracks, the Times reported. "They were like ISIS," Eduardo Zerón, a former Mexican security official, told the newspaper. "They would arrive at a municipality and say, 'The Jalisco cartel is here, and whoever isn't with us, we'll destroy them.'"

# EL MENCHO OPERATION PART OF BROADER CARTEL FIGHT

**M**exican President Claudia Sheinbaum's administration has intensified the fight against transnational criminal organizations since she took office in October 2024, and the killing of Rubén Oseguera Cervantes ("El Mencho"), leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), is considered a milestone. Here are some other highlights in the fight.

**Tens of thousands of arrests:** Security forces have detained over 20,000 people for major crimes since Sheinbaum was sworn in, including El Mencho's brother Antonio Oseguera Cervantes, nicknamed Tony Montana after the movie "Scarface," and Canadian former Olympic snowboarder Ryan Wedding, accused of running a billion-dollar drug trafficking ring and ordering multiple killings.

**Mass extraditions:** Mexico has quietly shipped about 100 suspected cartel drug traffickers to the United States since January 2025 to stand trial, bypassing lengthy court delays. Among the first extraditions, in February 2025, were Antonio Oseguera Cervantes and Rafael Caro Quintero, who is accused of the 1985 murder of Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena. More recent extraditions included Wedding in January 2026; Abigail González Valencia, a key leader of the financial arm of the CJNG; Pablo Edwin Huerta Nuño, a Tijuana Plaza boss; Juan Carlos Felix Gastelum, a Sinaloa Cartel cell leader and son-in-law of former Sinaloa Cartel leader Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada; Ricardo González Saucedo, second-in-command of the Northeast Cartel; and Abdul Karim Conteh, leader of a group that smuggled thousands of migrants into the U.S.

**Record drug and arms seizures:** Authorities have confiscated more than 320 metric tons of illegal drugs, including the largest fentanyl bust in Mexican history (over 1,000 kilograms) in Sinaloa. The Mexican government also has seized 18,000 firearms under Sheinbaum, Mexican Secretary of National Defense Gen. Ricardo Trevilla Trejo said.

**Busting corruption:** In February 2026, the mayor of Tequila, Jalisco state, and three other local officials were arrested for allegedly collaborating with the CJNG. The arrests were part of Operativo Enjambre, or Operation Swarm, an operation targeting the infiltration of organized crime into local government. Around 60 public servants have been detained since November 2024, including other mayors, police commissioners and high-ranking security officials.

El Mencho didn't hesitate to attack government forces with heavy weaponry, including rocket-propelled grenades, armored trucks mounted with .50-caliber machine guns, land mines and, in recent years, drones equipped with explosives or toxic chemicals. In 2015, CJNG sicarios shot down a Mexican Army helicopter with a rocket-propelled grenade, killing three Soldiers. El Mencho escaped and went into hiding, but his violent streak continued. In 2020, El Mencho's gunmen sprayed an armored SUV carrying then-Mexico City Police Chief Omar García Harfuch with more than 400 bullets, killing two of Harfuch's bodyguards and a bystander. Twelve cartel members were arrested and received life sentences, Reuters reported.

The brazen attack wasn't forgotten by Harfuch, now Mexico's secretary of security and citizen protection, who played a major role in tracking down El Mencho. In November 2025, CJNG kidnapped two of the secretary's investigators in Zapopan, a cartel stronghold. The ensuing manhunt led to the agents' release after a week. More importantly, it produced valuable intelligence into the cartel's operation, aiding the government's efforts to plan and execute the February operation, Reuters reported.

Harfuch has worked closely with the U.S. in countertransnational criminal organization strategy, and the U.S. played a significant role in the decisive raid that killed the cartel boss. The U.S. government offered a \$15 million reward leading to El Mencho's capture, and the recently formed Joint Interagency Task Force-Counter Cartel, which involves multiple U.S. government agencies, proved crucial to the operation. The task force, launched in January, provided the Mexican government with "a detailed target package" for the El Mencho raid, according to a former U.S. official quoted by Reuters. A U.S. Predator surveillance drone provided intelligence to the Mexican efforts during the raid, the El Paso Times newspaper reported. The newspaper also reported that U.S. Special Forces and Mexican Special Forces had trained together over the previous six months drilling on scenarios for the El Mencho raid.

While the success of the operation gained international headlines, Ritondale noted, it's part of a long-standing partnership that has only grown closer during the administration of Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, who took office in October 2024. "What the operation of El Mencho brought to light is what a lot of people were already tracking: There is a deep level of cooperation between Mexico and the U.S. I don't think this is the first time that this has happened. For all intents and purposes, it was a very well-executed operation. The U.S. and Mexico are very well tuned to execute this kind of operation," he told The Watch. "This isn't their first rodeo." ■



THE WATCH ILLUSTRATION

# THE FENTANYL PIPELINE

Chinese chemical companies, cartels team up to fuel deadly epidemic

THE WATCH STAFF

**C**hemical manufacturers in China continue to fuel clandestine labs by churning out fentanyl precursors and contributing to a crisis that kills thousands in the United States every year. In many cases, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) 2025 National Drug Threat Assessment, they are delivering precursor chemicals to transnational criminal organizations, or TCOs, which convert them into the addictive and deadly opioid.

Although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has scheduled fentanyl and many precursors on its controlled substances list, the chemicals used to make the drug continue to flow from China to Mexico because the synthetic opioid is much easier and cheaper to produce than plant-based drugs. "China scheduled fentanyl and fentanyl analogs, and we realized somewhat of a reduction of direct shipments of fentanyl and fentanyl analogs directly from China to the United States," David Luckey, senior international and defense researcher for the nonprofit think tank Rand Corp., told The Watch. "But the shipment of fentanyl or precursor chemicals continued and perhaps increased from China to Mexico, and Mexican production of illegal fentanyl and fentanyl analogs increased," he added.

The U.S. in September 2025 sanctioned the Chinese chemical company Guangzhou Tengyue Chemical Co. Ltd. and two of the company's representatives for manufacturing



California Attorney General Rob Bonta, left, and Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman, center, listen to Downey Police Chief Scott Loughner in March 2025 as he announces felony charges against three people accused of possessing nearly 23 kilograms of fentanyl. LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

and coordinating shipments of illicit opioids and chemical agents to the U.S. "Overdoses from synthetic opioids like fentanyl is the leading killer of young Americans from 18-45," the U.S. State Department said in a news release. "China plays a central role in this crisis, not merely by failing to stem the ultimate source of many illicit drugs distributed in the United States, but by actively sustaining and expanding the business of poisoning our citizens."

Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., told the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in July 2025 that countering the smuggling of precursors is an important but complex law enforcement and regulatory effort. Although signs of CCP cooperation with the U.S. are emerging, Felbab-Brown said the CCP could do much more to help.

“After years of no cooperation between China and the United States, the two countries built up multifaceted anti-fentanyl cooperation in 2024,” she testified. The CCP has scheduled dozens of precursors and other drugs, cooperated with the U.S. on anti-money laundering efforts, and acted on U.S. intelligence to stem the flows. Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow at Brookings, directs the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors and the Brookings series *The Fentanyl Epidemic in North America and the Global Reach of Synthetic Opioids*.

While the U.S. has welcomed the CCP’s newfound cooperation, the assistance isn’t as full-throated as it could be. “The cooperation was far from perfect and featured significant gaps and limitations, such as the lack of law enforcement actions by China against Chinese smuggling networks knowingly selling nonscheduled chemicals to Mexican criminal groups with the clear knowledge they would use the precursors for illegal purposes,” Felbab-Brown testified. “China has demurred on such cooperation with the explanation that its legal framework lacks material support and racketeering laws or that the Chinese sellers didn’t know — despite evidence to the

A Drug Enforcement Administration chemist holds vials of fentanyl pills at a research laboratory in Northern Virginia.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



contrary — that they were selling to criminal networks abroad for the production of illicit drugs.”

## RAY OF HOPE

The CCP’s attempts at regulation, coupled with U.S. pressure on China and TCOs, have had some positive results. Although nearly 87,000 U.S. residents died from drug overdoses in the 12 months ending in September 2024, that’s a 24% decline from the previous year, when the death toll was 114,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In China’s latest enforcement effort, the CCP strengthened controls on two chemicals used to make fentanyl. It recently added 4-piperidone and 1-Boc-4-piperidone to a list of precursors to be more strictly controlled, according to a June 2025 report by *The New York Times* newspaper. The move “demonstrates China’s sincerity in wanting to work with the United States on this issue,” said Yun Sun, director of the China program at the Stimson Center, a Washington, D.C., research institute, the *Times* reported.

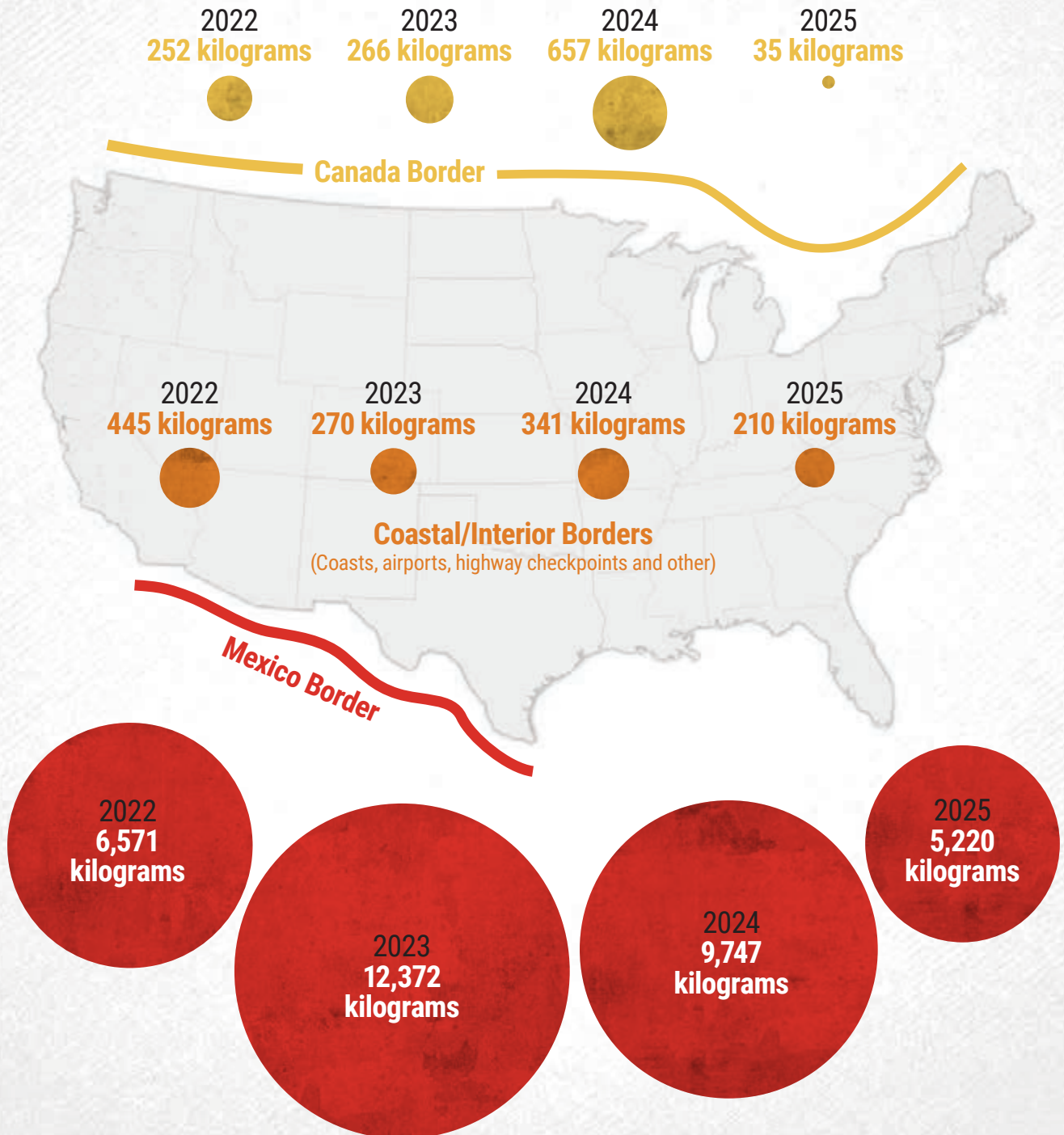
The new restrictions were announced shortly after Wang Xiaohong, the CCP’s minister of public security, met with David Perdue, the U.S. ambassador to China, in Beijing. The CCP also agreed to address the fentanyl supply chain in an agreement reached with the U.S. in late 2025. The CCP said it would stop the shipment of certain designated chemicals to North America and strictly control exports of certain other chemicals to all destinations in the world.

## PUNISHING THE PRODUCERS

The U.S. also is ramping up enforcement on TCOs. The U.S. State Department in February 2025 implemented an

# FENTANYL SEIZED

## Along the U.S. Borders



The Watch Illustration | Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection  
Note: Dates are fiscal years (from October to September).

executive order designating eight TCOs as foreign terrorist organizations, or FTOs, expanding the government’s authority to stem the illicit activities of the cartels. In September and November, the State Department added four more organizations to the FTO list.

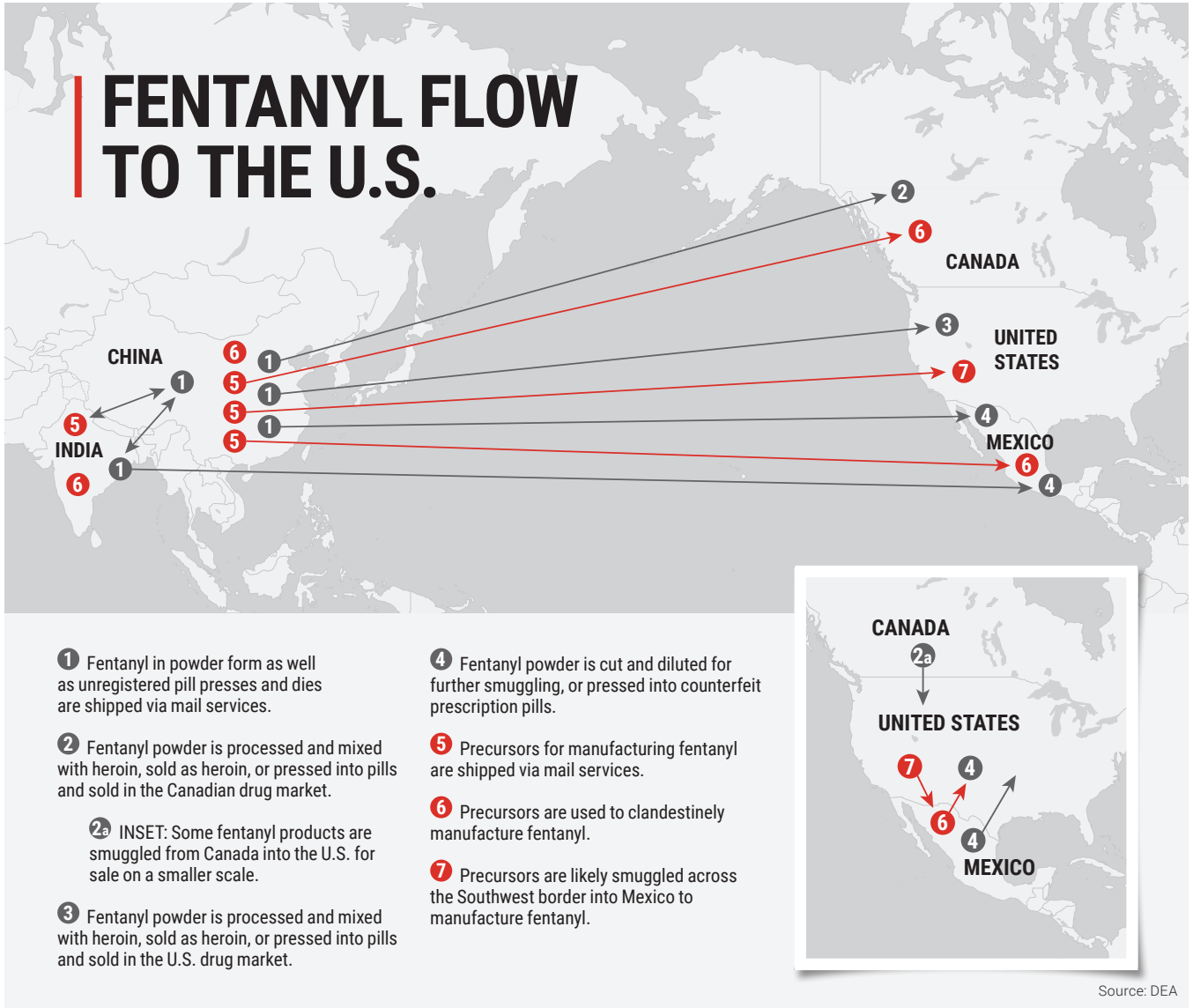
And, according to the DEA threat assessment, the cartels are a huge part of the problem. “Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) — including international drug cartels and other violent criminal groups — threaten the safety of the American people, the national security of the United States, and the safety and stability of the Western Hemisphere,” the DEA stated. “These organizations produce and traffic multi-ton quantities of illicit drugs, routinely engage in acts of violence and extortion, and orchestrate the flow of contraband and people through territories along the U.S.-Mexico border.”

Mexican TCOs are among the world’s leading producers of illicit drugs, such as fentanyl, heroin and methamphetamine, the DEA threat assessment states. The TCOs also

control the wholesale trafficking of these drugs and others into the U.S. These organizations form business ties with U.S. drug trafficking operations to distribute and sell drugs.

The foreign terrorist designation now applies to six Mexican cartels and six violent international gangs. Those designated were Barrio 18, Cartel de los Soles, Gulf Cartel, Jalisco New Generation Cartel, Los Choneros, Los Lobos, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), New Michoacan Family, Northeast Cartel, Sinaloa Cartel, Tren de Aragua and United Cartels.

Military operations also could be part of the recipe for stemming cartel crime. The U.S. government acknowledged in August 2025 that it was deploying three Aegis guided-missile destroyers to the waters off Venezuela to combat threats from Latin American drug cartels, Reuters and The Associated Press reported. The USS Gravelly, the USS Jason Dunham and the USS Sampson all traveled to the region. A U.S. War Department official also confirmed for the AP that military assets had been assigned to the



region in support of counternarcotics efforts.

Cooperation between Mexico and the U.S. to fight the cartels has been increasing. In August 2025, Mexico sent 26 cartel figures to face justice in the U.S. after the U.S. government requested them, AP reported.

### INDIA'S EMERGING ROLE

The fight against illicit fentanyl now includes a new player. The U.S. is enlisting the help of India to reduce the supply of precursors making their way into the U.S. In an August 2025 appearance on “The Joe Rogan Experience” podcast, FBI Director Kash Patel revealed that the U.S. is collaborating with Indian law enforcement to dismantle the trafficking of precursors.

Known as the “pharmacy of the world” for its role in supplying affordable medicines, vaccines and generic drugs globally, India has become a key transit point for Chinese chemical manufacturers sending precursors to Mexican cartels, Patel said.

Patel accused Chinese suppliers of routing precursors through India to evade enforcement in a deliberate campaign by the CCP to target the U.S. population. “You don’t hear fentanyl deaths in India,” he said. “You don’t really hear fentanyl deaths in England, Australia, New Zealand or Five Eyes partners in Canada,” he added.

The FBI has established direct contact with Indian authorities to tackle the issue. “We’re going to find these companies that buy it and we’re going to shut them down,” Patel said. Those efforts build upon a framework of cooperation established by the formation of the U.S.-India Counter Narcotics Working Group, which held its sixth annual meeting in 2025.

The working group’s framework has three pillars: (1) countering illicit production and trafficking of drugs, as well as their precursor chemicals; (2) advancing a sustainable and holistic public health partnership; and (3) advancing a secure and growing pharmaceutical supply chain. Both countries also have joined a global effort to stem the scourge of synthetic drugs by joining the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats, which was launched in 2023.

Such cooperation has led to criminal indictments. Indian chemical manufacturers already have been named in U.S. indictments, including Vasudha Pharma Chem Ltd., which has been charged with conspiring to send fentanyl precursors to Mexico and the U.S. The U.S. Justice Department announced in March 2025 that Vasudha and three employees were charged. They were Vasudha’s chief global business officer, Tanweer Ahmed Mohamed Hussain Parkar, 63; marketing director Venkata Naga Madhusudhan Raju Manthena, 48; and marketing representative Krishna Vericharla, 40. Each was charged with multiple counts of manufacturing and distributing a List 1 fentanyl precursor chemical for unlawful importation into the United States. Two other companies, Raxuter Chemicals and Athos Chemicals Private Ltd., face similar charges.



Then-U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi points to a photograph of Heriberto Salazar Amaya. She described him as the head of a criminal organization that deals fentanyl. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

### THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENTANYL CHALLENGE

Rand Corp.’s Luckey played a key role in an expansive opioid study by helping lead his organization’s research for the Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking. The 2022 report called for a whole-of-nation approach to shutting off the flow of illicit opioids, expanding access to treatment and reducing fatalities by spreading the use of overdose-reversing drugs such as naloxone. The commission included four members of Congress, officials from seven executive branch departments, four nongovernmental experts and more than 60 Rand researchers and analysts.

While much of the report keys on stemming the supply, it places a large emphasis on reducing the harm of the often-deadly drug through better public health approaches. “Better access to and continued scientific understanding of treatments for OUD [opioid use disorder], including through medication, are primary needs. Innovative prevention messaging must inform entire communities — including those with OUD, those who casually use drugs, and the public at large — of the pervasiveness of synthetic opioids used as a lacing agent and resources available to those struggling with addiction.”

Education about the deceptive marketing tactics used by the cartels is paramount, the commission’s report said. “Global drug traffickers continue to evolve to meet consumer preferences — the advent of synthetic opioids in pill form leverages Americans’ familiarity with taking pills and does away with the social stigma of injection, snorting, and smoking. Of deepest concern is that most consumers are not — at least initially — seeking fentanyl specifically,” the report said. “Rather, it is being laced into heroin or manufactured as counterfeit tablets, including such brand names as OxyContin, Percocet, Vicodin, Adderall, and Xanax, driving overdose deaths.” ■

# SIFTING FACT FROM FICTION

Russia's propaganda machine sets sights on Latin American drug cartels

## THE WATCH STAFF

Russia has ramped up its propaganda machine to peddle lies about the United States' connections to Latin American drug cartels. Among the claims: The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and FBI are enlisting imprisoned members of Mexican and Colombian drug cartels to fight for Ukraine against Russia; and Ukraine is selling donated U.S. weapons, including Javelin anti-tank missiles and grenade launchers, to a Mexican drug cartel. Fact-checkers have repeatedly debunked these lies.

Like Baghdad Bob, Saddam Hussein's fawning mouthpiece during the Iraq War, Russia spins a web of far-fetched falsehoods to advance its political objectives. Among its top priorities these days is victory in Ukraine, which Russia invaded in February 2022 after annexing Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

In November 2023, the U.S. State Department accused Russia of funding a disinformation campaign in Latin America that floods the media with propaganda and fake news to drain support for Ukraine and bolster anti-U.S. and anti-NATO sentiments. The campaign is "designed to surreptitiously exploit the openness of Latin America's media and information environment," a State Department statement said. "The Kremlin's ultimate goal appears to be to launder its propaganda and disinformation through local media in a way that feels organic to Latin American audiences."

Moscow's message? "That Russia's war against Ukraine is just and that they can unite with Russia to defeat neocolonialism," the State Department said. "These themes align with Russia's broader false narrative that it is a champion against neocolonialization, when in reality it is engaged in neocolonialism and neo-imperialism in its war against Ukraine and its resource extraction in Africa."

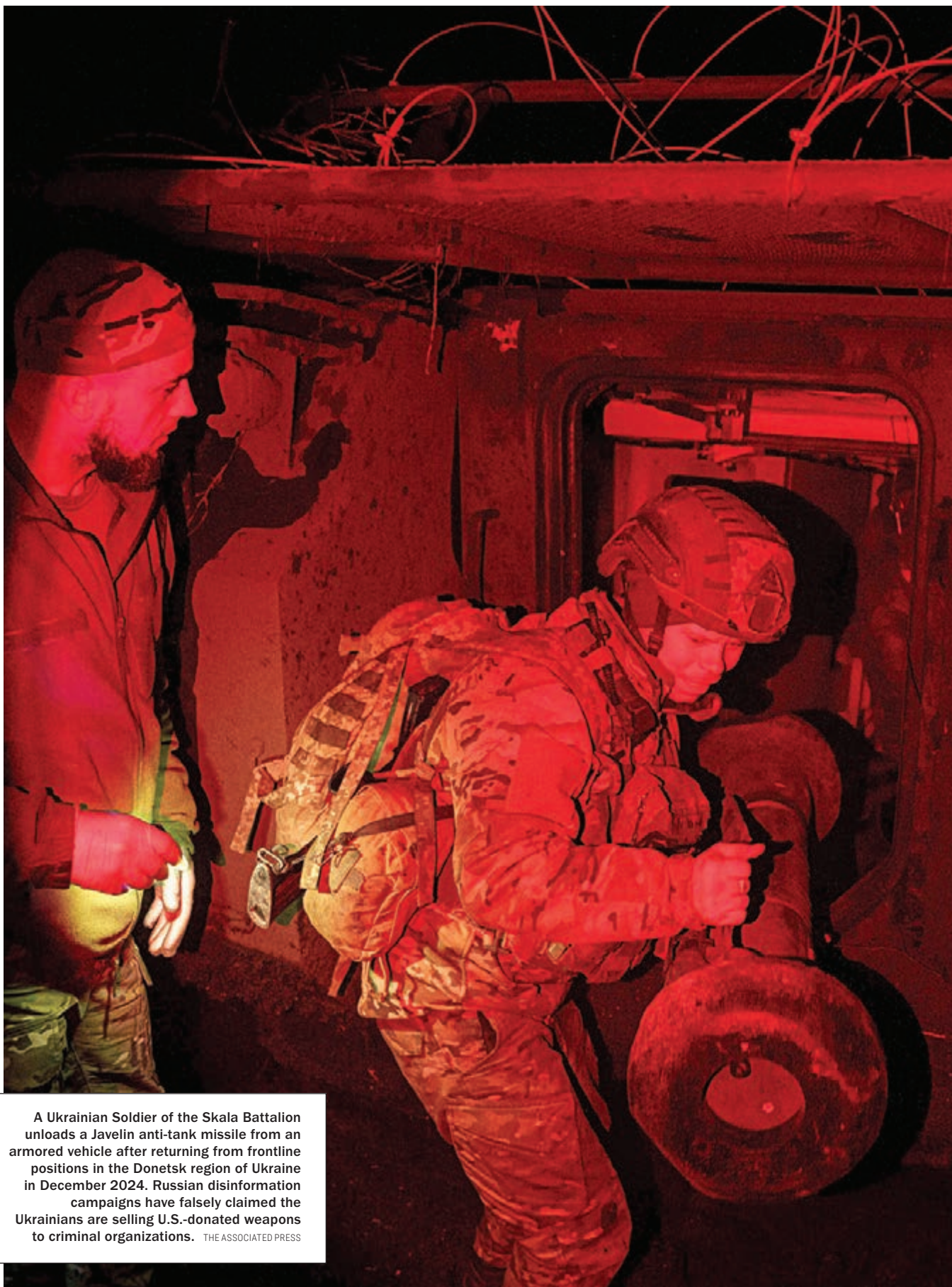
"The Kremlin's ultimate goal appears to be to launder its propaganda and disinformation through local media in a way that feels organic to Latin American audiences."

~ from a November 2023 statement by the U.S. State Department

"The Kremlin's goals with Mexico and Latin America are similar to its goals with Africa, Southeast Asia and beyond: to diminish and supplant the U.S.'s, and the broader West's, ties in these regions, while also delegitimizing democracy writ large to ensure Russia's own system of governance remains favorably viewed at home," Benjamin Shultz, lead researcher at the American Sunlight Project, told The Watch in an email. The American Sunlight Project is an organization that analyzes and counters online misinformation and disinformation.



THE WATCH ILLUSTRATION



A Ukrainian Soldier of the Skala Battalion unloads a Javelin anti-tank missile from an armored vehicle after returning from frontline positions in the Donetsk region of Ukraine in December 2024. Russian disinformation campaigns have falsely claimed the Ukrainians are selling U.S.-donated weapons to criminal organizations. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

“The Kremlin’s goals with Mexico and Latin America are similar to its goals with Africa, Southeast Asia and beyond: to diminish and supplant the U.S.’s, and the broader West’s, ties in these regions, while also delegitimizing democracy writ large to ensure Russia’s own system of governance remains favorably viewed at home.”

~ Benjamin Shultz, lead researcher at the American Sunlight Project

In September 2024, the U.S. Justice Department announced it had seized 32 internet domains that the Russian government used in foreign malign influence campaigns, known as Doppelganger. Russian companies Social Design Agency (SDA), Structura National Technology and ANO Dialog were cited in an unsealed affidavit.

“At [Russian President Vladimir] Putin’s direction, Russian companies SDA, Structura, and ANO Dialog used cybersquatting, fabricated influencers, and fake profiles to covertly promote” false narratives generated by artificial intelligence (AI) on social media, then-Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco said. The disinformation campaign was directed at Mexico, the United States and other U.S. allies, the Justice Department said.

But disinformation campaigns in Latin America aren’t targeting only Latin Americans. “They are employing the cartels in their narratives as a hook to connect their story telling with specific audiences in the U.S.,” said Dr. Darren Linvill, a Clemson University researcher and expert in social media forensics and disinformation. He is co-director of the university’s Media Forensics Hub, a team of researchers working to study and combat online deception.

“Many communities in the U.S. reasonably see the cartels as a sort of boogeyman and are simply more likely to listen to a narrative that discusses them,” Linvill said. He explained that Russian propaganda similarly tries to connect Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to hot-button social issues and conspiracy theories because those narratives “play well with the audiences Russia is trying to reach.”

In April 2024, the Voice of America (VOA) news website reported that Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR, had alleged with no proof that U.S. law enforcement agencies were recruiting imprisoned members of Mexican and Colombian drug cartels to fight against Russia in its war with Ukraine. “American private military companies, under the guidance of the Drug Enforcement Administration and the FBI, have begun to recruit Mexican and Colombian drug cartels’ members, who are serving their sentence in American prisons, to take part in the Ukrainian conflict on the side of Kyiv’s degrading regime,” the

SVR said in a news release. The SVR claimed the “first group of cutthroats” were to be deployed to Ukraine in summer 2024 and had been promised full amnesty.

The SVR also alleged that the United States negotiated with drug lords to lock down a deal. The British newspaper The Sun reported: “The SVR made wild rumours suggesting the chosen prisoners would be sent on a ‘business trip’ to Ukraine under the promise they would return to a pardon and be allowed to return home.”

VOA’s fact-checking project, Polygraph, “found no reports in Russian and Western news outlets or by rights and drug trafficking watch groups to back up the SVR’s statement,” VOA reported. “There are also no reports about the U.S. government agencies asking drug lords for permission to send their men to the front line in Ukraine.”



Russian President Vladimir Putin has overseen numerous disinformation campaigns that falsely imply connections between the U.S. government and drug cartels. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

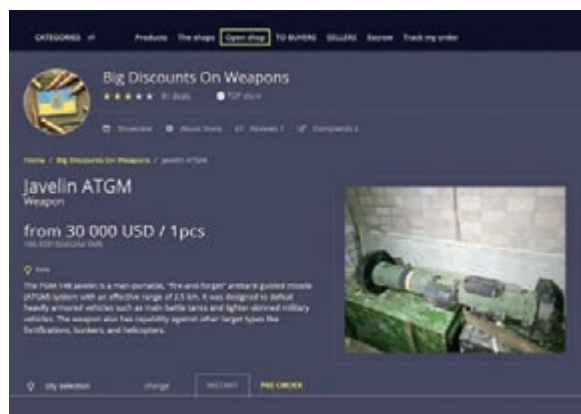
Ironically, Russia’s use of its own criminals to populate the battlefield is well known. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the now-deceased head of the Russian private military company Wagner Group, recruited tens of thousands of Russian prisoners to battle in Ukraine with the promise of amnesty after six months. The practice continued after Prigozhin’s death in a suspicious plane crash two months after he led an aborted rebellion against Russia’s Ministry of Defence.

United24 Media, a Ukrainian government news platform, reported in April 2024 on the complex Russian government machinations that fed a fake story that Ukraine was selling U.S. weapons, such as Javelin anti-tank missiles and grenade launchers, to a Mexican drug cartel. Citing the Center for Countering Disinformation, part of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, and a BBC News investigation, United24 Media outlined how Russia's government created fake advertisements purporting to sell Javelin anti-tank missiles and then set the story loose on Russian media.

A BBC investigation team contacted people on the dark web who were claiming they had U.S. weapons, donated to Ukraine, for sale. Russian media had reported that these "sellers" were Ukrainians. When the BBC team communicated with one who had the username "javelinusa," his communications in Ukrainian were riddled with grammatical errors. Javelinusa was asked about it, and he then claimed he was Polish.

A linguist who analyzed the communications for the BBC said that was a lie. "The person behind these messages is Russian-speaking," Daria Lewicka, an expert in Polish and a Ukrainian-Russian-Polish interpreter, told the BBC.

"I see a lot of 'Russianisms' in his Ukrainian language, but I don't see any 'Polonisms' at all," Lewicka told the BBC. "For example, he uses a phrase 'зуби не заговорюй' [which can be translated as 'don't beat around the bush']. This is a common Russian phrase and it has no equivalent in Polish."



A screenshot from the dark web shows a Javelin anti-tank missile system purportedly for sale for \$30,000 with the promise to deliver the weapons to the Ukraine-Poland border or abroad. BBC

The seller also made some typos, so the online translator did not recognize them and left the original words untranslated. Both words were Russian, with Russian spellings. BBC contacted another seller and found a similar pattern.

Lewicka also found inconsistencies in reviews — mostly posted in Polish — vouching for the sellers.

It was clear to Lewicka that they had used online translators. "Real people don't talk like this," she said.

Newsweek, meanwhile, reported that one ad was traced to pro-Russian Telegram channels, and the images of the Javelin anti-tank weapon were from 2014, before the war. Newsweek said Russian media misrepresented official oversight measures as proof of illicit activity. Keith Kellogg, President Donald Trump's special envoy for Ukraine, "said that 'inspector generals are on the ground in Ukraine' monitoring weapons transfers and financial aid to ensure accountability," Newsweek reported.

The fake stories were spread to other markets as well, including Mexico. But there, the story evolved into the sale of military weapons to drug cartels. "The fake news and disinformation materials they produced ... shape their narrative about the 'black market of weapons' to suit different audiences," United24 Media reported.

Linville, of Clemson University, concurred. "Just as there have been narratives about the cartels using weapons the U.S. gave to Ukraine, there have also been narratives about Hamas using weapons the U.S. gave to Ukraine," he said.

On August 1, 2022, Russian media and Telegram channels, referencing Mexican broadcaster Milenio Televisión, published a video alleging the sale of Ukrainian weapons to a Mexican drug cartel. The video mentioned dozens of U.S.-made M136 grenade launchers, AK-47 assault rifles and Javelin anti-tank guided missiles that were "supplied to Ukraine by the USA," United24 Media said.

But the TV presenter mistakenly calls an M136 AT4 anti-tank grenade launcher — a weapon mass-produced since the 1980s — a "Javelin." M136 AT4 grenade launchers are widely used by many militaries throughout the world.

Russian state media arm RT en Español picked up the story and amplified it. The Russian embassy in Mexico then released a statement saying, "the Kyiv regime is pumped with Western weapons and resells them to Mexican cartels." Mainstream Mexican media repeated the embassy statement without questioning it.

Both the U.S. Department of War Office of Inspector General and the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) have confirmed that they've found no evidence that Ukraine's military has sold U.S.-donated weapons. "Had we found such evidence, we would have investigated these leads," Chelsa Kenney, a director for international affairs at GAO, told The Dispatch, an online magazine.

Research by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, an international non-governmental organization, found "a whole new industry in fake darknet sites purporting to sell weapons provided to Ukraine, whether as Russian



An Indian Soldier fires the U.S. military's anti-tank Javelin missile during a joint exercise with U.S. Soldiers at Camp Bundela, India. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF WAR

“Russian disinformation is a constant pressure campaign on us. Our work to stem it needs to be similarly constant.”

~ Dr. Darren Linvill, researcher and expert in social media forensics and disinformation, Clemson University

information operations to discredit Kyiv, or simply as scams.” Numerous organizations have debunked the claims, including The Associated Press; the East StratCom Task Force, a European anti-disinformation group; and Euronews, a European TV news network. Newsweek also pointed out that there have been no reports of Mexican transnational criminal organizations deploying heavy U.S. artillery.

“Russian disinformation is a constant pressure campaign on us,” Linvill said. “Our work to stem it needs to be similarly constant.”

Shultz, of the American Sunlight Project, said the Russian disinformation could ramp up. “It is entirely possible that ... Russia rehashes claims around drug cartels infiltrating American communities, or drug cartels working with the Ukrainian military,” Shultz said. “Russia has previously labeled Zelensky a drug addict; perhaps there will be some interplay between Latin America and narratives like these over the next year.”

On February 10, 2025, U.S.-based political commentator Tucker Carlson revived the false claims about arms sales to Mexican drug cartels. “Fact — not guess, fact — is the Ukrainian military is selling a huge percentage, up to half, of the arms we send them,” Carlson said on “The Tucker Carlson Show.” “They’re selling it, and a lot of it is winding up with the drug cartels on our border,” he said.

The Russian Embassy in Mexico, meanwhile, continues to pound the drum of disinformation. On July 17, on the social networking platform X, the embassy published a statement from Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova that said: “The smuggling of Western weapons remains a lucrative business for Kyiv, with a volume of billions

of dollars per month. ... While thousands of young Ukrainians die, the Ukrainian junta continues to enrich itself.”

After the National Autonomous University of Mexico provided a prosthetic limb to a Ukrainian Soldier injured in the war with Russia, the Russian Embassy posted its objection on X in May 2025, falsely claiming, “In Ukraine, people who professed neo-Nazi ideas came to power and started a war against their own population.” The Russian Embassy lied again in June, saying the Ukrainian Embassy in Mexico had become “a recruitment center” for Mexicans willing to fight for Ukraine. When The New York Times published a story in December about Russian spies in Mexico, the Russian Embassy in Mexico issued a sarcastic response whining about “the spirit of espionage mania” and pushing more falsehoods.

So, what’s next for Russian disinformation? Whatever form it takes, AI probably will amplify it.

“AI is super-charging Russian disinformation campaigns,” Shultz told The Watch. “Russia is leveraging mass content aggregation networks to ‘groom’ LLMs [large-language models] like ChatGPT, resulting in Russian state propaganda (presented as fact) reaching untold numbers of Americans.”

“Moreover, deepfakes, such as a recent campaign targeting [French President Emmanuel] Macron, [German Chancellor Friedrich] Merz and [British Prime Minister Keir] Starmer, alleging them to be doing cocaine in Ukraine, are making false events which never took place look as real as ever. LLMs and other generative AI technologies are cheaper and more accessible than ever before, enabling the Kremlin to expand its influence operations,” Shultz said. ▣

ASIA



## ASIAN SCAM OPERATIONS ARE EXPANDING WORLDWIDE, RESEARCHERS WARN

*The Associated Press*

**T**ransnational criminal organizations in East and Southeast Asia are spreading their lucrative scam operations across the globe in response to crackdowns by authorities, according to an April 2025 United Nations report. For several years, scam compounds have proliferated in Southeast Asia, especially in border areas of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, as well as in the Philippines, shifting operations from site to site to stay a step ahead of the police.

More recently, scam centers that have bilked victims out of billions through false romantic ploys, bogus investment pitches and illegal gambling schemes now are operating as far afield as Africa and Latin America. Asian crime

syndicates have been expanding operations deeper into remote areas with lax law enforcement that are vulnerable to the influx, according to the report from the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The report is titled "Inflection Point: Global Implications of Scam Centers, Underground Banking and Illicit Online Marketplaces in Southeast Asia."

"This reflects both a natural expansion as the industry grows and seeks new ways and places to do business, but also a hedging against future risks should disruption continue and intensify in Southeast Asia," Benedikt Hofmann, UNODC's acting regional representative for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, said in an April 2025 statement.

## SON OF 'EL CHAPO' PLEADS GUILTY IN U.S. DRUG CASE, PROMISES COOPERATION

The Associated Press



Video provided by the Mexican government shows Ovidio Guzmán López being detained in Culiacán, Mexico. CEPROPIE VIA THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**A** son of notorious Mexican drug kingpin “El Chapo” pleaded guilty in July 2025 to drug trafficking charges in the United States, becoming the first of the drug lord’s sons to enter a plea deal. Prosecutors allege Ovidio Guzmán López and his brother, Joaquín Guzmán López, ran a faction of the Sinaloa Cartel. They became known locally as the “Chapitos,” or “little Chapos,” and U.S. federal authorities in 2023 described the operation as a massive effort to send staggering quantities of fentanyl into the U.S.

As part of a plea agreement, Ovidio Guzmán López admitted to helping oversee the production and smuggling of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, marijuana and fentanyl into the U.S., fueling a crisis that has contributed to tens of thousands of overdose deaths annually. Guzmán López also pleaded guilty to drug trafficking, money laundering and firearms charges.

Terms of the deal were not disclosed.

Guzmán López’s sentencing was postponed while he cooperates with authorities. Whether he avoids a life sentence depends on whether authorities say he has met the terms of the agreement.

Joaquín Guzmán López, meanwhile, pleaded guilty December 1, 2025, to two counts of drug trafficking and continuing criminal enterprise. With the plea deal, his attorney said, he is expected to avoid life in prison.

Laurie Levenson, a professor at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles and former assistant U.S. attorney, said that Ovidio Guzmán López, by pleading guilty, may have “saved other family members ... in this way, he has some control over who he’s cooperating against and what the world will know about that cooperation.” Levenson called the plea change a big step for the U.S. government and said Ovidio Guzmán López could provide “a road map of how to identify members of the cartel.”

## CANADA

## CANADA LISTS 7 CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS AS TERRORIST ENTITIES

Reuters

**C**anada has listed seven transnational criminal organizations as terrorist entities and announced a new partnership with banks to combat money laundering. The list of terrorist entities includes Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), the Sinaloa Cartel and Tren de Aragua, the Public Safety Ministry said.

The announcement in February 2025 came a day after the United States designated Tren de Aragua, the Sinaloa Cartel and other drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations. "These listed entities are organized crime groups that spread fear in local populations by using methods of extreme violence, and are known for drug trafficking, human trafficking and trafficking in illegal guns," then-Public Safety Minister

David McGuinty told reporters in Ottawa. "The measures we are taking will keep fentanyl off the streets and from entering the United States."

The other listed entities are the Gulf Cartel, La Familia Michoacana, Carteles Unidos and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

To curb money laundering linked to drug trafficking, the Department of Finance announced a new partnership with law enforcement, Ottawa and Canada's big banks that will allow them to share money laundering and organized crime intelligence.

Canada's fentanyl czar Kevin Brosseau in February 2025 launched the first meeting of the partnership, which includes chief money laundering officers of the big banks and national police force officials.

Ryan Wedding, a former Canadian Olympic snowboarder who has pleaded not guilty to running a billion-dollar drug trafficking ring and orchestrating multiple killings, is taken off a plane by FBI agents in Ontario, California, on January 23, 2026. Authorities say he was working under the protection of the Sinaloa Cartel, which is one of seven transnational criminal organizations that Canada has listed as terrorist entities. FBI VIA THE ASSOCIATED PRESS





## CHINA SHOWS MOVEMENT ON KEY U.S. FENTANYL DEMANDS

Reuters

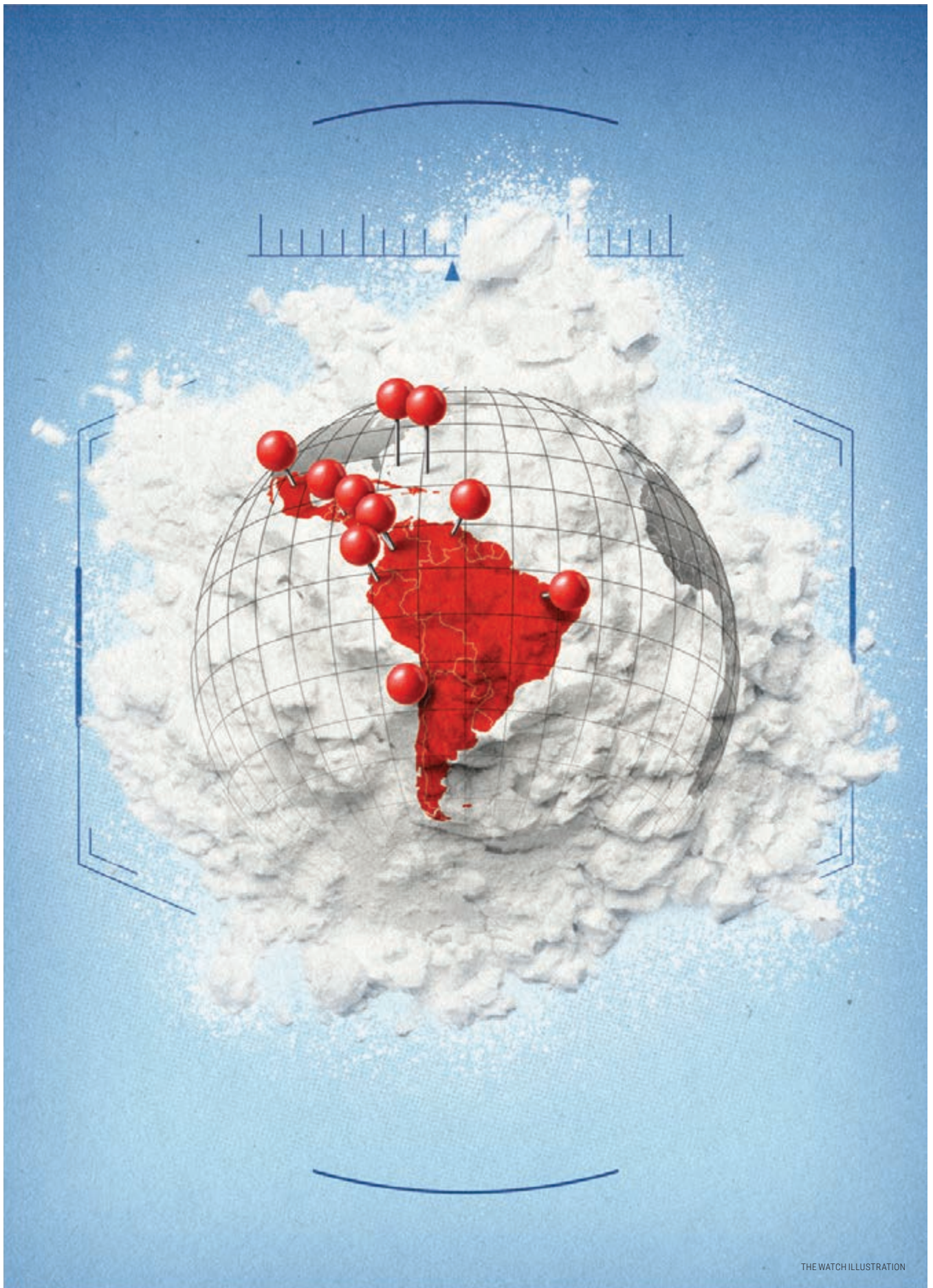
**C**hina took a series of actions in June 2025 to counter the narcotics trade in a sign of cooperation with the United States' demands for stronger steps to curb the flow of the synthetic opioid fentanyl. The U.S. imposed 20% tariffs on Chinese imports in February 2025 over Beijing's failure to curb the flow of precursor chemicals for fentanyl. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has balked at some of Washington's demands, which included publicizing the crackdown on precursors on the front page of the CCP's People's Daily newspaper, educating party members and tightening regulation of specific chemicals.

However, Beijing did add two precursors to a list of controlled chemicals starting on July 20, 2025. The chemicals, 4-piperidone and 1-boc-4-piperidone, were "considered fundamental to resolving the fentanyl issue," according to a source familiar

with U.S. negotiations.

The move came after U.S. Ambassador David Perdue had a meeting with China's Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong in Beijing, at which Wang expressed willingness to work with Washington on drug control, according to a Chinese statement.

After that statement, a court in the southeastern province of Fujian handed a suspended death sentence to former drug control official Liu Yuejin for bribery, state media reported. Liu, a former director of the Ministry of Public Security's narcotics control bureau, was convicted of illegally receiving bribes worth over \$17 million between 1992 and 2020. His death sentence was suspended for two years. According to Chinese law, if a convicted person sentenced to death does not commit a crime during their reprieve period, their sentence could be reduced to life imprisonment.



THE WATCH ILLUSTRATION

# LESSONS LEARNED

As U.S. counters transnational criminal organizations, what do Latin American operations teach?

## THE WATCH STAFF

**T**he United States has been helping to counter transnational criminal organizations, or TCOs, in Latin America for nearly a half-century. In Colombia, the rise of TCOs in the 1980s threatened that country's internal and regional stability. The export of cocaine to the U.S. damaged citizens and communities. But in 2000, a joint Colombian-U.S. agreement to conduct counter-TCO operations began, formalizing a relationship with origins in the U.S. economic, diplomatic, intelligence and military spheres that helped Colombia dismantle the brutal narcotics regimes.

Mexico is now the center of cartel activity threatening U.S. and Mexican national security. TCOs like the Sinaloa Cartel and the *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* funnel up to \$30 billion worth of drugs, illegal migrants and other contraband across the 3,145-kilometer border each year. In January 2025, the U.S. government declared a national emergency and since has poured military resources, including radar, air and naval assets, bolstered by 10,000 Army Soldiers and National Guardsmen, along the frontier and its maritime approaches. Mexico also has sent 10,000 troops and increased intelligence gathering and precision raids. Illegal migration has nearly ceased, and the increased U.S. presence has greatly complicated cartel efforts

to ferry drugs and human beings. But challenges and questions remain: Do the efforts of Colombia and other Latin American and Caribbean countries offer lessons to be learned?

While based in a brutal reality of cocaine-fueled violence, political corruption and social dislocation, the media images of previous decades frequently obscure the effectiveness of U.S. military, economic and political partnership with Colombia and Colombian resolve to tackle complex issues.

### CRACKDOWN IN COLOMBIA

Often, the popular image of Colombian drug trafficking involves TV and movie images of hippopotamuses owned by drug barons menacing rural farmers, and lavish estates full of assassins. While based in a brutal reality of cocaine-fueled violence, political corruption and social dislocation, the media images of previous decades frequently obscure the effectiveness of U.S. military, economic and political



Sailors assigned to the littoral combat ship USS Little Rock, now decommissioned, and Coast Guardsmen with the Law Enforcement Detachment conduct live-hoisting exercises to a rigid-hull inflatable boat in 2020. The Little Rock supported Joint Interagency Task Force South's Campaign Martillo targeting illicit drug operations. U.S. NAVY

partnership with Colombia and Colombian resolve to tackle complex issues. U.S. law enforcement agencies like the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), working with their Colombian partners, proved crucial to the downfall of kingpins like Pablo Escobar and the leaders of the Cali Cartel.

Beginning in the 1980s, and formalized in 2000's Plan Colombia, the U.S. and Colombian governments employed a wide array of strategies to counter TCOs in the region, including destroying coca crops, training Colombian Soldiers to counter TCO activity, and providing aerial intelligence and surveillance. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department and other agencies have helped the Colombian government reform its judicial system and professionalize its military and political institutions. All told, a 2025 State Department report tallied nearly \$500 million in counter-TCO aid to Bogotá since 2017, which was deemed an important non-NATO ally in 2022.

The counter-TCO strategy in Colombia has achieved notable successes — currently no TCO looms as large as Escobar of the Medellín Cartel, and the Cali Cartel once did. A 2022 report by the Rand Corp. think tank found that U.S. involvement in counter-TCO activities had yielded sustained benefits and aided in the defeat of a guerrilla movement reliant on the narcotics trade. “The broad partnership between the governments of Colombia and the United States beginning in 2000 was instrumental in

preventing Colombia from becoming a likely failed state and in ending the insurgency,” the report concluded.

From 2000 to 2020 — the first two decades of Plan Colombia — U.S. aid helped build the capacity of the Colombian military and police to investigate, arrest and dismantle cartel operations.

While not focused on dismantling cartel production facilities, crops or leadership, Campaign Martillo seeks to make transporting narcotics unprofitable by seizing drugs, arresting distributors and deterring traffickers.

### **CAMPAIGN MARTILLO**

In 2012, the U.S. launched Operation Martillo, a multi-national effort to deter drug trafficking in the Caribbean and Central America. Since renamed Campaign Martillo (Hammer), the ongoing operation, overseen by U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), has played a key

Colombian Adm. Jose Espitia, left, then commander of the Task Force against Drug Trafficking, called "Poseidon," shakes hands with Soldiers next to a narco-submarine seized in Buenaventura, Colombia, in March 2021. AFP/GETTY IMAGES



The coordination of so many participating military forces over more than a dozen years demonstrates the success of military assets strategically deployed in an integrated, coordinated way to stymie TCO activity.

role in stemming the tide of TCO-supplied narcotics to the U.S. More than a dozen European and Latin American allies and partners have sent naval ships to patrol the Caribbean and eastern Pacific regions, and land-based forces in Central and South America have collaborated to interrupt drug trafficking routes from Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and other production regions. While not focused on dismantling cartel production facilities, crops or leadership, Campaign Martillo seeks to make transporting narcotics unprofitable by seizing drugs, arresting distributors and deterring traffickers. U.S. Navy and Coast Guard vessels as well as aircraft from several U.S. agencies have participated alongside forces from Belize, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, France, Guatemala, Honduras, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Panama, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States. Chile also has contributed, according to USSOUTHCOM.

Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) coordinates Campaign Martillo activities. The U.S. military takes the lead in detecting and monitoring drug shipments bound

for the U.S. by air or sea. Based on intelligence gathered under the direction of JIATF-S, U.S. law enforcement agencies and partner nations then take action to interdict drug runners. U.S. military assets support those efforts. In a Campaign Martillo maritime interdiction, for example, Navy ships and helicopters patrol and intercept traffickers, but the actual boarding, seizing of drugs and arrests are carried out by the U.S. Coast Guard's Law Enforcement Detachments, or LEDETs. The detachments are embedded on Navy ships as well as ships from partner nations. Other U.S. law enforcement agencies, like the DEA, also place detachments on Coast Guard ships.

From January through July 2025, Campaign Martillo netted more than \$1 billion in illegal narcotics, according to JIATF-S. The nearly weekly interdictions have included high-powered speedboats and semisubmersible submarines.

The coordination of so many participating military forces over more than a dozen years demonstrates the success of military assets strategically deployed in an integrated, coordinated way to stymie TCO activity.

“A comprehensive and sustained effort by the Mexican government to dismantle and effectively prosecute the middle operational layer of criminal groups, as well as the buildup of effective prosecutions, is essential to achieve a lasting weakening of the Mexican criminal groups.”

~ Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, Brookings Institution  
U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee testimony, July 2025



A member of the Mexican National Guard patrols the Izaguirre Ranch in Teuchitlán, Jalisco state, Mexico, in March 2025 after three crematoriums were found there. Then-Mexican Attorney General Alejandro Gertz Manero promised the “truth will come out” about what happened at a suspected drug cartel training ground where charred bones, shoes and clothing were discovered. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

## OPERATION BAHAMAS TURKS AND CAICOS

In 1982, the U.S. faced a fire hose of narcotics traveling through the Caribbean region to the country's shores four years after the Medellín Cartel first started buying property in Norman Cay, The Bahamas. The TCO had built an airstrip that served as a transshipment point for cocaine and marijuana from Colombia bound for the U.S. After The Bahamas shut down the Medellín operation, Operation Bahamas Turks and Caicos (OPBAT) was formed by The Bahamas, the U.K. and the U.S. The Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI), a British Overseas Territory, also had become a major transshipment point for narcotics on the way to the U.S.



Operation Bahamas Turks and Caicos (OPBAT) personnel stand among 1,031 kilograms of marijuana seized near Exuma, The Bahamas, in September 2020. OPBAT, formed in 1982, has targeted and interdicted drug shipments in the Caribbean region.

ROYAL BAHAMAS POLICE FORCE

Initially, the DEA took the lead as the primary agency with two helicopters to assist Royal Bahamas Defence Force (RBDF) troops to interdict drug operations. The agreement also gave U.S. interdiction forces the right to fly in the islands' airspace and patrol their contiguous waters. The Coast Guard took over command of OPBAT in 1987, according to a Coast Guard history. For more than 40 years, OPBAT has successfully impeded drug smuggling through the eastern Caribbean. "OPBAT is an example of cooperation and coordination between entities. It has responded to the changing patterns and techniques of the drug traffickers employing innovative and advanced technologies. It has been a successful operation and with continued flexibility will remain so," the history states.

OPBAT helicopters are guided by a Tactical Analysis Team and manned by Department of War intelligence specialists, who locate suspicious vessels in an enormous area — Bahamian waters roughly equal the area of California — and relay the information to RBDF or TCI Police units that execute the interdictions. U.S. Coast Guard ships also assist.

OPBAT has strengthened the security and defensive capabilities of regional partners like The Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos, whose geographic strategic importance to

drug smuggling routes has been countered with sustained collaborative pressure. But like Campaign Martillo, OPBAT doesn't dismantle production facilities or disarm TCOs by confronting them in their home territories. The risk of violence also has been lower traditionally in maritime interdictions than land-based operations.

## LESSONS

Mexico presents a much different scenario, experts say. A large nation sharing an extensive border with the U.S., Mexico presents unique challenges for combating cartels. A U.S. decision to designate six Mexican TCOs as foreign terrorist organizations in February 2025 potentially raises the stakes.

Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institution think tank based in Washington, D.C., testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee in July 2025 about effectively confronting Mexican TCOs. "A comprehensive and sustained effort by the Mexican government to dismantle and effectively prosecute the middle operational layer of criminal groups, as well as the buildup of effective prosecutions, is essential to achieve a lasting weakening of the Mexican criminal groups," Felbab-Brown said at the July 25 hearing.

Tricia Bacon, a professor at American University in Washington, D.C., who worked in counterterrorism at the State Department before her current post directing the university's Policy Anti-Terrorism Hub, said cartels are profit-driven, not ideologically motivated.

In her State Department career, Bacon served in Afghanistan and witnessed how hard it was to move Afghan politics and society away from opium cultivation. U.S. officials never found a successful replacement crop for farmers to grow instead of opium poppies. The judicial system remained a bastion of corruption. For Mexico to see a different outcome will require a sustained U.S. effort, she said.

That effort is already underway between the Mexican and U.S. militaries. In June 2025, Mexican Secretary of National Defense Gen. Ricardo Trevilla Trejo, the country's top Army official, and Navy Secretary Raymundo Pedro Morales Ángeles visited U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) in Colorado Springs, Colorado, for a three-day visit hosted by USNORTHCOM and North American Aerospace Defense Command Commander Gregory M. Guillot.

The visit, which involved the exchange of priorities and perspectives between top military leaders of both countries, contributed robustly to the mutual understanding and intellectual compatibility of the respective forces' commands. "This visit reflects the enduring trust and open communication between our nations' militaries," Guillot said. "Mexico is an essential partner in the defense of North America, and engagements like this ensure our efforts are aligned and effective," Guillot said, according to a USNORTHCOM news release. ■



# SHARING KNOWLEDGE

*The Watch journal is provided free to those responsible for homeland defense.*

## CONTRIBUTE TO THE WATCH

Send all story ideas, photos, opinion articles and other content to The Watch's editorial staff at [n-nc.peterson.n-ncj3.mbx.the-watch@mail.mil](mailto:n-nc.peterson.n-ncj3.mbx.the-watch@mail.mil)

### SUBMISSION TIPS

- Articles should not exceed 800 words.
- Please include a short biography and contact information with each submission.
- Photo file size should be at least 1 megabyte.

### RIGHTS

Authors retain all rights to their original material. However, we reserve the right to edit articles to meet length and style requirements. Article submission does not guarantee publication. By contributing, you agree to these terms.

Follow us on **Facebook** and view the Watch eTalk series at <https://thewatch-journal.com/etalk-panel>

FOR A

# FREE

SUBSCRIPTION

Reach us at:  
[thewatch-journal.com/contact](http://thewatch-journal.com/contact)

Or write to:

The Watch  
Program Manager  
HQ USNORTHCOM  
250 Vandenberg St., Suite B016  
Peterson SFB, CO 80914-3808

Please include your name, occupation, title or rank, mailing address, and email address.

THE **WATCH**

READ US AT [THEWATCH-JOURNAL.COM](http://THEWATCH-JOURNAL.COM)



For more on security and defense issues around the globe, visit the links below:

[APOGEE-MAGAZINE.COM](http://APOGEE-MAGAZINE.COM) | [DIALOGO-AMERICAS.COM](http://DIALOGO-AMERICAS.COM) | [IPDEFENSEFORUM.COM](http://IPDEFENSEFORUM.COM) | [SENTRY-MAGAZINE.COM](http://SENTRY-MAGAZINE.COM) | [UNIPATH-MAGAZINE.COM](http://UNIPATH-MAGAZINE.COM)