



No, the U.S. Shouldn't Wage War Against Mexican Cartels

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Diplomatic tensions are rising between the United States and Mexico as some American politicians push for military action against cartels south of the border. Those calls come amid rising fentanyl overdose deaths and a kidnapping incident that left two Americans dead in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, last week.

Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R–Texas) wondered why "we still haven't declared the cartels a military target" and pushed to "authorize military force against them." Sen. Lindsey Graham (R–S.C.) called for the military "to go after these organizations wherever they exist" in order "to destroy drug labs that are poisoning Americans"—not "to invade Mexico" or "shoot Mexican airplanes down," he clarified. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R–Ga.) questioned why "we're fighting a war in Ukraine, and we're not bombing the Mexican cartels." Rep. James Comer (R–Ky.) said it was "a mistake" that former President Donald Trump didn't bomb "a couple of fentanyl labs, crystal meth labs" in Mexico, referring to Trump's alleged interest in launching missiles into Mexico to wipe out the cartels.

The idea has spread like wildfire, and it's already inspiring legislation. But there's little reason to believe that any of these tactics would be effective against Mexican cartels (to say nothing of the violations of national sovereignty and likely collateral damage they would cause). Combining the war on drugs with the war on terror is a recipe for an expensive and ineffective mess of foreign engagement.

One Mexico hawk, Rep. Mike Waltz (R–Fla.), has said the U.S. has a proven track record when it comes to fighting drug cartels with military might. "We've done this before," he said in January. "We had Plan Colombia then. We had special operations training." Plan Colombia had counternarcotics and counterterrorism elements and cost the U.S. roughly \$12 billion between 2000 and 2021.

As Cato Institute Policy Analyst Daniel Raisbeck has written for *Reason*, Plan Colombia's aid did initially "help the Colombian military to severely weaken the once-formidable

[Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)]. But Plan Colombia's anti-narcotics element was an unqualified failure." Per Raisbeck:

By 2006, "coca cultivation and cocaine production levels (had) increased by about 15 and 4 percent, respectively." In 2019, there were more hectares cultivated with coca leaf in Colombia (212,000) than two decades earlier (160,000).

The so-called FARC "dissidents," thousands of fighters who did not demobilize in 2016, still control large swathes of the cocaine business. They wage constant combat over production areas and export routes against other guerrilla groups and criminal organizations, including several with links to Mexican drug cartels.

American counternarcotics efforts yielded similarly bad results in Afghanistan. The U.S. spent about \$9 billion to tackle Afghanistan's opium and heroin production, only for the effort to be "perhaps the most feckless" of "all the failures in Afghanistan," according to *The Washington Post's* analysis of confidential government interviews and documents. By 2018, Afghan farmers were growing poppies on four times as much land as they were in 2002. Operation Iron Tempest, meant to cripple Afghanistan's opium production labs, folded within a year. "Many of the suspected labs turned out to be empty, mud-walled compounds," noted the *Post*.

The war on drugs has helped turn Latin America into the most violent region in the world. Criminalization has led to the proliferation of black market activity, a boom in many countries' prison populations, and increased corruption across Latin America. It's also contributed to a huge number of homicides: At least half of the violent deaths in Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Venezuela are estimated to be drug-related, according to the World Economic Forum.

Despite those failures, many Republicans still want to use war on terror tactics to fight Mexican cartels. In January, Crenshaw and Waltz introduced an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), which would let the president "use all necessary and appropriate force" against parties that traffic or produce fentanyl. AUMFs have been the statutory basis for much American military action abroad and have been abused to justify engagements far beyond their initial intent. The cartel-related AUMF could easily see some mission creep.

Sens. Rick Scott (R–Fla.) and Roger Marshall (R–Kan.) also introduced a measure to designate the drug cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), which some legal and immigration analysts have suggested could harm asylum seekers and the people who help them. For instance, paying the cartel a ransom could qualify as material support to an FTO, which could bar migrants from entry. It's punishable by up to 20 years in jail.

The increase in overdose deaths among Americans is tragic and obviously a problem. It isn't one that will be solved by fighting the war on drugs just a little bit harder. It certainly isn't one that will be solved by bombing a neighboring country against its wishes, risking further escalation. It requires being realistic about the policies that have made drug use more dangerous. "That starts with bipartisan support for prohibition," writes *Reason's* Jacob Sullum, "which creates a black market where the quality and potency of drugs are highly variable and unpredictable."

Simply stopping the supply of drugs into the country is an impossible task, as decades of prohibition show. Republicans would be far better off embracing harm-reduction strategies rather than pushing for another episode of military adventurism that is destined to fail.