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The Honorable John Cornyn  
The Honorable Sheldon Whitehouse  
Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control  
Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Cornyn, Co-Chair Whitehouse, and distinguished members of the caucus,

Thank you for holding this hearing entitled “Beyond Our Shores: The Global Reach of Mexican Drug Cartels and Risks to U.S. National Security.” The activities of Mexican cartels outside of Mexico and the United States have significant implications for our homeland and our partners and merit the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control’s close attention. I am honored to have this opportunity to submit this testimony as a statement for the record.

I am a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, where I direct the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors and the Brookings series, the Fentanyl Epidemic in North America and the Global Reach of Synthetic Opioids, and codirect the Africa Security Initiative. Illicit economies, such as the drug trade and wildlife trafficking, organized crime, and corruption, and their impacts on U.S. and local security issues around the world are the domain of my work. I have conducted fieldwork on these issues across Latin America as well as in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

In 2022, I wrote a pioneering series of articles in Mexico Today of La Reforma that detailed the expansion of Mexican criminal groups in North America, Latin America, the Asia-Pacific region, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East:

- “The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part I: In the Americas.”
- “The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa and CJNG – Part II: The Asia-Pacific.”
- “The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa and CJNG – Part III: Africa.”
- “The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part IV: Europe’s Cocaine and Meth Markets.”
- “The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part V: Europe’s Supercoke and On-the-Horizon Issues and the Middle East.”<sup>1</sup>

The series also laid out the threats this expansion posed to public safety and public health around the world, warning that further expansion and graver risks lay ahead. In my research and writing since, I have continued to track and explore these growing challenges.

My testimony below draws on the series and expands its findings with up-to-date developments regarding Mexican cartels' operations outside of Mexico and the United States.

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### **Executive Summary**

Over the past decade, Mexican criminal groups, particularly the Sinaloa Cartel and Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), have significantly expanded their operations outside of Mexico and the United States. While still flooding Europe with cocaine from Latin America and trying to develop new markets for the drug in Australia, New Zealand, and Asia, they are also internationally promoting and trafficking synthetic drugs far more dangerous than cocaine—particularly methamphetamine. In the past five years, they have set up methamphetamine labs across Europe and in Africa, partnering with local criminal actors and teaching them how to produce the highly potent and lethal Mexican version of the meth.

In Latin America, the presence of the Mexican cartels is most extensive and longest. Spanning the continent, it includes, among many other activities, the facilitation of drug coca cultivation in Colombia and the trafficking of the drug throughout the continent, and precursor smuggling and pill pressing in Central America. In Asia, Mexican criminal groups cooperate with Chinese and Indian networks to smuggle fentanyl and meth precursors and utilize Chinese money laundering networks. But they also appear to seek to develop cocaine markets not just in Australia and New Zealand, but also in East Asia.

In Australia and New Zealand, the Mexican cartels have recently surpassed the long-established Chinese criminal groups in the supply of methamphetamine.

Africa is no longer just a transit point for the Mexican cartels' cocaine shipments or their purchases of precursor chemicals from China and India. Though West Africa and the Sahel still serve as vast conduits of cocaine trafficking to Europe, and the continent is crisscrossed with precursor and other drug smuggling, the Mexican cartels have begun to set up methamphetamine labs in Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya to feed demand in regions like the Asia-Pacific as well as locally.

The cartels have also set up such labs in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, and likely elsewhere in Europe. The expansion of meth use on the continent, which the cartels appear to seek, creates high public health risks. Beyond the high mortality and morbidity

of Mexican methamphetamine, the risk is also that meth addiction will become a vector for expanded fentanyl use.

The Mexican cartels also smuggle methamphetamine through the United States, Canada, and the Middle East, and launder money in all three regions.

Around the world, the expansion of drug trafficking gives rise to increased drug use, as the cartels pay their local partners in drugs, rather than cash, and the latter then need to develop local drug consumption markets to obtain liquidity. African and Pacific Island countries along drug trafficking routes are among the latest to suffer the public health consequences.

In markets outside of Mexico—much like in the United States—the Mexican criminal groups do not seek to distribute drugs at the retail level. They leave such retail to local criminal groups. Instead, they organize the upstream part of the supply chains—such as production, trafficking, and wholesale distribution, often in alliances with local actors.

Like in Mexico, the criminal groups have also diversified their external activities beyond drugs, including into human smuggling and trafficking; illegal gold mining, such as in Ecuador; illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, such as in Costa Rica and Central America; and wildlife trafficking, such as in Africa.

In various parts of Latin America, such as in Colombia, Ecuador, and Costa Rica, the Mexican cartels' presence and influence have already significantly augmented criminal violence and made it more complex and difficult to suppress. This is especially the case when the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG compete in the same country over local allies, illicit production, and trafficking routes, and demand exclusive relations. Although in Europe, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific, Mexican cartels operate under the radar and do not come in with many hitmen and high firepower, their arrival has been associated with escalating criminal violence among local criminal groups, even in Australia. And their encroachment on and effort to displace Chinese meth suppliers in the Asia-Pacific region could also translate into similar infighting among the local allies of the Chinese and Mexican criminal groups.

The Mexican cartels' arrival often presents local criminal groups with the capacity to increase their firepower and expand their criminal activities beyond cooking potent meth—diversifying into many other illegal and legal economies. The cartels' presence can also increase local corruption.

Mexican cartels pose threats to public safety, the rule of law, economic and environmental sustainability, public health, and even U.S. national security—in both the United States and in the countries abroad where they set up their operations.

The cartels' expansion abroad undermines U.S. law enforcement efforts against the cartels by creating resilient and redundant systems of drug production and trafficking networks, money laundering, and income flows. U.S. international and anti-money-laundering actions in Mexico or any one location become less effective as a result.

The expansion of Mexican cartels also weakens U.S. partners and makes them susceptible to nefarious activities. Beyond the obvious dangerous drug use and increased criminal violence, the threats also include others, such as the loss of biodiversity, economic sustainability, and food security when the Mexican cartels promote local wildlife trafficking or exacerbate IUU fishing. Mexican cartel activities could also undermine the security of U.S. supply chains, such as in critical minerals, or the financial integrity and economic stability of partners. The risks also include threats to democracy when criminal violence and corruption give rise to authoritarianism or create opportunities for exploitation by hostile powers such as Russia.

Mexican cartels' expanded global footprint thus necessitates greater international law enforcement cooperation against the groups. Elements of how to build such a U.S. strategy include:

- Raising awareness abroad of the threats associated with Mexican cartels and helping government authorities around the world to develop intelligence capabilities and law enforcement tools against them.
- Sharing intelligence.
- Prioritizing the dismantling of clandestine methamphetamine laboratories, the flow of synthetic opioids, and the Mexican and local networks behind them.
- Bringing down Mexican criminal networks and prioritizing groups that partner up with them.
- Countering Mexican criminal groups' operations beyond drugs.
- Dismantling money laundering networks associated with Mexican criminal groups.
- Reducing corruption and patronage systems and establishing apolitical, independent legal systems.
- Prioritizing actions against Mexican criminal groups connected to terrorist networks or hostile states.
- Scrupulously adhering to human rights and civil liberties protections and holding law enforcement accountable.

Preparing for second-degree effects.

### **The regional spread of Mexican cartels' operations outside of Mexico and the United States**

The Sinaloa Cartel has led the spread of Mexican criminal groups outside of Mexico around the world, as I detailed in my 2022 series in *La Reforma's Mexico Today*. Its presence in **Latin America** is the most extensively established: It started with the cartels setting up operations in Central America to move cocaine toward the United States, then grew in Colombia from the late 2000s on, and eventually spread to Ecuador, Panama, Chile, Costa Rica, and many other Latin American countries. Beyond the cocaine trade and the smuggling of precursor chemicals, those Latin American cartel operations also include actual secondary and backup systems for synthetic drug production, such as methamphetamine labs and pill pressing facilities in Guatemala. The illicit pill presses in Guatemala have also been implicated in the cartels' mixing of methamphetamine and fentanyl into legal medications sold in Mexico to international tourists, such as Adderall.<sup>2</sup> The majority of fentanyl and methamphetamine production still takes place inside Mexico itself.<sup>3</sup>

In Latin America, Mexican cartels also participate in illegal mining and logging, wildlife trafficking, IUU fishing, and migrant smuggling and human trafficking.

In the mid-1990s, the Sinaloa Cartel worked with Italian criminal groups to develop cocaine markets in **Europe**, first sending emissaries there and eventually setting off burgeoning cocaine consumption. Today, the Mexican cartels' cocaine supply chains include partnerships with a wide panoply of criminal actors in Europe, including Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Polish, Moroccan, Albanian, Turkish, Balkan, and Irish groups.

Just a few years later, in the early 2000s, leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, commonly known as El Chapo, and Ismael Zambada García, alias El Mayo, also built relations with Chinese criminal groups, including the 14K and Sun Yee On triads, which dominated in southern China. The Sinaloa Cartel undertook this outreach to **Asia** predominantly to secure supply chains for methamphetamine production in Mexico.<sup>4</sup> But working with their Chinese and Hong Kong counterparts, the Mexican cartels also attempted to develop cocaine markets in East Asia, but cocaine use did not take off there at that time. Yet 20 years later, the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG have once again set their eyes on building cocaine markets in **the Asia-Pacific region**, particularly in Australia and New Zealand. Island nations in the Pacific Ocean, such as Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Papua New Guinea, have become important conduits for drug trafficking, while suffering growing drug use and HIV spread as a result.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, the logistical operatives of the Mexican cartels have set up shop in Indonesia, the Philippines, and South Korea.

Both the Sinaloa Cartel's and CJNG's Asian connections have expanded to Chinese and Indian suppliers of fentanyl precursors and encompass other activities than drugs, such as timber, wildlife trafficking, and IUU fishing.<sup>6</sup>

The Sinaloa Cartel's activities in **Africa** grew over the past 15 years beyond cocaine and beyond West Africa, a key conduit of cocaine to Europe. Its trafficking routes for drugs and their precursors now crisscross the continent. The Sinaloa Cartel is also engaging in human smuggling and wildlife trafficking on and from the continent.

And in the past decade, the Sinaloa Cartel developed methamphetamine trafficking through and money laundering in **Canada** as well as in the **Middle East**. But Mexican cartels are not known to have set up meth labs in Canada or supply methamphetamine or fentanyl within Canada or from Canada to the United States. Instead, there is a separate fentanyl and meth market in Canada operated by independent chemists and biker groups who synthesize meth and fentanyl at Canadian superlabs and dominate drug distribution within Canada. The meth and fentanyl that Mexican cartels bring to the United States is produced in Mexico.

Crucially, in Europe and Africa, the Sinaloa Cartel has been organizing methamphetamine production, something they also do with more direct control in the Northern Triangle of Central America. Sinaloa, as well as CJNG, is promoting the expansion of meth markets in those regions and developing supply production chains for high-profit markets in Australia and New Zealand. The cartels compete with other meth suppliers, such as Chinese groups, to dominate the local and global methamphetamine supply.

In their operations inside and outside of Mexico, the cartels also expanded their international money laundering operations, partners, and methods.

Where the Sinaloa Cartel, the innovator, has gone, its principal rival, CJNG, the even more violent imitator, has followed. Like Sinaloa, CJNG is building meth labs outside of the Americas, such as in Europe, while trafficking cocaine and methamphetamine around the world. It has developed drug trafficking networks in Africa and developed partnerships for precursor supply in China and India. Across Latin America, it violently competes with the Sinaloa Cartel over who controls local allies, proxies, vassals, and trafficking routes and hubs. It too has diversified beyond drugs.

As of now, the infighting that rages between the Chapitos' and Mayitos' factions of the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico since September 2024 does not seem to have hampered Sinaloa's activities outside of Mexico. While within Mexico, some analysts question whether the Sinaloa Cartel still exists and suggest that its factions now operate fully independently,<sup>7</sup> violent splits, relabeling, or a slowdown of its operations has not been registered outside of Mexico. But should that happen, violence could spike outside of Mexico as well, including as a result of attempted takeovers of Sinaloa's operations abroad by CJNG or local criminal groups.

### **The lines of operations of Mexican cartels abroad**

Thus, today the lines of operations of Mexican cartels outside of Mexico and the United States center on cocaine trafficking and meth production and trafficking. But they also include other commodities and other illicit activities.

#### ***Cocaine trafficking***

Dominating the smuggling of cocaine into the United States since the 1980s, the Mexican cartels have expanded their functional role in the cocaine trade and in its geographic spread. Since the late 2000s/early 2010s, after the weakening of the Colombian drug trafficking group La Oficina de Envigado, led by the drug capo Diego Murillo Bejerano, alias Don Berna, and the earlier demise of Colombia's Medellín and Cali Cartels, the Sinaloa Cartel started sending emissaries to Colombia to develop new partnerships with local drug producers and traffickers and cut out many Colombian middlemen. The cartel also became more intimately involved in local cocaine production in the country.<sup>8</sup> Its operations in Colombia grew further after Colombia's 2016 peace agreement with the leftist insurgency the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, the FARC). The withdrawal of the FARC cadres from various parts of Colombia and uncertainties as to who controlled which local drug operations allowed the Sinaloa Cartel and eventually its other Mexican rivals, such as CJNG and the Zetas, to assert a greater role close to production sites.

The Mexican groups began competing over local allies, often pushing them into violent competition with each other. The Sinaloa Cartel frequently aligns with the FARC dissident groups and another leftist Colombian guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), while the CJNG frequently aligns with groups that emerged out of the right-wing paramilitaries known as Autodefensas de Colombia and Don Berna's cartel, such as the Golfo Clan. But those

arrangements are hardly defined by origins or any vestiges of ideology. The Frente 21 Uriás Rondón group that emerged out of the FARC, for example, collaborates with CJNG.<sup>9</sup> The local partnerships are fluid and often not as exclusive as the Mexican cartels would wish, both characteristic drivers of violence. Beyond shopping for and incentivizing local allies, the Mexican cartels also began providing microfinance for coca cultivation to local managers and placed supervisors into production labs to obtain higher-purity yields.<sup>10</sup> The Sinaloa Cartel is particularly strong in the province of Calí, the city of Barranquilla, and along Colombia's Caribbean coast. CJNG is also strong in the Caribbean side of Colombia, while the Zetas are particularly entrenched in the province of Calí.<sup>11</sup>

In Africa as well, the Mexican cartels have developed local networks among criminal and insurgent groups and corrupt government officials for moving vast volumes of cocaine to Europe. Like in Latin America, the cocaine traffic has set off a significant increase in cocaine use in the Sahel and in coastal and West African countries as prices for the drug declined dramatically.<sup>12</sup>

To avoid processing vast volumes of cash in many different currencies, trafficking groups prefer to pay their local crime partners in kind. The local criminal groups then need to convert the drugs into cash by selling the payment drugs locally and developing local demand. Marketing intensifies, availability grows, price declines, and, devastatingly, use takes off.

In Europe, where Mexican and Italian criminal groups helped to orchestrate the expansion of cocaine use from limited quantities in the early 1990s to perhaps the most intense in the world today, the Mexican groups' principal effort today centers on innovating trafficking methods. With use and demand sky-high, the Mexican cartels, their European partners, and their rivals, such as Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), need to move vast volumes of cocaine, an illicit substance far bulkier than synthetic opioids.<sup>13</sup> They increasingly target smaller ports for offloading cocaine, such as in Ireland, Spain, Portugal, and Scandinavia, not just large ports such as Amsterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg, Marseille, and Piraeus. Although hiding cocaine among legal goods in shipping containers remains a highly effective smuggling method, since most ports are capable of inspecting only around 3% of cargo, Mexican criminal groups also hide drugs underneath the hulls of large ships and use divers to retrieve them, and offload drugs from mother ships to yachts and other smaller craft, which they then bring to land. They also widely utilize submersibles.<sup>14</sup> Marine surface drones as well as large-capacity aerial drones capable of carrying larger drug cargo over longer distances are the next domains of trafficking, which will further expand areas available for offloading along the littoral and deeper inland.<sup>15</sup>

Mexican cartels have also partnered with European cooks in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain to produce the world's most potent cocaine.<sup>16</sup> Instead of smuggling finished cocaine into Europe, the Mexican cartels trafficked the far bulkier and heavier coca paste into Europe, which is logistically more challenging and inefficient, and with European chemists, then converted it into cocaine in European labs to maximize potency.

Finally, Mexican cartels, like other Latin American criminal groups, such as the PPC, have been supplying increasing volumes of cocaine to Australia and New Zealand, seeking to capitalize on the lucrative price markups these illicit drug markets exhibit. They may also be attempting once

again to dramatically expand cocaine markets in East Asia, another region of intense law enforcement and thus high drug prices. Seizures of cocaine as well as methamphetamine believed to belong to Mexican cartels started to occur in South Korea several years ago, for example.<sup>17</sup> There is a possibility that some of the shipments are not meant merely to pass through on a circuitous clandestine route to other destinations, such as Australia, but also to be pushed into local illicit drug retail.

### ***Methamphetamine trafficking***

Far more dangerous than the Mexican groups' efforts to enlarge cocaine markets is their expansion of methamphetamine production and trafficking outside of North America.

Since the early 2020s, first the Sinaloa Cartel and subsequently also CJNG have sought to snatch up the highly profitable methamphetamine markets in Australia and New Zealand. This put them into direct competition with the Chinese triads that have supplied those markets for almost 30 years.<sup>18</sup> Stunningly, the Mexican cartels have been highly successful. In 2024, Australian police officials reported that some 70% of the meth seized in Australia has been Mexican-produced, and that the Mexican cartels have overtaken Chinese networks as the dominant suppliers of meth to the country.<sup>19</sup> The high potency and lower price of the Mexican meth, sometimes as little as a third of the price of meth produced in Myanmar and trafficked by Chinese networks, gives the Mexican cartels a great advantage.

To get the meth into Australia and New Zealand, Mexican cartels use diverse routes from and through Dubai, Europe, and Africa. They also intensely smuggle the meth produced in Mexico through the United States and Canada into the Asia-Pacific Region, sometimes working with Canadian crime gangs, such as the Wolfpack and the United Nations gang, in international trafficking.<sup>20</sup>

In recent years, the Sinaloa Cartel has set up industrial-scale methamphetamine labs in Europe and Africa as well as trained local drug producers there on how to cook meth. In Europe, such meth labs with Sinaloa Cartel cooks and representatives have been detected, for example, in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Poland. The Sinaloa Cartel's meth distribution networks also centrally feature Spain. Labs with CJNG cooks and operatives have been identified in Bulgaria and Romania. Like Sinaloa, the CJNG also set up large headquarters operations in Spain, a vital entry point for meth and cocaine shipped across the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>21</sup> Both cartels also maintain logistical networks and alliances in Portugal, including on the Azores Islands, and in Italy.

In Africa, large meth labs associated with the Sinaloa Cartel have been detected in South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya. South Africa and Nigeria have long had vibrant illicit synthetic drug production for local markets, while also being thickly connected to international trafficking in heroin, as is Kenya. Because of their large legal trade with India, South Africa and Kenya also make convenient locations for the smuggling of precursor chemicals from India and China. These local dynamics and international dimensions, combined with limited law enforcement capacities and entrenched criminal and corrupt networks, make these countries highly desirable partners for the Mexican cartels as they seek to disperse and augment drug production and trafficking, develop local drug markets, and explore opportunities for illicit business in other commodities and services.

At the meth labs in Europe, the Mexican cartels do not always seek to maintain a permanent presence, let alone permanent control. If the cartels cannot induce or coerce individuals from the Mexican diaspora, such as the relatives of cartel members living abroad, to work at the labs, they send cooks and logisticians from Mexico. These dispatched operatives often stay for only a few weeks, as long as their visas allow. If the cartels plan to maintain a longer presence, the cartel headquarters will send a new crew on a new visa.<sup>22</sup>

In some cases, however, the Mexican cartel leaders do not appear to hope for a permanent presence at the meth labs abroad, let alone the extraordinary level of control they impose on various economies, such as agriculture and legal and illegal fishing, logging, mining, and poaching, in Mexico.<sup>23</sup> There, they insist that people harvest, extract, and process only under the controlling eye of the cartels' supervisors, accountants, and monitors. Instead, in various European countries, such as France and the Netherlands, the Mexican cartels merely expect that the local chemists and criminal groups whom they trained will produce reliable amounts for shipments to Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere and pay adequate fees from local distribution across Europe and Africa.

But without the presence of the large numbers of sicarios and the firepower the cartels enjoy in Mexico, the above arrangement is a significant leap of faith for the Mexican criminal groups. Once the European crime partners acquire the chemistry knowledge, why should they continue paying a cut to the Mexicans and feed their supply chains? Why not strike out on their own, particularly in local retail markets, where the Mexicans lack independent access and in settings where their warfare capabilities greatly surpass the Mexican assets? This is especially true for groups such as the Mocco Maffia in the Netherlands and Belgium, and Turkish and Albanian criminal groups across Europe.

Nor is it clear so far what percentage of the meth production in Europe and Africa is meant to stay within the country where the specific meth lab operates, be sent elsewhere on the continent, or be shipped out to the Asia-Pacific region. There is increasingly evidence that the Sinaloa Cartel, for example, is targeting markets in Western Europe for its meth.<sup>24</sup> But even when a locality serves originally as merely a transshipment place, the odds are that it will develop into its own retail and consumption market. Thus, there is a significant chance that places in the Middle East, such as Dubai, that have become important transportation hubs for Mexican meth and cocaine will prompt the Middle East's transition away from Captagon toward the far more devastating meth. The suppression of Captagon production by the Ahmad al-Sharaa regime in Syria presents Mexican drug traffickers with such an opportunity, even as they have to compete with the meth supplied by traffickers from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq and the emergent local production there.<sup>25</sup>

The danger associated with Mexican meth trafficking is thus three-fold.

First, the expansion of Mexican meth production and trafficking could produce increases in violence, even in regions with previously low levels of violent criminality, such as Western Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. In Europe and Africa, the Mexican groups' limited ability to control their local allies and proxies could produce retaliatory violence as the cartels may seek to

impose loyalty and fealty and prevent defections. As meth markets grow in Germany, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and other European countries, the local distributors could start to violently compete with each other as to which group is aligned with which cartel and controls which particular meth turf.

As the Mexican cartels began supplying their meth to Australia and New Zealand, they intensified such violent competition there among local biker groups, which dominate retail distribution in the two countries.<sup>26</sup> The biker gangs also increasingly contract out a variety of crimes through online recruitment, including murders to teenagers, who take up homicide contracts for as little as 3,000 Australian dollars (\$2,000).<sup>27</sup> In pushing their meth in Australia and New Zealand, the Mexican criminal groups also risk antagonizing Chinese criminal groups and potentially triggering violent confrontations with them through local proxies.

Second, methamphetamine use creates devastating morbidity effects, with effective treatment elusive, unlike in the case of medical treatment for opioid use. The meth produced by Mexican cartels is especially potent, significantly surpassing the potency of the meth produced in Myanmar and distributed by Chinese criminal groups or the meth produced in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and traditionally South Africa. The potency and the presentational form of Mexican meth, in the shape of large crystals, make it highly desired by users. But its potency also means that it is associated with even higher morbidity and high lethality. In the United States, it has already killed tens of thousands of people.<sup>28</sup> The spread of Mexican meth thus creates greater public health risks than meth supplied by other groups.

The production method also gives the Mexican groups a hefty advantage, since it is capable of converting the waste product in the methamphetamine production, known as L-meth, into the desired meth, known as the D-meth. Thus, the Mexican method significantly increases the amount of the desired product from the same amount of precursors. This method also facilitates the production of the sought-after large crystals.

Third, there is also a risk that the spread of methamphetamine use in Europe and Africa and its growth in the Asia-Pacific region may become a conduit for intensified distribution and use of synthetic opioids. So far, synthetic opioids have turned up in various drug mixtures in Africa, but their use hasn't exploded. In Europe too, the fentanyl and nitazine classes of synthetic opioids have been detected in over 20 countries, and that number is steadily growing. But their supply—as well as that of their precursors—has originated in Eastern Europe, China, and India, and retail is still localized. Industrial-scale supply associated with large criminal groups has not been established. Nor have Mexican cartels specifically been detected supplying synthetic opioids into Europe, as they are instead betting on methamphetamine. But expanded meth distribution networks could be used by the Mexican cartels—or rival groups—to start pumping in synthetic opioids, perhaps mixed into meth too.

### ***Illicit activities beyond drugs***

As I have repeatedly testified in the U.S. Congress and extensively written about, in Mexico, Mexican criminal groups have infiltrated many other illegal and legal economies, including agriculture, logging, mining, fisheries, and wildlife trade.<sup>29</sup> In some parts of Mexico, they now

outright dominate both the legal and illegal side of such trades. The Sinaloa Cartel, in particular, often seeks to dominate the entire vertical chain of operations in a particular commodity.

The Mexican cartels are now taking such business diversification abroad. For example, the Sinaloa Cartel has developed an extensive presence in Costa Rican and other Central American fishing fleets, using their vessels not just for smuggling drugs but directly for IUU fishing.<sup>30</sup> The cartel facilitates the importation of illegally caught seafood into Quintana Roo and other parts of Mexico. Marine products, such as the highly valuable and illegally harvested totoaba bladders that the cartel sells to Chinese networks, and sometimes uses as payments for fentanyl precursors, are smuggled out of Mexico, sometimes through the United States and Canada.<sup>31</sup>

The cartel has taken its wildlife trafficking operations to far-away locations. In Africa, it has inserted itself into parrot and bird trafficking and other aspects of the wildlife trade, perhaps also to facilitate barter for drug precursors.<sup>32</sup> Chinese, Vietnamese, and local African poaching and wildlife trafficking networks still vastly surpass the Sinaloa Cartel in wildlife trafficking operations in Africa and elsewhere. But it is significant that the cartel seeks to enlarge its portfolio of operations even in settings where other networks have long dominated.

In Mexico, the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG have vastly expanded their role in mining, sometimes extorting mining companies, other times setting up their own illegal mines for gold, silver, and rare earths.<sup>33</sup> CJNG has also been illegally mining mercury in Mexico and smuggling it to illegal mining networks in the Amazon through the Peruvian port of Callao.<sup>34</sup> Through alliances with local actors, such as Los Lobos in Ecuador, CJNG has also reportedly developed access to some 20 illegal gold-mining operations in the country.<sup>35</sup>

Two decades ago, the vicious Zetas cartel in Mexico, now fragmented and weakened, started kidnapping and brutalizing undocumented migrants in Mexico, extorting them for fees and eventually also extorting the smugglers who had previously independently smuggled the migrants into the United States. After that, the large Mexican cartels began charging and licensing illegal crossings across the U.S.-Mexico border. But the Sinaloa Cartel, CJNG, and others have for years been inserting themselves into human smuggling that spans Latin America, from the Southern Cone through the Darien Gap and Central America, into Mexico and the United States.<sup>36</sup> Several years ago, the Sinaloa Cartel also reportedly began facilitating the smuggling of people from Africa into Central America and onward to Mexico and the United States, latching onto its drug trafficking networks in Africa.<sup>37</sup> Both cartels also participate in global human trafficking networks that enslave people for sexual exploitation and forced labor.

### ***Globalized money laundering***

The Mexican cartels are not known to function extensively as providers of money laundering services to others. Rather, they are the beneficiaries of international money laundering networks. For years, that used to include the Black Peso Exchange Market. Over the past decade, Chinese money laundering networks became the No.1 money launderers for the Mexican cartels, and these networks have also extensively spread in Europe, in countries like Italy, France, and Spain. They now serve criminal groups and corrupt businesses there and beyond. In my previous testimonies and my various writings, I have detailed this switch toward Chinese money

laundering.<sup>38</sup> The Chinese money laundering networks have been able to catapult themselves to the top of money laundering outside of the Asia-Pacific region, since they can charge fees to Mexican cartels and other international criminal groups at rates far lower than other illicit systems by capitalizing on Chinese capital controls and captive clients in China. They can also exploit a wide set of tools, including, above all, trade-based money laundering at volumes and with global reach other groups cannot.

That does not, however, mean that the Mexican cartels have put all their eggs of illicit profit into one money laundering basket. Even as they switched extensively toward Chinese money laundering networks, they have also diversified to Albanian money laundering businesses and even Brazilian ones, where the PCC dominates the client space and is an important rival to the Mexican cartels.<sup>39</sup> For over a decade and a half, Mexican cartels have utilized money laundering networks in Canada, including Chinese networks and casino-based laundering, and in more recent years, they have come to exploit laundering systems in Dubai.<sup>40</sup> Dubai and other global trade hubs in the Gulf also serve as major illegal gold laundering centers.

### **Impact on violence and corruption and criminal knowledge transfer**

Beyond their own intentional operations and objectives, the Mexican cartels often profoundly shape the criminal landscape, the rule of law, and the political economy of the foreign localities where they have established operations.

#### ***Violence***

Although in Mexico, the CJNG, the Sinaloa Cartel, and other Mexican criminal groups are highly violent, with some of their operations there approaching internal warfare, when they set up operations in Africa, Europe, or the Asia-Pacific region, they arrive without firepower and sicarios and exhibit less brazenness. Often, only a handful of their logistical and corruption experts set up quarters in a new location and operate with a low profile. The Sinaloa Cartel is also highly sensitive to a host country's law enforcement capacities and will restrain its members from engaging in violence when it fears the law enforcement response would be crushing. That is a crucial reason why the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG behave very peacefully in the United States, in a striking contrast to Mexico, despite being present across the United States and being the top wholesale suppliers of drugs in the United States.

However, the Mexican cartels' arrival abroad can be a direct or indirect trigger of violence. This is especially true if both of the Mexican rivals compete for local allies, proxies, smuggling routes, and corruption networks, and if they demand exclusivity from their local partners. I laid out earlier how this dynamic exacerbated violence in Colombia, but this has similarly been a key driver of violence in Ecuador as well as Costa Rica and Chile, all three long thought of as islands of peace in a continent rife with highly violent criminality. In Ecuador, for example, the Sinaloa Cartel first aligned itself with the local criminal group the Choneros. Several years later, CJNG followed Sinaloa into Ecuador, it too coveting access to Ecuador's porous borders and trafficking access to Colombia's cocaine and its ports, which are able to funnel the drug to Europe in cargo containers. It aligned itself with the Choneros' rivals—Los Lobos—and both groups launched into intense internal warfare to acquire the best smuggling routes and systems for their Mexican partners and greater retail turf for their own local cocaine sales.<sup>41</sup> The Ecuadorian government's

high-value targeting policies fragmented the Choneros.<sup>42</sup> The criminal challenge to Ecuadorian law enforcement authorities, already intense before the arrival of the Mexican Cartels, ballooned, making Ecuador one of Latin America's most violent countries.

Sometimes, the Mexican cartels directly reinforce the local actors' fighting assets. But even without the cartels' explicit prodding, local criminal partners of the Mexican cartels can feel incentivized to violently acquire greater turf now that cooperation with the Mexican cartels promises far greater illicit profit. That has been the case in Australia, for example, as I discussed earlier.

If Chinese criminal networks, which prioritize corruption and political infiltration and very rarely conduct assassinations, let alone resort to shootouts with rivals, end up feeling threatened by the Mexican cartels' expansion in the Asia-Pacific region, both sets of actors may seek to hire local proxies for their violent contestation over turf. If that were to happen, those regions could experience unprecedented levels of criminal violence.

### ***Corruption and modus operandi contagion effects***

Among the Mexican criminal groups, the Sinaloa Cartel especially excels in developing corruption networks with law enforcement, military agencies, and government offices. The cartel's operatives have brought those skills with them in foreign lands. For example, years before the Choneros started battling it out with the Lobos to satisfy their Mexican partners, the Sinaloa Cartel developed extensive corruption networks within the Ecuadorian government.<sup>43</sup> In some localities, the Mexican cartels may also bring levels of financial corruption to levels that were not seen there before.

The odds are thus substantial that where the cartels arrive, corruption increases. That is also true about the influence of Chinese criminal networks and their global expansion.

And just like with the Chinese groups, the Mexican cartels' arrival abroad can also expand the menu of illicit activities in which they participate. Local groups emulate the Mexican criminal powerhouses' effective modus operandi and diversify into a broad extortion of all economic activity, including illegal logging, mining, fishing and wildlife trafficking, and ultimately, also the takeover of legal economies.

### **Threats to U.S. national security**

Mexican cartels pose threats to public safety, the rule of law, economic and environmental sustainability, public health, and even U.S. national security. These dangers are augmented as a result of the cartels' international expansion in two ways: First, it undermines U.S. law enforcement efforts against the cartels; second, it weakens U.S. partners and makes them susceptible to nefarious activities.

The Mexican cartels' ability to disperse drug production and trafficking around the world and diversify their revenues by tapping into varied economies, commodities, and localities strengthens the cartels' capacities and resilience and gives them redundant survival systems.

The dispersion of synthetic labs around the world decreases the cartels' vulnerability to any hits against their labs in Mexico. The dispersion of and redundancies in drug trafficking routes and means reduce the impact of any particular route being shut down by law enforcement. The globalization of the cartels' operations augments their financial intake, giving them more money for weapons, hitmen, and corruption. The diversification of their revenue streams and money laundering systems makes it far harder for law enforcement agencies to shrink the cartels' income.

The cartels' global dispersion also increases the chance that they will come into contact with foreign terrorist organizations who may seek to partner with them, such as in Africa or the Middle East, or hostile powers, such as Russia, whose criminal groups are extensively utilized by Russian intelligence services.

Should Mexican cartels establish cybercrime and scam operations powered by artificial intelligence in Africa, Europe, or Latin America, they can target not just local systems and people, but also U.S. citizens. Already, timeshare and other scams run by CJNG from Mexico have wiped out lifelong savings of American citizens and compromised Mexico's financial systems.

By infiltrating the legal economies, production systems, and trade networks outside of Mexico, the Mexican cartels and other criminal groups can also undermine crucial U.S. supply chains. This could result in the poisoning of medication supply for the United States, as has already happened with the cartels' adding methamphetamine and fentanyl into Adderall. The cartels' activities could divert critical minerals from the United States and its Western allies. IUU fishing can undermine the food security of local communities and entire countries and compromise the sustainability of U.S. seafood supply chains by polluting them with illegally harvested seafood, something already underway.<sup>44</sup>

By augmenting illegal logging and mining and wildlife trafficking, Mexican cartels' operations abroad can intensify global warming and habitat loss, undermine ecosystems services vital for human survival and economic well-being, threaten vital biodiversity, and spread zoonotic diseases.<sup>45</sup> The current dangerous and economically costly spread of screwworm affecting cattle in the United States originated in cattle rustling by Mexican cartels between Central America and Mexico.<sup>46</sup> The risks of zoonotic disease spread as a result of the cartels' activities has grown as they now use wildlife products to pay for fentanyl precursor chemicals, as my investigative scoop revealed in 2022.<sup>47</sup>

The pernicious activities may take place in far-away territories, but their transnational effects will negatively affect the United States at home.

And all of these threats weaken and destabilize U.S. partners and allies.

The arrival of rival Mexican cartels to a new locality could set off previously unseen forms of violent criminality. In the worst circumstances, such as in Ecuador and Colombia, the presence of Mexican cartels dramatically intensifies violence and makes it far harder for local security and

law enforcement agencies to suppress it. Local security forces may not have the capacity to act against and incapacitate the Mexican cartels' management operations outside of their countries and may not be able to deter the cartels' instigation of violence locally.

As discussed earlier, the cartels' presence may magnify and spread corruption in a new area, undermining accountability and the rule of law.

The resulting malaise and instability will likely increase societal polarization and its susceptibility to manipulations by hostile actors such as Russia. It can also weaken societal commitment to democracy, checks and balances, and the rule of law as people facing high criminal violence trade civil liberties, human rights, and democracy for mailed-fist authoritarianism or Chinese anti-crime technologies that can be abused for authoritarian practices and espionage for the promise of safety.

### **Policy recommendations**

Of course, the Mexican cartels' expanded global footprint also comes with expanded vulnerabilities. Many more law enforcement agencies, including highly potent ones, such as those in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, have become focused on dismantling the Mexican criminal networks. The cartels' connections to local criminal partners can put them on the radar of local law enforcement agencies, which uncover the cartels' operations in their pursuit of local targets. Such targeting, however, should not be random and opportunistic. Nor can the United States bomb its way out of the Mexican cartels' expansion outside of North America. Rather, the United States should support a concerted international law enforcement effort to reduce the Mexican cartels' international footprint and influence.

Elements of such a strategy include:

1. Raising awareness abroad of the threats associated with Mexican cartels and helping government authorities around the world to develop intelligence capabilities and law enforcement tools against them.

In some countries, law enforcement agencies already closely focus on the threats of Mexican cartels. Elsewhere, however, the Mexican groups' arrival is a new phenomenon, while other criminal groups dominate the agenda of local agencies. While recognizing that suppressing the most violent criminal groups must remain the law enforcement policy priority of U.S. partners, U.S. law enforcement agencies can support them with developing awareness and investigative capacities, including linguistic training, to counter the Mexican criminal groups' activities.

In addition to growing specialized capacities within agencies, such support could also encourage the development of joint task forces that pull in experts on Mexican criminal networks from across a wide set of local agencies.

2. Sharing intelligence.

While guarding against corruption and criminal group infiltration into law enforcement systems abroad, the United States must be willing to share actionable intelligence with partners.

3. Prioritizing the dismantling of clandestine methamphetamine laboratories, the flow of synthetic opioids, and the Mexican and local networks behind them.

The morbidity and mortality associated with methamphetamine, especially Mexican methamphetamine, far surpass that of cocaine. The lethality of synthetic opioids is even higher. The United States should encourage authorities around the world to prioritize suppressing these synthetic drugs associated with the Mexican cartels and other suppliers. Ideally, emerging meth production would be rapidly squashed before it sets off extensive meth use disorder and drives up demand.

4. Bringing down Mexican criminal networks and prioritizing groups that partner up with them.

Since the number of Mexican operatives outside of Mexico is often limited to tens of individuals, law enforcement agencies should focus on rounding up the entire network. Moreover, they should prioritize targeting the local criminal groups that are willing to cooperate with the Mexican cartels.

5. Countering Mexican criminal groups' operations beyond drugs.

Since Mexican criminal groups operate in many domains other than drugs, countering their money laundering schemes and illicit activities in logging, mining, IUU fishing, and wildlife trafficking is essential. More focus on these activities will help governments develop a multifaceted picture of the Mexican criminal networks. It may also help reduce how much local criminal groups diversify their activities.

Law enforcement investigations into illicit economies in natural resources often provide unique venues for infiltrating criminal groups, generating intelligence, and uncovering their political and government-linked networks. Thus, fostering competent and well-resourced law enforcement forces specializing in efforts against poaching, wildlife trafficking, IUU fishing, and illicit logging, deforestation, and mining provides varied benefits to dismantling organized crime.

Such non-drug economies also need to feature prominently in intelligence gathering and efforts to gather financial intelligence and counter money laundering.

6. Dismantling money laundering networks associated with Mexican criminal groups.

The Trump administration has impressively expanded financial investigations and sanctions against a wide range of Mexican cartels' operations in Mexico and actors that launder money for them. It should expand such financial investigations and targeting outside of Mexico as well and encourage partner governments to do so too. That includes alerting them to the role of Chinese money laundering networks as key facilitators of money laundering for the Mexican cartels as well as many other criminal groups. Even in Europe, the spread of Chinese money laundering

networks is a recent phenomenon; in some parts of the world, law enforcement agencies may not be aware of it at all.

7. Reducing corruption and patronage systems and establishing apolitical, independent legal systems.

Systematically prosecuting the political and business sponsors of Mexican criminal groups and corrupt government officials at all levels of government is vital. The Trump administration has taken bold and highly desirable steps in indicting former and current government officials in Mexico connected to Mexican cartels. It should take such actions outside of Mexico too.

Enabling such anti-corruption activities also requires helping other countries build effective, apolitical prosecutorial and legal systems shielded from political interference as well as infiltration by criminal groups.

Countering generalized corruption and patronage systems that provide exceptions from the rule of law for one's clique fosters both objectives. Criminality thrives amidst corruption.

Countering corruption is significantly enhanced by strong independent oversight bodies, such as offices of inspectors general and other systems of transparency and accountability, including thriving investigative journalism and civil society organizations that expose the malfeasance of politicians, police, and security forces and hold them to account.

The United States should support such formal and societal checks-and-balances around the world in its anti-crime efforts.

8. Prioritizing actions against Mexican criminal groups connected to terrorist networks or hostile states.

Should some Mexican criminal groups start cooperating with terrorist networks, such as Islamist jihadi groups in the Middle East or Africa, and facilitate some of their activities, these Mexican groups and factions should become a top priority for U.S. law enforcement even if they do not traffic drugs into the United States.

Similarly, should some Mexican criminal factions start collaborating with Russian organized crime, Russian intelligence services, or other hostile states, these Mexican factions should become a top priority for U.S. law enforcement.

9. Scrupulously adhering to human rights and civil liberties protections and holding law enforcement accountable.

Strongman law enforcement tactics ultimately backfire and, over time, cause profound damage to all aspects of the rule of law. They may be popular for a while, but they destroy the essential trust of populations in police forces and the law.

All law enforcement activities need to take place amid scrupulous adherence to the rule of law, due process, and civil liberties and human rights. All too often, wars on crime have become a mechanism for broad political repression and for overthrowing democracy. Unaccountable law enforcement forces, incentivized to suspend the rule of law against alleged criminals—on the basis of however flimsy allegations—readily become tools of authoritarianism and turn on all citizens without restraint.

Brutal and unaccountable law enforcement forces also lose their anti-crime effectiveness. In many countries, such police forces have become the top criminals, redistributing drug markets and other crime turfs among themselves.

In contrast, reducing impunity for all, including law enforcement forces, and strengthening the rule of law improve anti-crime efforts.

#### 10. Preparing for second-degree effects.

If law enforcement succeeds in dismantling Mexican criminal networks in a particular country, other criminal actors will replace them. Ideally, law enforcement's actions against the Mexican groups would have created deterrence against the most undesirable activity, such as the production and trafficking of synthetic drugs, and the criminal actors who try to take up the role of the Mexican cartels would shy away from it. Regardless of whether incapacitation produces deterrence, law enforcement agencies need to analyze, plan, and prepare for a future in which Mexican groups are replaced by other criminal groups with alternative agendas, whether those groups are Chinese, Albanian, Brazilian, or other.

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Tackling Chinese criminal networks in Latin America,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 16, 2026, [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2026-03/Vanda\\_Felbab-Brown\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2026-03/Vanda_Felbab-Brown_Testimony.pdf); Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Dirty money: Chinese organized crime in Latin America”; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “The CCP’s role in the fentanyl crisis,” Statement for the record, U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on the CCP, April 15, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-limits-of-renewed-us-china-counternarcotics-cooperation/>; and Felbab-Brown, “China and synthetic drugs control.”

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Karina Suárez and Andrés Rodríguez, “The Albanian mafia operating casinos for the Sinaloa Cartel,” *El País English*, November 25, 2025, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2025-11-17/the-albanian-mafia-operating-casinos-for-the-sinaloa-cartel.html>; and Ricardo Brito, “Brazilian police bust gang for laundering Mexican cartel money,” *Reuters*, July 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazilian-police-bust-gang-laundering-mexican-cartel-money-2024-07-02/>.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Bertrand Monnet, “From Mexico’s Sinaloa to the skyscrapers of Dubai, the art of laundering fentanyl money,” *Le Monde*, December 8, 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/12/08/from-mexico-s-sinaloa-to-the-skyscrapers-of-dubai-the-art-of-laundering-fentanyl-money\\_6323478\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/12/08/from-mexico-s-sinaloa-to-the-skyscrapers-of-dubai-the-art-of-laundering-fentanyl-money_6323478_4.html).

<sup>41</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown and Diana Paz García, “Ecuador’s elections, organized crime, and security challenges,” The Brookings Institution, February 3, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/ecuadors-elections-organized-crime-and-security-challenges/>.

<sup>42</sup> Christopher Newton et al., “InSight Crime’s 2025 homicide round-up,” *InSight Crime*, March 11, 2026, <https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2025-homicide-round-up/>; Gavin Voss and Steven Dudley, “Ecuador says extortion is down. The reality is more complicated,” *InSight Crime*, May 4, 2026, <https://insightcrime.org/news/ecuadors-authorities-say-extortion-down-reality-more-complicated/>.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, “Paradise lost: Ecuador’s battle with organized crime,” International Crisis Group, November 12, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/latin-america-caribbean/ecuador/109-paradise-lost-ecuadors-battle-organised-crime>.

<sup>44</sup> For further details, see Felbab-Brown, “China’s role in poaching and wildlife trafficking in Mexico.”

<sup>45</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, *The Extinction Market* (Hurst/ Oxford University Press: 2017); Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Wildlife trade in Mexico, conservation, and pandemics,” *Mexico Today*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/11/wildlife-trade-in-mexico-conservation-and-pandemics/>; Felbab-Brown, “China’s role in poaching and wildlife trafficking in Mexico”; Felbab-Brown, “Preventing the next zoonotic pandemic,” *Project Syndicate*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/preventing-the-next-zoonotic-pandemic/>.

<sup>46</sup> For details, see, for example, Natalia Hidalgo, “Screwworm scare highlights ongoing cattle trafficking loopholes in southern Mexico,” *InSight Crime*, July 29, 2025, <https://insightcrime.org/news/screwworm-scare-cattle-trafficking-mexico/>.

<sup>47</sup> Felbab-Brown, “China’s role in poaching and wildlife trafficking in Mexico.”