

ISSUE BRIEF

War Against the Cartels

Prospects and Perils for the Trump
Administration's Military-Led Campaign

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INTRODUCTION

It appears the United States may be preparing to start a major, military-led counterterrorism operation against several Mexican drug cartels, and perhaps also against some gangs in Venezuela and elsewhere throughout Latin America. U.S. President Donald Trump has reached the determination that the United States is now engaged in “armed conflict” with violent criminal organizations and drug cartels, which the Administration has rebranded as terrorist groups.¹

We acknowledge and encourage action against the real threats posed by the cartels, but also caution against a military-led campaign. Instead, the United States should amplify its already robust partnered, law-enforcement-led operations. However, if the United States undertakes a military-led campaign, Washington should carefully consider strategic options and begin preparing for likely undesirable second- and third-order consequences. This Issue Brief focuses on those options and foreseeable consequences.

¹ Charlie Savage et al., “Trump ‘Determined’ the U.S. is Now in a War with Drug Cartels, Congress is Told,” New York Times, October 2, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/02/us/politics/trump-drug-cartels-war.html>.

SHIFTING THE AMERICAN APPROACH TO COMBATTING TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

By standing practice and in accordance with executive orders, U.S. and international law, through early 2025, U.S. law enforcement agencies bore primary responsibility for addressing transnational crimes like drug trafficking. Guiding orders, codes, and accords included but were not limited to the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) that helped to counter Mafia criminal networks in the United States, the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and, perhaps most importantly, President Trump's Executive Order (EO) 13773 signed in 2017.²

Any attempt to assess the impact of the shifting American strategy on cartels and narcotics trafficking gangs should start with EO13773, "Enforcing Federal Law With Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking."³ In this first-term edict, President Trump clearly identified the cartels as criminal organizations and unequivocally directed law enforcement agencies to retain and strengthen their leading roles. He elided all references to military capabilities and operations in this order.

2 The White House, "Executive Order on Establishing the United States Council on Transnational Organized Crime," December 15, 2021, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/15/executive-order-on-establishing-the-united-states-council-on-transnational-organized-crime/>; Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Transnational Organized Crime," accessed October 10, 2025; and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto," accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html>.

3 This order both amplified standing practice and sought to enhance inter-agency collaboration, so it was to a great extent reflective of long-running and then standing practice. Federal Register, "Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking," February 14, 2017, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/02/14/2017-03113/enforcing-federal-law-with-respect-to-transnational-criminal-organizations-and-preventing>

Historically, however, military units have played an important role in Western Hemisphere counternarcotics activities. For example, special operations units have supported counter-cartel operations in Colombia and Mexico; American Marines have partnered with Guatemalan counterparts to combat the Zetas cartel; and military planes, ships, drones, satellites, and other intelligence assets have been used to support a wider array of partnered operations throughout Central and South America.⁴

Clearly, there is nothing new about deploying troops on the ground in places like Colombia or Mexico, or about massing Navy ships and combat aircraft in the Caribbean.⁵ Both Democratic and Republican presidents have supported these operations. However, under law enforcement leadership, these military operations have been almost entirely advisory or supportive, in accordance with standard practices, orders, and the law.

Standing practice and even federal law can be reinterpreted. Any president can instantly overwrite or countermand any executive order without consultation or hearing; by design, these are instruments of fiat. So, on the day of his inauguration, President Trump signed Executive Order 14157 designating cartels and other criminal organizations

4 Noah Shachtman, "Marines vs. Zetas: U.S. Hunts Drug Cartels in Guatemala," *Wired*, August 3, 2012, <https://www.wired.com/2012/08/marinesvszetas/>; U.S. Southern Command, "Enhanced Counter Narcotics Operations," accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.southcom.mil/EnhancedCounterNarcoticsOps/>; "Colombia: A Special Forces Mission in Counterinsurgency," ARSOF History, accessed October 10, 2025, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v2n4_colombia_page_1.html; and "The SOUTHCOM Reconnaissance Systems Program in Colombia," *Inter-American Review* (George Washington University), accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.iar-gwu.org/print-archive/the-southcom-reconnaissance-systems-program-in-colombia>.

5 MSN News, "U.S. Military Deploying over 4,000 Additional Troops to Waters around Latin America as Part of Trump's Counter-Cartel Mission," accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/us-military-deploying-over-4-000-additional-troops-to-waters-around-latin-america-as-part-of-trump-s-counter-cartel-mission/ar-AA1KBidx>; and Sam LaGrone, "Littoral Combat Ship USS Sioux City Joins SOUTHCOM Anti-Drug Mission in First Deployment," *USNI News*, September 1, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/09/01/littoral-combat-ship-uss-sioux-city-joins-southcom-anti-drug-mission-in-first-deployment>.

as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).⁶ This action nullified the overarching intent of his own 2017 order.

By designating transnational criminal organizations like Mexican cartels, Venezuelan Tren de Aragua, and Salvadoran La Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), Trump leaned away from the methodical enforcement of law towards more immediate and lethal action.⁷ His order is fairly explicit in its application of violent means. It directs the “total elimination” of the presence of each organization in the United States and, borrowing from the military lexicon, the targeting of their “extraterritorial command-and-control structures.”⁸ To be fair, this order also avoids direct mention of military force. But given subsequent official statements, it appears that President Trump has placed the military in the lead.⁹

6 Federal Register, “Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Nationals,” January 29, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/designating-cartels-and-other-organizations-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations-and-specially-designated-global-terrorists/>.

7 The White House, “Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/designating-cartels-and-other-organizations-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations-and-specially-designated-global-terrorists/>.

8 Federal Register, “Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Nationals.”

9 There certainly is room for extensive debate here. Under normal circumstances this assumption would be challenged with reference to the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), formally Public Law 107–40 of September 18, 2001, and also the broadly applied 2002 AUMF (Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002) that underwrote the invasion of Iraq and, subsequently, operations against Iraqi, Syrian, and other terrorist organizations. Note that the 2001 AUMF references Title 50, while the 2002 AUMF references Title 10. Executive orders are not federal laws, so they generally do not anchor in code. See U.S. Congress, Authorization for Use of Military Force, Public Law 107–40, September 18, 2001, <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>; U.S. Congress, Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002, H.J. Res. 114, 107th Cong., 2002, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/107/congress-house-joint-resolution/114>; and Costs of War Project, Brown University, The 2001 AUMF: A Blank Check for War? 2021, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20War_2001%20AUMF.pdf.

WHAT IS SUBSTANTIVELY DIFFERENT ABOUT A MILITARY-LED OPERATION?

All international operations are conducted under various titles of U.S. law. Thus far, most counternarcotics operations have been carried out under the authority of law enforcement agencies, albeit with various types of intelligence and military support. Typically, military-led operations are conducted under Title 10 of the U.S. Code, whereas covert intelligence operations run by organizations such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) are conducted under Title 50.¹⁰ In mid-October, President Trump said that he authorized the CIA to conduct covert action in Venezuela, which could include a range of secret activities, including paramilitary and lethal operations.¹¹

These are distinctions with a real difference. Law enforcement operations tend to be lean, cautious, collaborative, and methodical, gradually building from lengthy fieldwork towards arrest and trial. Hasty or overly violent law enforcement operations are avoided because they sow failure in the courtroom, often resulting in convictions that fall short due to procedural violations. Intelligence-led operations like those against al-Qaeda can be conducted more aggressively. But those operations—and particularly highly sensitive covert operations—are also likely to be quiet and tightly controlled. The Trump administration has even tried to make the case that the cartels are as dangerous as al-Qaeda, with Secretary of Defense Pete

10 According to at least one open-source report, Title 50 operations have been taking place on Mexican soil for years. Drazen Jorgic et al., “Inside the CIA’s Secret Fight Against Mexico’s Drug Cartels,” Reuters, September 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/inside-cias-secret-fight-against-mexicos-drug-cartels-2025-09-10/>.

11 Vera Bergengruen et al., “Trump Authorizes CIA Covert Operations in Venezuela,” Wall Street Journal, October 15, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/trump-authorizes-cia-covert-operations-in-venezuela-b28dbb-d2?st=4qm8qc&reflink=article_whatsapp_share.

Hegseth stating, “these cartels are the Al Qaeda of the Western Hemisphere, using violence, murder and terrorism to impose their will, threaten our national security and poison our people.”¹²

Still, even cautious and covert use of intelligence to target and then kill designated terrorists is more likely to cause civilian casualties than any law enforcement operation. Even the most carefully targeted violent action against nonmilitary targets has consequences. During its drone campaign against al-Qaeda in Pakistan from the late 2000s into the early 2010s, American military and political leaders routinely asked themselves if these remote kinetic operations were creating more terrorists than they were killing.¹³

One cause of unwanted blowback is the inherent uncertainty of intelligence.¹⁴ Most intelligence-driven targeting decisions are guided by relative probabilities rather than irrefutable evidence.¹⁵ High-tempo military operations generate thinner and less specific intelligence and are even more likely to create civilian casualties and kill people—sometimes even allied local leaders and soldiers—who are in fact innocent. Over time, these mistaken attacks can erode the conditions necessary for success. Success also breeds further challenges, leaving fewer high-value targets and opening the aperture to riskier operations that yield a lower return on investment.

12 Stephen Sorce, “3 Killed in US Strike on Colombian ELN Vessel Smuggling Narcotics, Hegseth Says,” Fox News, October 19, 2025, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/3-killed-us-strike-colombian-eln-vessel-smuggling-narcotics-hegseth-says>.

13 Bryce Loidolt, “Were Drone Strikes Effective? Evaluating the Drone Campaign in Pakistan Through Captured al-Qaeda Documents,” *Texas National Security Review*, 5, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 53–79, <https://tnsr.org/2022/01/were-drone-strikes-effective-evaluating-the-drone-campaign-in-pakistan-through-captured-al-qaeda-documents/>.

14 On this point see, for example: Sherman Kent, “Words of Estimative Probability,” *Studies in Intelligence* 8, no. 4 (1964): 49–65, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP93T01132R000100020036-3.pdf>.

15 Some counterterror targeting is deliberate and carefully monitored by legal advisors; targets are only struck after weeks or months of monitoring and careful development of evidence.

In contrast to law enforcement and intelligence operations, military campaigns are rarely methodical, minimally intrusive, cautious, or quiet. They are far more likely to be large, aggressive, and destructive, and they can drag on for much longer than initially anticipated. Military leaders are, by selection, training, and education, inclined to maximize the resources they put towards any fight, thereby increasing the chances of achieving decisive victory. When applied to complex environments and threats like insurgencies, terrorist groups, and criminal networks, military aggressiveness risks getting the nation stuck into a deeper war. Prospects for failure are also amplified when a military campaign is divorced from a comprehensive and fully resourced civil-military strategy, which aligns military operations with diplomatic, economic, and governance efforts.

Approaching the cartels as a military threat increases the chances of achieving battlefield effects like destroying drug labs, sinking boats, shooting down aircraft, and killing cartel members. These operations will undoubtedly hurt the cartels. But they also carry a significant risk of escalation and dangerous second- and third-order effects, particularly if the United States takes unilateral action in Mexico or violates Venezuelan air or maritime space with military assets. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum may be forced by public opinion to react to U.S. military operations within her borders. There are already signs of potential escalation with Venezuela, including the operational tempo of increasing drone strikes against alleged drug boats. Another strike occurred in mid-October, when President Trump announced that “six male narcoterrorists” were killed in a U.S. drone strike on a maritime vessel.¹⁶

16 Anna Betts, “Trump Says Six Were Killed in US Strike On Another Boat Allegedly Carrying Drugs Near Venezuela,” *The Guardian*, October 14, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/oct/14/trump-six-killed-us-strike-boat-venezuela>. At the time of publication, October 22, there had been seven strikes against alleged drug trafficking vessels.

The most significant risks with a military-led operation against the cartels are escalation and quagmire. These risks are substantial. This is all occurring against the backdrop of an interagency counterterrorism enterprise that has been demoralized, is suffering from a talent exodus, and has a broken trust in other pillars of the U.S. government.

INDICATORS OF A MILITARY-LED CAMPAIGN

As noted above, both military and intelligence organizations have been directly supporting counter-cartel operations in Latin America, particularly Central America, for decades. Intelligence support operations reportedly remain ongoing.¹⁷ Now, as noted here, President Trump reportedly informed Congress that the United States is at war with the cartels. The U.S. has been building toward this transition from law enforcement to military operations since the beginning of 2025. At the same time, members of the U.S. Congress are growing more concerned about the lack of information coming from the Trump administration related to the ongoing campaign against narco-traffickers in Venezuela.¹⁸

On the day of his inauguration, President Trump identified the cartels as terrorist organizations. In March, thousands of combat and support troops were moved to secure the U.S.-Mexico border with the express intent of preventing the flow of illegal immigration and drug trafficking. This ostensibly defensive movement of the equivalent of

a combined-arms combat division at least doubled President Trump's own 2017 deployment of 4,000 National Guard troops to the border. It also placed military assets in position to support intelligence gathering across the southern border.

Also in March, President Trump argued that since the cartels were waging war on America, "it's time for America to wage war on the cartels."¹⁹ More and more visible preparations followed.²⁰ Throughout the summer, Navy combat ships—including some carrying U.S. Marines—massed in the Caribbean. In early August, the *New York Times* reported that President Trump had signed a secret directive authorizing the Pentagon to begin using military force against the cartels.²¹ On September 5, a squadron of F-35 fighter-bombers was deployed to Puerto Rico in support of prospective military operations against the cartels.²² And already by early September 2025, some kinetic action was underway.

On either September 2 or 3, the Trump administration authorized a strike against a four-engine speedboat in international waters, killing

19 Zachary B. Wolf et al., "Trump's 2025 Joint Session Address, Fact Checked and Annotated," CNN, March 5, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2025/03/politics/transcript-speech-trump-congress-annotated-dg/>. Administration officials have mostly remained silent on the specific details of any prospective counterterror plan, though there have been public discussions about the way that Trump counterterrorism officials view this threat. "Surveying the U.S. Counterterrorism Landscape with Dr. Sebastian Gorka," Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), July 23, 2025, <https://www.fdd.org/events/2025/07/23/surveying-the-us-counterterrorism-landscape-with-dr-sebastian-gorka/>.

20 There may also have been some law-enforcement urging to take more direct action. See, for example: Dan Lamothe et al., "DEA Faced Pushback at White House, Pentagon After Urging Mexico Strikes," *Washington Post*, September 19, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/09/19/trump-cartel-strikes-mexico-dea/>.

21 Helene Cooper et al., "Trump Directs Military to Target Foreign Drug Cartels," *New York Times*, August 8, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/08/us/trump-military-drug-cartels.html>.

22 Steve Holland et al., "Trump Plays Down Possible Regime Change in Venezuela; US Deploys Stealth Fighters Jets," *Reuters*, September 6, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-deploying-stealth-fighter-jets-caribbean-drug-fight-tensions-with-venezuela-2025-09-05/>.

17 While sources cannot be confirmed and details are thin, Reuters reported that the CIA had been operating in Mexico against the Cartels for "years," so this action ostensible predated the current Trump Administration. See Jorgic et al., "Inside the CIA's Secret Fight Against Mexico's Drug Cartels."

18 Dan De Luce et al., "Members of Congress Growing Concerned Over Lack of Information From Administration About Venezuela Strikes, Sources Say," *NBC News*, October 15, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/members-congress-growing-concerned-lack-information-administration-ven-rc-na236921>.

11 alleged members of Tren de Aragua.²³ President Trump stated publicly that this was a military-led operation.²⁴ Administration officials were quick to set this attack as a baseline for further action.²⁵ After the first boat strike, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth suggested that more kinetic actions were imminent: “We’ve got assets in the air, assets in the water, assets on ships, because this is a deadly serious mission for us, and it won’t stop with just this strike.”²⁶ Indeed, American military forces attacked another suspected drug boat in mid-September, and more attacks followed.²⁷ These naval actions alone could build into a sustained military campaign. In mid-October, B-52 bombers flew off the coast of Venezuela and an elite Army Special Operations aviation unit was conducting flights in the southern Caribbean Sea, also near the Venezuelan coast.²⁸

Even given the reported message to Congress putting the United States on a war footing, a large-scale operation is not inevitable. One-off remarks from President Trump might be chalked up to posturing or stage-setting for more extensive negotiations with foreign partners at some

future point; but some hard policy groundwork and justifications have been laid. Several senior members of the Trump administration have described combating Mexican drug cartels as a primary line of effort in U.S. counterterrorism policy.²⁹ U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard’s top-level intelligence forecast signaled a dramatic flip from 2024 analyses; her March 2025 *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* emphasized dangers posed by transnational gangs and terrorists ahead of top threats from 2024 like China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea combined.³⁰

These actions have all the hallmarks of a deliberate, policy-driven buildup to war. Successful wars are carefully planned and executed with due consideration for consequences. Given the opaque nature of planning in this case, we offer up a range of important considerations.

IF WE GO: UNILATERAL OR PARTNERED?

It remains unclear what a broad, military-led counterterrorism campaign against the cartels might look like, how long such a campaign might last, or what geographic scope it might encompass. Trump officials frequently hint at action in Venezuela and Mexico. Operations could conceivably extend to Haiti as well, where a criminal insurgency has taken root and continues to wreak havoc.³¹ Options are limited in Venezuela and Haiti, but in Mexico, American planners could continue to

23 Phil Stewart et al., “US Military Kills 11 People in Strike on Alleged Drug Boat from Venezuela, Trump Says,” Reuters, September 3, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-military-kills-11-people-strike-alleged-drug-boat-venezuela-trump-says-2025-09-03/>.

24 *ibid.*

25 Eric Schmitt et al., “U.S. Strikes a 2nd Venezuela Boat, Killing 3, Trump Says,” The New York Times, September 15, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/15/us/politics/trump-venezuela-drug-boat-strike.html>.

26 Idrees Ali et al., “Trump Administration Says More Operations Against Cartels Coming,” September 4, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-administration-says-more-operations-against-cartels-coming-2025-09-03/>.

27 “President Announces New Deadly Strike on Boat From Venezuela,” The New York Times, September 15, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2025/09/15/us/trump-news>; Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu, “US forces strike third alleged drug vessel killing three, Trump says,” BBC News, September 19, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crme4pv224wo>.

28 Eric Schmitt, “U.S. B-52s and Helicopters Fly Near Venezuela in Show of Threats,” New York Times, October 16, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/16/us/politics/trump-administration-helicopters-venezuela-military-pressure.html>.

29 Counterterrorism and US Strategy with Dr. Sebastian Gorka,” Hudson Institute, August 19, 2025, <https://www.hudson.org/events/counterterrorism-us-strategy-dr-sebastian-gorka-michael-doran>.

30 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), March 2025, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

31 The Soufan Center, IntelBrief, “Haiti Struggles With Criminal Insurgency as U.S. Designates Gangs as Terror Groups,” May 22, 2025, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-may-22/>.

partner with the state or go it alone.³²

Signals from the administration on this point are mixed. It simultaneously hints at unilateral action—working alone—while trying to assuage partner fears. For example, just after the U.S. attack on the alleged Tren de Aragua boat, Secretary of State Marco Rubio attempted to reassure President Sheinbaum by pledging to respect Mexican sovereignty and offering to bolster security cooperation with the Mexican military and security services.³³

Indeed, partnering in a prospective counter-cartel war in Mexico would be the ideal approach. History strongly suggests that counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and perhaps even counterinsurgency operations in complex urban and mountainous terrain require across-the-board teamwork. Temporary success achieved against narco-terrorist groups like the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in Colombia was only achieved through carefully balanced and mutually supportive partnering operations, robust budgets, and extended time horizons.³⁴ Americans did not lead a unilateral strike campaign to defeat the FARC; the Colombians led and won that fight with U.S. support. Despite close collaboration, that conflict has lasted decades, remains ongoing, and

32 Cartels and violent drug trafficking groups there also operate as de facto insurgent forces that challenge political legitimacy, battling for territorial dominance and control of lucrative smuggling and trafficking routes. Gary M. Shiffman, *The Economics of Violence: How Behavioral Science Can Transform our View of Crime, Insurgency, and Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). See also, Benjamin Lessing, “Logics of Violence in Criminal War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59, no. 8 (December 2015).

33 But even with Rubio taking center stage, there are reports that Stephen Miller, the White House deputy chief of staff, is playing a leading role in directing U.S. strikes against Venezuelan drug traffickers, perhaps superseding Rubio’s role. Vera Bergengruen et al., “Rubio Reassures Mexico After U.S. Military Strike Jolts Region,” *Wall Street Journal* September 3, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/americas/rubio-reassures-mexico-after-u-s-military-strike-jolts-region-bf5c37e8?st=H5L4kZ>; Hugo Lowell, “Stephen Miller Takes Leading Role in Strikes on Alleged Venezuelan Drug Boats,” *The Guardian*, September 29, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/sep/29/stephen-miller-venezuela-drug-boat-strike>.

34 For more on this campaign see, for example: Greg Mills et al., *A Great Perhaps? Colombia: Conflict and Convergence*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015).

progress is reversible.³⁵

Similarly, the United States led a coalition to defeat the armed militia component of the terrorist organization Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, relying on allies and partners to amplify its intelligence collection and strike capabilities.³⁶ No matter how many bombs the United States and its allies may have dropped, no ground would have been taken from IS and the group would not have been physically defeated on the battlefield without heavy sacrifices by Syrian and Iraqi soldiers (and irregular forces) and counterterror teams.

This dynamic—strength through partnership—has proven true in every 21st-century war. It has been true to varying extents throughout recorded history. Moreover, in wars like the one against the Islamic State, military actions were only one component of what were necessarily far broader and more nuanced campaigns. Other parallel and mutually reinforcing lines of effort have been essential. Counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and counternarcotics operations and wars achieve success through carefully balanced military, diplomatic, financial, and political inputs. American interagency partners support each other, partnered forces, and allies as part of a complex strategy. And even with all cylinders firing, chances of long-term success in any irregular war are mixed at best, and the outcome is subject to a range of unpredictable factors—what some might term “the fog of war.”

35 The United States recently decertified Colombia as a counternarcotics partner. See: U.S. Department of State, “Presidential Determination on Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2026,” media note, September 15, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/09/presidential-determination-on-major-drug-transit-or-major-illicit-drug-producing-countries-for-fiscal-year-2026/>.

36 For more on the counter-IS coalition see, for example: U.S. Department of State, “Members- The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS,” <https://www.state.gov/the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-partners>.

PROSPECTIVE PLANS: WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN MEXICO?

Military options to fight the cartels abound. Different approaches would probably be taken against cartels in Mexico and Venezuela. It might be possible to wrangle Mexican military cooperation for at least limited strikes against cartel assets, though the Mexican government would likely exert significant pressure on the U.S. military to show restraint. Even if the U.S. military unleashes its drone, manned aircraft, and missile strike assets—going full lethal—chances of military success or achieving “total elimination” of the cartel command-and-control, manufacturing, and shipping networks in Mexico appear to be dim.

Decades of survival learning have compelled the cartels to place their most valuable assets—processing plants, storage warehouses, and leadership—in either remote and hard-to-fight rural locations or in tight urban terrain in Mexican cities. American military forces can try to locate and strike these assets from the air using a mix of drones, manned aircraft, and ship-launched missiles. However, no air-only campaign has ever proven capable of destroying a terrorist organization, dismantling a criminal network, or stemming drug production. There are no indications a war in Mexico would be less complex or any easier to win than any other irregular war.

Cartel network resilience in Mexico and civilian casualties are likely to force ground action at some point. There has been little discussion of how the United States could win the necessary support from the Mexican public as collateral damage mounts and a prospective rally-around-the-flag effect takes hold among large swaths of the population. Given the American track record in Vietnam, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other irregular wars, it is unlikely U.S. military planners would have the time or resources to carefully prepare for nonlethal

actions before getting dragged into a potentially long-running ground campaign.

Ground operations in Mexico are likely to start with small counterterrorism raids conducted by special operations units. But the scope and scale of the cartel threat preclude success through small raiding alone. Moreover, the U.S. military’s predilection is to push assets forward and expand its operations. Small raids would likely give way to larger raids, which would require bases on Mexican soil. Over time, it would be increasingly likely that American special operators would be wounded and killed. Losses would probably prompt even more aggressive action.

Slippery-slope arguments are not logically sound, but historical precedent at least suggests a likely slide towards quagmire as ground forces get sucked into a complex irregular war. Even a cursory glance at an online map will demonstrate how quickly a military ground effort to take down groups, for example, like La Línea in Juarez, Mexico—right along the U.S. border—would swallow up small special operations teams. Prospects for a wider counterterror war would be tangible and could also derail some of the Trump administration’s other foreign policy priorities, including great power competition with China.

PROSPECTIVE PLANS: WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN VENEZUELA?

Venezuela is a different proposition altogether. Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro knows that a major counterterror interdiction into his country is likely to lead to his ouster and probable arrest (or perhaps assassination) by the U.S. military; the United States currently has a \$50 million bounty on his head.³⁷ President Maduro would have little

37 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “Nicolás Maduro Moros,” Narcotics Rewards Program: Wanted, August 7, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/nicolas-maduro-moros>.

choice but to treat any U.S. military incursion against the cartels as an existential threat. He has already urged Venezuelans to form self-defense militias, further complicating any U.S. intervention.³⁸ While the Venezuelan military could not put up a serious fight against the U.S. military, its likely conventional response could force an intended American counterterrorism operation towards a full-scale military invasion. Assuming it is able to defeat the organized units of the Venezuelan military quickly, the U.S. military would then have to conduct strikes against the cartels from afar or, as in Mexico, press on to land. Once American troops are ashore in Venezuela, they would effectively have to pursue regime change, evoking the well-known “Pottery Barn” rule: “You break it, you own it.” That would in turn put the United States in charge of Venezuela, its impoverished people, perhaps a pro-Maduro, anti-American insurgency, and the resilient drug cartels operating on familiar terrain.

For a president who campaigned on ending endless wars, starting a new war with no clear long-term objectives against drug traffickers hastily reclassified as terrorists would seem counterintuitive. But given the massive deployment of U.S. military might to the Caribbean, regime change and a long-term counterinsurgency war in Venezuela could indeed be on the table.³⁹ As Chatham House’s Christopher Sabatini recently wrote in the *New York Times*, “what some members of the Trump administration want is regime change, and they want it as cheaply as possible.”⁴⁰ But the United States’ experience in Iraq demonstrates the perils of regime change and how such an approach can never be done on the

cheap—either in terms of blood or treasure. Within the Trump administration, there is currently an intensification of a pressure campaign that would escalate U.S. military action to force President Maduro out of power.⁴¹

IS THE UNITED STATES READY FOR A LONG-TERM IRREGULAR WAR?

In short, no, the United States is not prepared. Senior American military leaders have extensive experience conducting both counterterrorism and counterinsurgency fights in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. But few troops who joined the armed forces since 2014 have any such experience. Since the late 2010s, the U.S. military has turned sharply away from these irregular warfare operations and has trained almost exclusively for high-end warfare against China.⁴² Most of the training programs tailored to help prepare soldiers for irregular operations—cultural engagements, tactical movement in urban terrain, fighting a non-uniformed enemy, etc.—have been jettisoned.

In practice, almost nobody in the U.S. military uses the word “counterinsurgency” or its acronym, COIN, which has become, in both the literal and figurative sense, a four-letter word. Even if the U.S. were eager to get back into the COIN fight, there simply are not enough special operators to fight this war alone.

Research on best practices and lessons learned for both counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations shows that qualified success is achieved only with high levels of commitment and motivation

38 Steven Gislam, “As Trump Eyes Venezuela, Maduro Urges People to Join Militia,” DW, September 14, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/as-trump-eyes-venezuela-maduro-urges-people-to-join-militia/video-73988980>.

39 Ryan C. Berg et al., “Deploying U.S. Vessels to the Caribbean Is a Show of Force,” *Foreign Policy*, September 4, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/09/04/venezuela-naval-deployment-drug-cartels/>.

40 Christopher Sabatini, “Trump Isn’t Busting Drug Cartels. He’s Settling Scores,” *New York Times*, October 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/01/opinion/venezuela-trump-maduro-regime-boats.html>.

41 Julian E. Barnes et al., “Top Trump Aides Push for Ousting Maduro From Power in Venezuela,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/29/us/politics/maduro-venezuela-trump-rubio.html>.

42 Mike Cherney, “In the Hills of Australia, Pacific Allies Are Training to Fight China,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/china-deter-us-japan-australia-training-exercise-15c219e1>.

on the part of the host-nation government. This research also shows that purely kinetic strategies are often counterproductive. Long-term focus, adaptability, and strong will to continue the fight over an extended timeframe—more often measured in decades rather than years—are required by all partners.⁴³ It remains unclear if any of the factors would be present in a U.S. military operation in either Mexico or Venezuela.

After the shift away from two decades of the so-called “Global War on Terrorism” (GWOT), Washington pivoted to great-power competition with near-peer rivals. Accordingly, American intelligence organizations have shifted focus to the threat of China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. There is a low likelihood that units tailored for large-scale combat operations will be cognitively prepared for, or have the on-hand expertise to mass the capabilities necessary to effectively understand and target the cartels without incurring significant second- and third-order consequences. Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations are manpower and expertise-intensive. Recent cuts and voluntary departures from both the intelligence and military communities are ill-timed. Venezuelan citizens are concerned about what will be left in the wake of U.S. military action, and warned that even if President Maduro is overthrown, there would be a panoply of armed actors vying for control of the spoils—remnants of Venezuela’s military, Colombian guerrillas, paramilitary gangs, and other violent non-state actors.⁴⁴

Perhaps more importantly, there is little indication that the American public is collectively prepared for an escalating, long-term war in Mexico, Venezuela, or even Haiti. While most Americans might agree

that the cartels represent a real threat and need to be dealt with, most will have little understanding of the costs and time required to fight the cartels. Nor are they likely to expect, or have the stomach for, the likely horizontal escalation the cartels can undertake inside the United States. As Brian Michael Jenkins recently warned, “Mexico’s cartels may respond violently, exploiting U.S. vulnerabilities in Mexico—and possibly north of the border.”⁴⁵ There are recent reports that Mexican drug cartels have offered upwards of \$50,000 bounties for targeted assassinations of officers from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP).⁴⁶

RISK OF HORIZONTAL ESCALATION

All cartels in the southern hemisphere represent threats to the United States primarily because they maintain strong networks of transporters, managers, muscle, and dealers inside the United States. Cartel criminals are active in probably most American cities and major urban areas and have a presence in a number of rural areas as well. Additionally, the cartels are well-organized with access to heavy firepower and explosives.⁴⁷

45 Brian Michael Jenkins, “Confronting Cartels: Military Considerations South of the Border,” CTC Sentinel, 18, no. 9 (September 2025) <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/feature-commentary-confronting-cartels-military-considerations-south-of-the-border/>.

46 Luke Barr, “Cartels Issuing Bounties Up to \$50,000 For Hits on ICE, CBP Agents: DHS,” ABC News, October 14, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/amp/US/cartels-issuing-bounties-50000-hits-ice-cbp-agents/story?id=126521867>.

47 Law enforcement operations against drug networks in the United States encounter improvised explosive devices. See, for example: KIVI-TV, “Boise Police Discover Explosive Devices During Drug Investigation,” KIVI 6 On Your Side, accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.kivitv.com/west-boise/boise-police-discover-explosive-devices-during-drug-investigation>; News4JAX, “Suspected Explosive Devices Discovered During Drug Raid at Palm Coast Home,” November 20, 2024, <https://www.news4jax.com/news/local/2024/11/20/suspected-explosive-devices-discovered-during-drug-raid-at-palm-coast-home/>; and CBS Pittsburgh, “Explosives Found in Loyalhanna Township Drug Bust,” accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pittsburgh/news/loyalhanna-township-drug-bust/>.

43 Christopher Paul et al., *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies*, RAND Corporation, September 26, 2013, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR291z1.html.

44 Julie Turkewitz, “Fear and Hope in Venezuela as U.S. Warships Lurk,” New York Times, September 29, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/28/world/americas/venezuela-mood.html>.

What might the cartels do if they are attacked directly in Mexico or Venezuela? They almost certainly will fight back at the point of attack, using their robust militia units to try to shoot down U.S. drones and kill special operations teams. In all likelihood, their overt military capabilities will be worn down by strikes. Still, in the meantime, urban combat could resemble what David Kilcullen described in *Out of the Mountains*: a prolonged and grinding campaign similar to what occurred in Kingston, Jamaica, or San Pedro Sula, Honduras.⁴⁸ This will increase pressure on cartel leaders to force President Trump to stop the attacks. Really, their only option to force President Trump to back down would be to carry the conflict into the United States.

This kind of horizontal escalation could take many forms. Cartel leaders could use their own members to conduct attacks on American law enforcement officers, attack defense installations, or even attack political leaders. However, these kinds of attacks against hard targets are high-risk and have a low likelihood of success. Unfortunately, their better option will be to attack American civilians in shopping malls, in buses, at concerts, and in other crowded places. While that kind of horizontal escalation is not inevitable, and while U.S. law enforcement would work hard to prevent such attacks, this threat must be considered in the overall counter-cartel equation.

SECOND- AND THIRD-ORDER CONSEQUENCES

A cartel-funded terrorist campaign in the United States represents the most obvious and worrying second-order consequence of a prospective military-led anti-cartel war. Prospective other implications abound. These include, but are certainly not limited to:

- reduced U.S. influence over the global enforcement of international law, and specifically maritime law and the laws of armed conflict;
- reduced global capacity to deter and fight other wars, and specifically a reduction in capacity to address Chinese threats against Taiwan;
- significantly increased U.S. budget deficits—wars are expensive;
- further disruptions to trade between the United States and Mexico, and possibly threats to U.S.-owned factories in Mexico;
- increased global oil prices as Venezuelan and perhaps Mexican oil output is reduced or blocked from shipment;
- given no apparent reduction in domestic demand for narcotics, increased production of natural and synthetic drugs inside the United States;
- and splintering among cartels and the birth of new groups, which could, over time, become more powerful than their predecessors.

And we will have to be concerned about the impact that yet another long-term irregular war might have on both the U.S. armed forces and the American population. Given the current administration's stated emphasis on lethality and disdain for legal restrictions on the use of force, it would be reasonable to anticipate increased incidents of civilian harm and war crimes in a Mexico or Venezuela campaign. As we learned in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, these kinds of actions undermine domestic support for wars and, over the long run, erode the professionalism of our armed forces.

Military casualties, long deployments, and even a small wave of combat-wounded veterans will have some impact on the United States and on the prospects for sustaining a long war against the cartels. And as mentioned above and as many other experts have argued: Given cartel resilience, drug trafficking network resilience, and the extraordinary

⁴⁸ David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerilla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

financial incentives of the drug trade, this has all the hallmarks of a long and ultimately dissatisfying war.

SO WHAT SHOULD THE UNITED STATES DO?

Drugs will continue to be a feature of American life for as long as Americans demand drugs. With sustained street demand, drug supply from within or from outside of the United States will be inherently resilient; after all, money talks. Therefore, even the most aggressive action against the cartels are likely to have only a mitigating effect on their activities. But the incapacity to solve this problem through “total elimination” should not preclude efforts to slow the flow of illegal narcotics. At worst, a substantial reduction in street availability of lethal drugs might save thousands of American lives. Sitting back and allowing organized criminal gangs to leech off our people and our economy has never been a viable option. So clearly, something must be done.

However, that phrase—*something must be done*—has often preceded ham-fisted, often myopic and sometimes disastrous foreign policy. Americans are both at their best and at their worst when reacting to an exigent threat. We were at our best responding to the blatant conventional military attack at Pearl Harbor in 1941: We were legally, ethically, and morally justified in our response to Japanese aggression. Our coalition military campaign in the Pacific theater won freedom for millions of people across East Asia.

We were briefly at our best in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 as we responded to a blatant terrorist attack on our soil. At least in the view of the authors, we were legally, ethically, and morally justified in our efforts to destroy al-Qaeda. However, the pursuit of al-Qaeda into Afghanistan led us into a complex irregular war. That is precisely the kind of war that has repeatedly humbled major

powers throughout recorded history; see the French in Algeria, the British in Kenya, the Americans in Vietnam, and the Russians in Afghanistan.

In our haste to *do something* in Afghanistan in 2001, we failed to prepare for or even contemplate the long-term consequences of our military actions. Over 20 years, we failed to destroy al-Qaeda, lost a counterinsurgency war to the Taliban, used 9/11 to justify a new and long-running war in Iraq that helped birth the Islamic State, and became mired in a global counterterror war that has cost trillions of dollars and correlated with an overall increase in recorded global terror activity.

Therefore, while it feels like we must do something about the cartels—we agree in both spirit and practice—American policymakers, military, and law-enforcement leaders should act thoughtfully, legally, ethically, and morally, with reasonable expectations for success. In the case of the cartels, those considerations rule out even the most brilliant and carefully thought-through unilateral military campaign.

What, then, can we do against the Mexican cartels? We can and should act in concert with our partner in Mexico. An enhanced partnership would certainly include a ramped-up multinational law enforcement operation and perhaps increased support for any covert action underway. Our colleagues in the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Coast Guard, and Customs and Border Protection need all the help they can get.

We can also provide military intelligence, logistics, and equipment support to our Mexican partners in accordance with longstanding practice. As we noted above, the United States has a long history of using its military to support operations related to countering the drug trade. This includes border security, building partner capacity, enabling partner operations against criminal organizations, and interdicting drug shipments.⁴⁹

49 Joint Publication 3-07.4, Joint Counterdrug Operations (Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 13, 2007).

Both the United States and Mexico suffer from the existence and cruel behavior of the cartels. But just as the FARC were primarily a Colombian state problem, these cartels are primarily a Mexican state problem. We significantly reduce our risk, exposure to horizontal escalation, second- and third-order effects, and our costs to both blood and treasure by working by, with, and through our established partner.

Venezuela presents a different challenge. President Maduro's illegal regime will not cooperate with the United States in any effort to reduce gang or cartel activity on Venezuelan soil. He has proven resilient in the face of long-standing American sanctions; we may have hit the law of diminishing returns when it comes to financial and physical isolation.

Therefore, the best course of action against Tren de Aragua and other Venezuelan gangs and cartels is increased multinational air, land, and sea law-enforcement action. That will be a dissatisfying approach to some, but it remains the most logical, practical, legal, ethical, and moral way to address this problem.

Does acting legally and within the bounds of ethical and moral precedent still matter for the American experiment? We argue that good behavior is no less critical to the establishment and sustainment of American global power now than at any point in our history. In fact, given the rising chaos around the world, setting and maintaining the best possible example may be more important than ever. Fighting the cartels the right way, with the right expectations in place, will be a victory unto itself.

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