

The “4D Directive”: Confronting the Fentanyl Crisis as a National Security Threat

by

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The Fentanyl Crisis as a National Security Threat

Illicit fentanyl has become the deadliest force behind the United States' overdose crisis and a rising threat to national security. Unlike plant-based narcotics, fentanyl is entirely synthetic, inexpensive to manufacture, easy to traffic in minuscule quantities, and highly potent – 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine.¹ Because traffickers thus only need small shipments to flood consumer markets, the economics of fentanyl trafficking drive high profits while causing devastating public health costs. Since 2020, fentanyl has been linked to over 300,000 American deaths, with annual synthetic-opioid fatalities exceeding 70,000.² These numbers, which surpass U.S. combat deaths in many modern wars, highlight why fentanyl is increasingly seen as a national security threat rather than solely a public health issue.

The American overdose crisis developed in three distinct waves. The first began in the late 1990s, when aggressive marketing by pharmaceutical companies and over-prescription of opioids helped lead to overdose deaths rising from 8,000 in 1999 to over 16,000 by 2010.³ As access to prescriptions tightened, a second wave appeared around 2010, with users turning to heroin, mainly supplied by Mexican cartels. Heroin-related deaths nearly quintupled between

2010 and 2016.⁴ A third wave began in 2015, when illicit fentanyl and fentanyl analogues replaced heroin and prescription opioids as the leading cause of overdose fatalities. Deaths jumped from 22,000 in 2015 to over 56,000 by 2020, as fentanyl was increasingly mixed into counterfeit pills and other drugs, often without users' knowledge.⁵

This trajectory has established a resilient transnational supply chain that is challenging to disrupt. Chinese chemical and pharmaceutical companies – both legal and illicit – continue to be the primary sources of precursor chemicals used in the synthesis of fentanyl that is thereafter smuggled into the United States. Brokers exploit regulatory gaps, purchase chemicals online, and ship them through legitimate freight and parcel services, most commonly to Mexico.⁶ Mexican narcotrafficking cartels, especially the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation groups, then convert these inputs into fentanyl powder and counterfeit tablets, protected by sophisticated logistics and security networks.⁷ Smuggling into the United States primarily occurs through land ports of entry along the U.S. southern border, often concealed in passenger vehicles and commercial trucks; smaller amounts are transported through express couriers and international mail.⁸ (Fentanyl's extraordinary potency facilitates such smuggling, as very little volume is required to transport dangerous quantities.) Wholesale supplies then spread into decentralized retail networks, including online delivery, ensuring nationwide distribution.⁹

Financial infrastructure amplifies the problem. Cartels and their enablers rely on trade-based money laundering, underground Chinese banking, and digital assets to obscure profits. Sanctions and indictments have disrupted some networks, but front companies are easily reconstituted, and high profits ensure a ready supply of facilitators.¹⁰ This adaptability explains why record interdictions have not reduced overall supply; seizures fluctuate, but generally reflect adjustments by traffickers rather than a true contraction.¹¹

The effects go beyond public health into national and regional security. Fentanyl challenges U.S. border enforcement, where high trade volume strains inspections, and small shipments slip through

undetected. Mexican cartels strengthen their power by diversifying into extortion, fuel theft, and human smuggling, which further destabilizes Mexico and makes bilateral relations more difficult.¹² Digital technologies, encrypted communications, social media platforms, and pseudo-anonymous payments also help expand the reach of fentanyl networks and keep them hidden from scrutiny.¹³

Strategic competition increases the challenge. In 2019, pressured by the United States, Beijing placed all fentanyl-related substances under national control, briefly reducing flows. However, cooperation declined as tensions between the United States and China grew over trade, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. By 2022, China had suspended most counternarcotics cooperation, framing the crisis as a domestic American addiction issue, while Washington saw it as a global security concern.¹⁴ This divergence demonstrates how counternarcotics diplomacy has become vulnerable to broader geopolitical shifts.

Recent statistics illustrate the severity of the problem. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection Service (CBP) seized more than seven tons of fentanyl in fiscal year 2022, nearly doubling that amount in 2023.¹⁵ Although overdose deaths slightly declined in 2024 for the first time in years, the total still exceeded 95,000, surpassing the combined U.S. combat deaths in Korea and Vietnam.¹⁶ While U.S. interdiction and enforcement efforts have demonstrated impressive capacity, they also reveal the resilience of a network that continues to evolve and adapt, and on which those efforts have had remarkably little effect.

This context points to two ongoing realities. First, targeting a single part of the supply chain—such as precursors, laboratories, routes, or retail outlets—usually leads to substitution effects, with traffickers quickly shifting their activity elsewhere. Second, working with foreign partners is essential but fragile, hindered by corruption, uneven regulatory abilities, and conflicting political interests. Though it is true that the fentanyl trade feeds a continuing U.S. domestic demand for illicit opiates, that trade's dependence on Chinese precursors and Mexican cartels – groups now labeled by the U.S.

Government as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) – demonstrates that the crisis involves both state and non-state actors and cannot be seen solely as a U.S. domestic health problem.

The following section examines the primary tools available to U.S. authorities seeking to deal with this problem – namely, *deterrence*, *diplomacy*, *disruption*, and *defense* – and explains how they can be integrated with one another rather than employed in isolation. Throughout this paper, we refer to such an integrated approach as the “4D Framework.”

Policy Considerations: The 4D Framework

If fentanyl is to be addressed as a national security threat, policymakers need to first assess the tools at their disposal. Over the past decade, U.S. responses have included law enforcement activity, public health measures, financial sanctions, and military support; however, these efforts have too often been used only in a fragmented way. Implementing a coherent and integrated strategy, however, requires thinking systematically about the four main tools available: *deterrence*, *diplomacy*, *disruption*, and *defense*. Each tool targets a different part of the supply chain, with its own advantages and limitations; only by using them together can they create a sustainable solution.

In the case of the fentanyl trade, *deterrence* aims to change the cost-benefit calculations of those involved in manufacturing, transporting, or facilitating trafficking. Sanctions, criminal indictments, and extraditions, for instance, have targeted Chinese chemical suppliers and Mexican cartel leaders. The U.S. Treasury Department has used its authority to freeze assets and blacklist companies linked to precursor shipments, while the Department of Justice has filed criminal cases against Chinese nationals accused of marketing fentanyl precursors online.¹⁷ Labeling cartels as FTOs has expanded the legal options available, allowing for more use of counterterrorism measures.¹⁸ However, deterrence has inherent limitations. Many companies operate in loosely regulated

environments where reputational costs are low, and criminal networks are structurally resilient, quickly replacing sanctioned entities with new ones. To be effective, *deterrence* must be supported by consistent enforcement and clear consequences; otherwise, it risks becoming mere symbolic gestures.

Diplomacy is a second, vital tool because fentanyl is a transnational problem that no single country can solve alone. Sometimes, bilateral engagement has shown promise. In 2019, under U.S. pressure, China scheduled all fentanyl-related substances, for instance, closing a loophole that traffickers had exploited by changing chemical formulas.¹⁹ However, diplomatic progress remained fragile. As U.S.-China relations worsened over trade and Taiwan, Beijing pulled back cooperation, framing the crisis as a matter of American addiction demand rather than Chinese supply. (There are those, in fact, who have voiced suspicions that Beijing tolerates the trade in fentanyl precursors today as a matter of policy precisely because of its debilitating effects in the United States, in part as a kind of “payback” for Western – that is, British – support for the opium trade into Qing Dynasty China.²⁰)

Mexico also highlights the complexities of counternarcotics diplomacy. U.S. support through initiatives like the Mérida Initiative modernized Mexico’s military and police forces, but corruption, weak institutions, and cartel infiltration limited their ability to respond effectively.²¹ Broader coalitions, such as the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats, launched in 2023, offer hope for coordinated regulatory standards and intelligence sharing, but their success depends on U.S. leadership and the participation of hesitant states.²² Therefore, *diplomacy* is crucial, but it is rarely enough on its own.

Where *deterrence* and *diplomacy* seek to influence behavior, *disruption* targets networks directly. To this end, U.S. agencies have seized precursor shipments, dismantled clandestine labs, and imposed financial sanctions on cartel-linked intermediaries. Sometimes, these efforts have led to high-profile successes, such as the arrest of senior

cartel leaders and the coordination of Treasury and Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operations against money laundering networks.²³ However, *disruption* campaigns face two main challenges. First, since fentanyl is synthetic, small, easily hidden labs can replace those that are destroyed, unlike coca or poppy fields that need large-scale farming and hence are both easier to locate and more difficult to quickly reconstitute once disrupted. Second, cartels have shown great flexibility and agility in responding to disruption efforts, splitting into factions when leaders are arrested and shifting trafficking routes to avoid crackdowns. *Disruption* is thus essential, but it is inherently temporary – especially in the face of continued drug demand and high profits – unless integrated with *deterrence* and *diplomatic* efforts.

Defense constitutes the last line of effort, aimed at shielding the U.S. homeland from the influx of fentanyl that gets past upstream measures. CBP has invested heavily in advanced scanning technologies, canine units, and increased staffing at land ports of entry, resulting in record fentanyl seizures in 2022 and 2023.²⁴ The U.S. Coast Guard plays a similar role in intercepting precursor shipments across maritime routes, while partnerships with the Mexican Navy seek to strengthen interdiction efforts in the Gulf of Mexico. *Defense* also includes forensic tracing methods, which can link seized fentanyl to specific cartel operations and Chinese suppliers, enabling targeted sanctions and prosecutions.

However, *defense* efforts are limited by scale. The sheer volume of all forms of trade across U.S. borders makes comprehensive inspections impossible – especially against fentanyl, dangerous quantities of which can be concealed in a very small space – and traffickers continuously adapt with new concealment methods, such as drones, tunnels, and encrypted communications. Without upstream *disruption*, *defense* thus risks becoming a costly war of attrition in which the advantage belongs to the cartels.

Taken together, the four tools reveal both the breadth of U.S. strategic options and their inherent vulnerabilities. *Deterrence* without credible enforcement produces empty threats; *diplomacy* without

leverage yields symbolic agreements; *disruption* without coordination leads to temporary setbacks; and *defense* without upstream action resembles a perpetual game of catch-up. The value of the *4D Directive* lies not in treating these tools as alternatives, but in integrating them into a layered strategy that exerts pressure on networks across multiple levels.

The challenge for U.S. policymakers, then, is not whether to use *deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, or defense*, but how to integrate them effectively to create cumulative pressure rather than disjointed efforts. Knowing the available tools is only the first step. The next question is how well they have been applied in practice. Analyzing the record of three consecutive presidential administrations – President Donald Trump’s first term, Joe Biden’s presidency, and Trump’s current term – shows both limited progress and ongoing shortcomings.

United States Efforts to Date (2017-2025)

The trajectory of the fentanyl crisis has unfolded across three presidential administrations, each of which attempted to address the epidemic with varying degrees of focus upon deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, and defense. Overall, these efforts reveal recurring themes: partial successes, structural limitations, and a failure to maintain an integrated approach.

President Trump’s first term (2017-2021) treated the opioid epidemic mainly as a public health emergency supported by law enforcement efforts. In October 2017, the administration declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency and later passed the SUPPORT Act of 2018, which expanded treatment, prevention, and enforcement initiatives.²⁵ These actions coincided with tougher sanctions and prosecutions targeting Chinese suppliers of fentanyl precursors and Mexican cartel leaders. The administration also pushed Beijing in 2019 to classify all fentanyl-related substances, closing a loophole that traffickers had exploited by changing chemical formulas.²⁶ However, as we have seen, China’s enforcement weakened as trade tensions grew, and that initial progress proved temporary.

Similarly, efforts to improve intelligence sharing and joint operations with Mexico resulted in some lab seizures but were undermined by corruption and limited institutional capacity.²⁷ On the defensive side, the administration invested approximately \$6 billion in CBP upgrades, including new detection technologies and additional personnel, and fentanyl seizures increased.²⁸ This did not, however, seem to have much effect upon supply. In fact, from 2017 to 2020, annual fentanyl-related overdose deaths nearly tripled, from 19,500 to 56,894.²⁹ The first Trump Administration showed resolve but failed to significantly reduce the number of fatalities.

President Biden (2021–2025) adopted a more openly public health-focused approach, emphasizing harm reduction and international cooperation. The 2022 National Drug Control Strategy, for example, highlighted overdose prevention and the expansion of treatment and recovery programs. At the same time, the administration launched a Counter-Fentanyl Strike Force through the Treasury Department and DEA, targeting cartel finances and supply chains.³⁰ In October 2023, new sanctions and indictments were issued against Chinese firms and individuals linked to precursor shipments.³¹

Diplomatically, Biden aimed to revive cooperation with China; his November 2023 summit with Xi Jinping included commitments on counternarcotics cooperation, though Beijing's follow-through remained uncertain after suspending earlier coordination in 2022. With Mexico, the administration relied heavily on the U.S.-Mexico High-Level Security Dialogue to promote intelligence sharing and law enforcement coordination; however, systemic corruption and cartel adaptability limited progress.³² On defense, CBP recorded record seizures in 2022 and 2023, indicating improved interdiction efforts, yet overdose deaths still surpassed 70,000 annually, showing that seizures did not lead to reduced drug availability.³³ Critics argued that border vulnerabilities, combined with weak deterrence against cartels, allowed trafficking to thrive despite record interdictions.

President Trump's second term (2025–present) has adopted a significantly more assertive stance, driven by increasing border pressures and cartel violence. On inauguration day, he declared a national emergency at the southern border, and by April, roughly 9,000 military personnel had been deployed to support CBP operations.³⁴ As noted, cartels were designated as FTOs, expanding the government's authority to use counterterrorism tools against traffickers and their financial networks.³⁵

Diplomatically, Trump urged Mexico to take more decisive action, using tariff threats to secure the deployment of 10,000 National Guard troops to key trafficking routes.³⁶ China has been more resistant, however; Beijing still frames fentanyl as being only a U.S. domestic issue, weakening prospects for sustained cooperation.³⁷ In response to the disruption, the administration increased joint operations with Mexican forces, including embedding U.S. military advisors in support roles.³⁸ Discussions about potential U.S. special operations raids across the border have unsettled cartel leadership but also sparked debates over sovereignty and escalation.³⁹ On the defense front, CBP seizures remain high, and the presence of thousands of troops along the border highlights the administration's focus on physical deterrence. While it is too early to determine full outcomes, the second Trump administration has signaled an intent to treat fentanyl not only as a law enforcement issue but as a strategic threat comparable to terrorism.

Across all three administrations, the pattern is clear. Targeted actions have led to visible enforcement successes – sanctions imposed, labs destroyed, seizures recorded – yet the structural resilience of fentanyl networks has lessened the long-term effect of such measures. The adaptability of cartels, the inconsistent cooperation of China and Mexico, and the limits of border enforcement have all restricted U.S. efforts. This evidence shows the limits of a fragmented American response to the crisis.

Accordingly, the question is: What would a truly integrated strategy look like? The next section explains *how deterrence, diplomacy,*

disruption, and defense can be joined into a comprehensive approach capable of changing the course of the crisis.

Toward an Integrated 4D Framework

Deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, and defense have been employed, sometimes forcefully, but seldom in a coordinated manner. This lack of coordination is evident in how fentanyl policy has typically been organized around parallel public health, law enforcement, border security, and diplomatic initiatives. As reflected in successive National Drug Control Strategies and reinforced by persistent interagency fragmentation, these efforts have not been linked by a clearly articulated, integrated approach or placed under a single authority responsible for synchronizing their application across the supply chain.⁴⁰ The result has been a patchwork of policies that achieved tactical wins but did not reduce the overall availability of fentanyl. If the United States wants to change the course of the crisis, it must adopt an integrated approach that combines these tools into a long-term strategy.

Such integration must start with *deterrence*. Sanctions and indictments cannot be merely symbolic; they must be linked to visible enforcement and coordinated intelligence efforts. Labeling cartels as FTOs presents an opportunity to expand the legal arsenal; however, this label will only be effective if it is accompanied by real consequences, such as asset freezes, extraditions, and operational disruptions, executed in partnership with allies.⁴¹ To deter Chinese chemical suppliers, sanctions should be combined with persistent diplomacy that emphasizes the reputational costs of supporting a network responsible for tens of thousands of American deaths each year.⁴² (Since stepped-up sanctions on Chinese entities producing fentanyl precursor chemicals is likely further to roil Washington's relationship with Beijing, successful deterrence against the fentanyl trade may exist in some tension with other objectives in Sino-American relations. Working out the appropriate prioritization may be challenging.) *Deterrence* is effective only when the threat of costs is credible, consistent, and effectively integrated with other measures.

Diplomacy should be seen not as a concession but as a form of leverage. The fentanyl crisis is a shared threat to global stability, and framing it this way helps build coalitions beyond bilateral disagreements. The United States should expand the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats into an effective regulatory alliance, coordinating export controls and intelligence sharing among willing partners.⁴³ With Mexico, the goal is to move from occasional cooperation to a binding framework that ties U.S. aid to tangible progress against cartels. Sovereignty concerns (and Mexican sensitivities) will persist, but Mexico's involvement and cooperation is essential, and a new bilateral agreement – modeled on, but more robust than, the Mérida Initiative – provides the best way forward.⁴⁴ With China, engagement must include both pressure and incentives: pressuring Beijing through transparency and potential trade consequences while offering cooperation that aligns with its global self-image as a responsible great power.

Disruption requires a shift from episodic raids to ongoing financial and technological targeting. Cartel networks rely not only on secret laboratories but also on logistics, money laundering, and digital tools. Enhancing interagency cooperation among the Treasury, DEA, and intelligence agencies is crucial for tracking streams of digital assets, front companies, and shell transactions.⁴⁵ Simultaneously, joint operations with Mexico must evolve beyond merely targeting high-profile individuals to systematically dismantling the infrastructure that enables cartels to recover and adapt. Intelligence-driven disruption – bolstered by cyber capabilities and forensic tracking – can raise the cost of trafficking and weaken its resilience.

Defense should become the final, layered safeguard instead of the only line of resistance. Record seizures show capability but also highlight that interdiction alone cannot stop the flow. To be effective, defense must integrate maritime operations, postal inspections, land border screening, and digital monitoring of online trafficking. CBP needs ongoing funding for advanced detection systems, while the U.S. Coast Guard and Navy should work more closely to monitor maritime

precursor routes.⁴⁶ Defense should also reach into the cyber domain, where encrypted communications and social media recruitment are reshaping trafficking methods.

An integrated approach also needs clear coordination within the U.S. government. Currently, counternarcotics duties are spread across many agencies – DEA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Defense (DoD), CBP, State, and Treasury – without a single lead for strategy. Creating a national *fentanyl coordinator*, with authority similar to a counterterrorism “tsar,” would streamline interagency efforts and promote accountability. This role could help ensure that deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, and defense work together rather than separately.

Finally, integration must be maintained at the political level. Fentanyl is not a crisis that can be solved within one administration’s term. It is a generational challenge that requires ongoing policy, bipartisan support, and an understanding that failing to act strategically will extend a crisis that is in many ways as deadly as traditional warfare. By institutionalizing the *4D Directive*, the United States can move beyond short-term victories and aim for strategic results: reducing fentanyl availability, weakening cartels, and holding enablers accountable across borders.

The fentanyl crisis has already caused more deaths than many wars. It weakens border security, destabilizes allies, and erodes public trust in the government’s ability to protect its citizens. Tackling it requires a doctrine that integrates *deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, and defense* into a unified strategy. Without this integration, the United States will remain stuck in cycles of reacting and adapting, constantly responding to traffickers’ innovations. Overall, implementing our recommendations in this article would create a more coherent U.S. doctrine and hence a more effective approach. Indeed, *not* adopting such an approach would make the fentanyl epidemic one of the biggest national security failures of the 21st Century.

Conclusion: From Episodic Response to Doctrine

The fentanyl epidemic is no longer just a public health issue; it has become a *strategic threat* with consequences for national security, international stability, and the strength of American society. Overdose deaths in the tens of thousands annually represent not only a humanitarian crisis but also a slow-moving mass casualty event that erodes trust in governance and damages the integrity of U.S. borders.

Three administrations have attempted to tackle the issue with varying focus, but none has maintained a unified approach, and none has succeeded. The pattern is clear: limited diplomatic agreements, sporadic enforcement efforts, record seizures, and repeated adaptations by cartels and suppliers. Without a cohesive strategy, these efforts have remained fragmented and inadequate.

The United States now faces a stark choice. It can either treat fentanyl as a series of disconnected policy challenges – law enforcement, diplomacy, border control – or it can adopt an integrated counter-fentanyl strategy that synchronizes *deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, and defense* into a single approach. The first option perpetuates cycles of failure; the latter presents a genuine opportunity to alter the trajectory of the epidemic.

Recent developments in Venezuela – still underway at the time of writing – illustrate some ways in which regimes that depend on illicit economies such as drug trafficking respond to certain types of external pressure. Although Venezuela is not part of the fentanyl production chain, it offers a useful parallel for understanding how criminal revenue streams shape regime behavior in ways relevant to the U.S. counter-fentanyl strategy that we propose.

Renewed enforcement of U.S. sanctions authorities and ongoing international legal actions against senior figures in the government of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela reflect a long-standing assessment by U.S. agencies that criminal activity is closely tied to regime survival rather than operating at its margins.⁴⁷ Venezuela’s role as a permissive

environment for narcotics transit, money laundering, and sanctions evasion has been documented for years, particularly through networks linking political elites, security services, and transnational criminal actors.⁴⁸ Available reporting, however, suggests that tightening financial and diplomatic pressure has not produced moderation in regime behavior. (It seems, in fact, to have been frustration with the Maduro regime's *refusal* to change its behavior – even in the face of repeated American military strikes on boats apparently carrying cocaine from Venezuela – that helped lead to the U.S. decision to escalate with its move in January 2026 to seize Maduro himself by force. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Hegseth put it, Maduro "had his chance," but "f****d around and found out."⁴⁹) Instead, constraints on legal revenue streams have increased the government's reliance on illicit partnerships as alternative sources of income and leverage.⁵⁰ From a *deterrance* perspective, this pattern thus shows that when criminal activity is part of a governing strategy, pressure narrowly focused on individuals or transactions is unlikely to alter regime behavior at the state level.⁵¹ This suggests the importance of the kind of broader, integrated approach we advocate.

The implications of a U.S. counter-fentanyl strategy become clearer when examining how criminal networks operate under state protection. Criminal networks that operate with state tolerance or protection have repeatedly shown resilience in the face of arrests, seizures, and indictments, particularly when those activities serve broader political or strategic purposes.⁵² In such cases, *disruption* becomes consequential only when paired with *deterrance* that raises state-level costs by limiting access to financial systems, transportation corridors, and international legitimacy.⁵³ More broadly, illicit supply chains persist where sovereignty, corruption, and geopolitical friction protect from sustained external pressure.⁵⁴ When criminal economies serve regime survival rather than independent profit, counter-narcotics policy necessarily intersects with national security strategy, reinforcing the logic of integrating *deterrance* and *disruption* rather than treating them as separate efforts.

If Washington can institutionalize this doctrine, align allies, and sustain pressure along the supply chain, fentanyl can be contained, its production and distribution networks degraded, and its enablers held accountable. If the United States cannot, the crisis will continue to be a lasting national security failure.

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Notes

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