

The Vox logo is centered on a bright yellow rectangular background. The word "Vox" is written in a bold, black, serif font.

Why so many top Republicans want to go to war in Mexico

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One of the hottest new ideas in Republican politics is, apparently, launching a war in Mexico.

Three recent articles — in Rolling Stone, Politico, and Semafor — traced the rise of the proposal from obscurity to the party’s highest levels, finding ample evidence of the idea’s popularity in the GOP ranks. Former President Donald Trump, for example, has been asking for a “battle plan” to “attack Mexico,” specifically targeting drug cartel strongholds in the country. Every single declared Republican presidential candidate has endorsed treating cartels like terrorist organizations. And in both the House and the Senate, leading Republicans have proposed authorizing the use of military force in Mexico to fight cartels.

These proposals are typically billed as responses to the fentanyl overdose crisis. Roughly 107,000 Americans died from opioid overdoses in 2021, the last year data was available, a 15 percent increase over the 2020 death total. Of those deaths, a majority were attributable to fentanyl — a synthetic opioid painkiller considerably stronger than heroin. This is a major problem, and coming up with some kind of policy response is as important as it is difficult.

But launching cross-border raids into the territory of the US’s neighbor and third-largest trading partner, a vital partner on many issues, is just about the worst one. The US and Latin American partners have been waging a literal war on drugs for decades; military campaigns like Plan Colombia have repeatedly failed to stop narcotics from entering the

United States. Attacks on Mexican soil seem no more promising — and considerably more likely to backfire in dangerous ways.

In reporting this piece, I spoke to four different experts on foreign policy and/or the Mexican border from across the ideological spectrum; not one of them thought these proposals contained anything like a workable idea. “The planning would embarrass **Paul Wolfowitz**,” quipped Justin Logan, the director of defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

What this exposes, more than anything else, is an important way the Republican party *hasn't* changed in the Trump era.

As much as Trump billed himself as a kind of isolationist critic of the Republican foreign policy consensus, **his actual track record** as president shows that he was quite willing to use force aggressively. He used force in somewhat different ways, and for different reasons, than his predecessors — but very clearly accepted that some of America's big foreign policy problems could be solved by bombing them into oblivion.

The enthusiasm for a new Mexican-American war illustrates the same sort of principle. It marries a longtime idea on the center-right mainstream, the war on drugs, to the Trumpist concerns about illegal immigration and the decline in quality of life for the white working class — and claims that the troops can solve them both.

In one sense, the surge in proposals to use force in Mexico is both a new and extremely dangerous development. But in another sense, it's old Republican wine in a Trump Vineyards bottle.

What, exactly, are Republicans calling for?

The vogue for war in Mexico seems to date back to the late Trump presidency. In 2019, after the Sinaloa cartel brutally murdered nine US citizens, President Trump announced that **he would designate the cartels as foreign terrorist organizations** (FTOs). He tweeted that “Mexico, with the help of the United States, [should] wage WAR on the drug cartels and wipe them off the face of the earth.”

Designating a group as an FTO is complicated; it requires that cartels have a political motivation for their violence, which isn't really the case. Nor is it clear that it would do very much aside from creating a headache for federal counterterrorism agents, who would now have to decide whether a gang member purchasing weed from a cartel was engaging in material support for terrorism (a federal crime).

Perhaps for these reasons, the designation never happened. But Trump still wanted to wage war on the cartels as if they were terrorists. In 2020, the president reportedly asked

Defense Secretary Mark Esper twice if the military could “shoot missiles into Mexico to destroy the drug labs.”

Per Esper’s memoir, Trump argued that the Mexican government could not stop the cartels on their own — “they don’t have control of their own country” — and that destroying narcotics manufacturing labs would be a swift and painless operation. “We could just shoot some Patriot missiles and take out the labs, quietly,” the president reportedly said. “No one would know it was us.”

The idea is so outlandish that Esper at first thought Trump was joking. First of all, Patriot missiles can’t do this: they’re surface-to-air missiles designed to shoot down enemy aircraft. Presumably, Trump meant some form of cruise missile, but such a strike would make it exceptionally obvious who hit the laboratories. Most fundamentally, bombing a few drug manufacturing labs would not end trafficking into the United States. Even if the US had good enough intelligence to target most of them, the cartels would simply rebuild them.

It’s worth dwelling on this Trump proposal not only because of its absurdity, but because it helps illustrate why some on the right have moved on to more ambitious war plans.

In their logic, if the cartels are a violent threat to the US homeland akin to ISIS, then it follows that the US should do what it did with ISIS: take away the territory that they control and use it as a base to operate. In the case of ISIS, that meant airstrikes in tandem with local Iraqi and Syrian fighters who could take back the territory held by the terrorist group. But according to Mexico hawks, the Mexican government and its security forces have been corrupted by the cartels — unable or unwilling to wage war on drug and human traffickers.

As a diagnosis, that’s not entirely wrong. Leftist Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, widely known as AMLO, has been **more willing to use force against cartels than his “hugs not bullets”** campaign slogan would suggest. But he has failed to address the cartels’ growing clout, which includes significant penetration of the Mexican government. A recent **tranche of leaked documents revealed**, among other things, that Mexican soldiers ordered to fight cartels were actually selling guns to them.

Mexico’s failure to stop the cartels is a major motivating factor behind **an October 2022 policy proposal written by Ken Cuccinelli**, an immigration hardliner who served as acting deputy secretary of Homeland Security in the last two years of the Trump administration. In the paper, written for the Trumpy Center for Renewing America think tank, Cuccinelli calls for a “defensive war” against cartels facilitating drug trafficking and undocumented migration.

The proposal is thin on military detail. It proposes that “the President should conduct specific military operations to destroy the cartels,” but does not specify what exactly those operations would look like aside from involving special forces and airstrikes. If that fails, he argues for deploying unspecified “elements of the Marines, Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard” to Mexico.

The proposal fails to answer basic questions. For example: How many troops would an operation require, and where would they be deployed? What would the casualties look like on both sides? How would a US troop presence suppress drug trafficking and production **when it failed to do so in Afghanistan**? If the cartels start using locations where American troops aren't, does the war expand to more parts of Mexico or even other countries? And would any gains be sustained after a US withdrawal?

Given **all the things that have gone wrong** with recent American invasions of foreign countries, you'd think that the proponents of a new one might want to sweat the details.

And make no mistake: This is an invasion plan. While Cuccinelli repeatedly calls for the Mexican government's cooperation, Cuccinelli explicitly says Mexican refusal shouldn't block American action. “It is vital that Mexico not be led to believe that they have veto power to prevent the US from taking the actions necessary to secure its borders and people,” he writes.

Cuccinelli's paper, for all its murkiness, is actually the most developed of the many different proposals for going to war in Mexico floating around. Even actual proposed legislation on the topic is vaguer.

In the Senate, Sens. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and John Kennedy (R-LA) have **proposed designating nine cartels as foreign terrorist groups**. The text of the legislation does not provide any explicit permission to use military force or any framework for its use, but Graham said in a press conference that his intent is to authorize it in some unspecified fashion.

“[We will] give the military the authority to go after these organizations wherever they exist. Not to invade Mexico. Not to shoot Mexican airplanes down. But to destroy drug labs that are poisoning Americans,” **he said**.



Sen. Lindsey Graham speaking in Washington in front of posters depicting cartels and terrorist groups. *Tom Williams/CQ-Roll Call/Getty Images*

Reps. Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) and Mike Waltz (R-FL) have written a more specific **Authorization for Use of Military Force** for the cartels, one modeled on the laws that permitted the use of force against the Taliban and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Like Graham, Crenshaw insists that any use of force wouldn’t constitute an invasion — that he primarily envisions the military assisting with surveillance of cartels, and that any bombings or troop deployments would be **coordinated with the Mexican government**.

But there are no such restrictions in the actual legislation, which authorizes the president to use “all necessary and appropriate force” against cartel targets — specifically permitting its use against “foreign nations” deemed to “have trafficked fentanyl” into the United States. This opens the door to direct attacks on, let’s say, Mexican soldiers who are on the take from Sinaloa.

Nor would Mexico’s president ever cooperate with a US incursion. After these congressional proposals began bubbling in March, AMLO understandably erupted in fury at the thought of US military action inside his country.

“They have the arrogance to say that if we don’t fight crime in Mexico, they’re going to pass an initiative in Congress so the armed forces of the US intervene in our territory,”

AMLO said in a **press conference**. “We won’t allow it. And not only are we not going to allow it, we’re denouncing it.”

So how could “military force” be used “to destroy drug labs” in Mexico without either bombing the country or invading it? Graham and Crenshaw don’t really say.

The bottom line is, very simply, that these are not intellectually serious proposals. At this stage, they’re barely even policy proposals at all. This is something even some of the harshest conservative critics of Biden’s Mexico policy acknowledge.

“[People] just throw this stuff out — ‘Yeah, bomb ’em! Call them all terrorists!’ — without a lot of thought,” says Todd Bensman, a senior national security fellow at the restrictionist Center for Immigration Studies.

The real reasons Republicans are proposing war with Mexico

It’s tempting, given the thinness of these proposals, to simply dismiss them as political nothings: empty gestures of being “strong on crime” and “strong on border security.”

Many of these proposals conflate drug trafficking, undocumented migration, and violence as various different problems caused by cartels that could be solved with sufficient amounts of American ordinance. That makes little sense as a policy matter — each has different contours, even if the cartels have a hand in all of them — but makes perfect sense as a political matter, as it conjures a picture of a lawless border that the Biden administration is failing to secure out of sheer fecklessness.

But dismissing this rhetoric as purely political would be a mistake.

For one thing, ideas like this have a tendency to go from absurdities to policy. When Trump **first called for** a “total and complete shutdown” on Muslim immigration to the United States in 2015, it was widely rejected by Republicans and Democrats alike. During his presidency, Trump repeatedly tried to do it — at first causing chaos at American airports and, ultimately, successfully implementing a version of it.

Given that the former president is once again the prohibitive favorite in the 2024 race, and that he is reportedly asking for “battle plans” for a war on the cartels, the proposal needs to be taken at least somewhat seriously.

Moreover, the fact that these ideas have gained so much traction in the past month — accelerating after another **brutal murder of Americans by cartels** — illustrates some profoundly important things about the state of the Republican party.

Dara Lind, a senior fellow at the pro-migration American Immigration Council (and my former Vox colleague), sees the vogue for using force as an outgrowth of broader Republican ideology: “the ongoing conflation of migration with invasion” and “the idea that fentanyl importation is a deliberate plot to weaken America.” On these theories, cartels and the Mexican government (through its inaction) are facilitating nothing less than the broad-based destruction of American communities.

This kind of apocalyptic picture of the United States, a country whose middle class is being destroyed by drugs and undocumented migrants driving down wages, is an archetypical Trump-era Republican theme. Again and again, the populist right mentions drugs and immigration — along with the decline of manufacturing and the rise of “wokeness” — as some of the root causes of terminal American decline.

But as well tailored as “invade Mexico” is to the Trump era, it’s not a wholly new impulse. Waging literal war on drugs outside of America’s borders is a very old idea, one with significant bipartisan support. For Republicans in particular, casting themselves as tough on drugs and crime — in contrast to weak Democrats — predates Trump’s rise by decades.

So too does a willingness to launch a unilateral ground invasion in the name of fighting non-state actors that allegedly threaten American national security.

Trump, in theory, was supposed to be a break with that kind of hawkishness: he ran in part on **his (false) claim to have opposed the war in Iraq**. Yet time and again in his presidency, we saw that the strangely widespread idea of “Donald the Dove” was essentially false: **Trump was no less willing to use force** than other post-Cold War presidents, just willing to do it for somewhat different reasons.

A new Mexican-American war would be every bit as reckless as the Iraq war, quite possibly more so, since Mexico is literally America’s neighbor. That it’s become popular again shows both how the focus of the Republican party has changed in the past 20 years — and the ways in which its essential hawkishness has not.