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Deadly kidnapping, fentanyl crisis spark calls for U.S. military action against cartels

Joseph Morton and Alfredo Corchado

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The kidnapping of four Americans — and killing of two of them — has amplified calls from some Texas Republicans to green light military force against drug cartels with the same legal approach used to hunt down terrorists after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has responded angrily to the idea of U.S. military intervention and blasted leading proponent Rep. Dan Crenshaw, R-Humble, for seeking to undermine his country's sovereignty.

"Mexico will not allow any foreign government, even less if they intervene with weapons, in our territory," López Obrador said Thursday.

López Obrador said he was starting a campaign to inform Mexicans abroad and Hispanics in general to oppose Crenshaw and Republicans who take similar positions.

"Besides being irresponsible, this is also a lack of respect for Mexico, our independence and sovereignty," he said.

He referred to Republicans as "hypocrites" and said "We're not a colony of the U.S.A."

Crenshaw responded on Twitter by writing "Bring it. LOL." and telling López Obrador he should focus on campaigning against the cartels.

In an interview, Crenshaw said he's getting more traction on what is called an Authorization for Use of Military Force against the cartels that would terminate after five years. Nine other Texas Republicans have co-sponsored it.

The rate of Americans, particularly young people, dying from fentanyl-laced pills makes it different from heroin or marijuana being smuggled across the border, Crenshaw said.

"This is not a drug problem anymore. It's a poisoning problem," Crenshaw said. "People have had enough, we're at 70,000 Americans dead and they're just shooting up Americans who drive over to get a medical procedure because they mistake them for Haitian drug runners. ... That's insane."

Former U.S. Attorney General William Barr has called for treating the cartels like the terrorist group ISIS and telling Mexico to join the fight or stand aside. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., is working on legislation to pave the way for U.S. military action against the cartels.

In an interview, Graham said he envisions a two-step process that starts with labeling the cartels foreign terrorist organizations, which would expand the ability to target anyone providing them material support and set the stage for more aggressive measures.

“I don’t see an end to this movie without our military getting involved to protect Americans from being poisoned,” Graham said. “70,000 Americans are dying from fentanyl poison coming from Mexico. If 10 Americans died from a rocket attack launched out of Mexico by ISIS we’d wipe them off the map, ISIS, so we’ve got to look at this narco state for what it is. It’s a failed narco state.”

Critics say such talk reminds them of then-President Donald Trump calling for war against the cartels after Americans were killed and reportedly asking his defense secretary about bombing drug labs in Mexico.

Even if the United States could pressure President Andrés Manuel López Obrador into tolerating U.S. military operations inside Mexico, it would spark intense animosity from much of the Mexican public, said Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

“Most Mexicans would not take kindly to U.S. Special Forces waging fire-fights in their country,” he said. “Even drone strikes would be highly provocative, since civilian casualties would be inevitable — as in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia.”

Gladys McCormick, a senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said rhetorical saber rattling typically follows high-profile tragedies, but Mexico already has a significant police and military presence on its side of the border and efforts to confront the cartels militarily have not solved the problem.

“It’s been tried and it has failed colossally,” McCormick said. “So the idea to sort of try it again to me sounds utterly irresponsible.”

Even the word “cartel” feels outdated, she said, given how the organizations have spread across many different countries and diversified into semi-legal areas, from water rights to gray market oil sales.

She suggested focusing instead on addressing the humanitarian crisis at the border that feeds into the violence and improving the capacity of woefully under-resourced law enforcement in Mexico.

Designating cartels as terrorist organizations could help go after their financing, she said.

“But it isn’t about a military strike,” McCormick said. “It’s about tracking down the money trail.”

Crenshaw has another proposal called the “Declaring War on the Cartels Act” intended to help seize cartel assets and enhance penalties for those convicted of cartel-related crimes.

Crenshaw released a video message Wednesday evening addressed to López Obrador, in Spanish, pitching his military authorization proposal as a way for the United States and Mexico to battle the cartels together.

Proponents of the AUMF and terrorist designations for the cartels note passing such measures won’t automatically send tanks rolling across the Rio Grande or fill the skies over Mexico City with drones.

“It obviously doesn’t mean an invasion tomorrow,” Crenshaw said. “It just gives the president authority to use military force. Military force can be intelligence collection. It means by, with and through the Mexican government. We need them to be partners. Now, as president would I be willing to do more than that, if it really came to that? Maybe. But I know Biden won’t.”

Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Austin, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said he’s looking at the proposals to designate cartels as terrorist organizations and the military force authorization.

But McCaul also said he’s concerned such proposals could backfire by making cooperation with Mexico more difficult and creating a fresh surge of asylum seekers.

“Anybody seeking political asylum, their chances of getting in just increased dramatically because we’ve declared war on an organization in Mexico,” McCaul said.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said he wasn’t taking anything off the table when asked this week about treating the cartels like ISIS.

Cornyn plans to lead a bipartisan group of lawmakers later this month to Mexico City, where they will push for more cooperation on securing the border and stopping the flow of fentanyl.

“Unfortunately, they’ve not been aggressive enough in combating the cartels,” Cornyn said in an interview. “You may recall that President López Obrador said ‘hugs not bullets’ and that has not worked well.”

Cornyn said the talks also will cover how the two countries can work together to improve Mexico’s economy, which could help undermine the cartels.

Even some outspoken border hawks have reservations about the idea of the U.S. military rolling into Mexico.

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, has excoriated the Biden administration for its border and immigration policies. He reiterated on his podcast this week the president must do more to pressure Mexico.

But Cruz also pushed back on Graham’s talk about military action.

“Lindsey’s a friend, but I don’t agree with his recommendation there,” Cruz said. “I don’t think we ought to invade Mexico. I don’t think we ought to be in the business of invading foreign nations.”

Javier Garza, a freelance journalist specializing in security matters and a national commentator, said Crenshaw and other U.S. politicians cite the Americans dying of fentanyl poisoning while ignoring the thousands of Mexicans killed by assault-style firearms bought legally in the United States with the money Americans pay for their drugs.

“There is a shared responsibility on both sides of the border,” Garza said.