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As fentanyl crisis grows, U.S.-Mexico divide deepens

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MEXICO CITY — As alarm grows in the United States over the fentanyl epidemic, a highly acrimonious dispute has erupted between the U.S. and Mexican governments, threatening cooperation in battling an opioid that kills tens of thousands of Americans every year.

At issue is a fundamental disagreement over what's causing the crisis — and different visions of how to address it.

U.S. officials blame the flood of fentanyl crossing the border primarily on Mexican crime groups, and are pressing the government to do more to stop them.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, however, insists that the main source of the synthetic drug is Asia. Mexican criminals, he says, merely stamp fentanyl powder into pills as it transits the country.

"In Mexico, we don't produce fentanyl," he told reporters this month, the latest in a series of statements pushing back at Washington. He has blamed the crisis on a lack of family values in the United States that drives people to use the drug.

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Several prominent U.S. Republicans have accused López Obrador of denying the extensive reach of Mexican drug cartels. Fentanyl has shot to the top of the GOP agenda; lawmakers, former senior officials and presidential candidates are coalescing around the once-fringe idea of using the U.S. military to attack Mexico's drug cartels and fentanyl labs.

While the Biden administration opposes that idea, it's almost certain to be a key Republican proposal as both countries head into presidential elections in 2024.

Mexican officials warn that unilateral U.S. intervention would have dire consequences.

"In one act, you'd destroy all the security cooperation between Mexico and the United States," Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard told The Washington Post. He said he considered such a strike "unlikely."

U.S. frustration goes beyond the campaign trail. Federal prosecutors this month announced sweeping indictments laying out what they describe as brazen efforts by the Sinaloa cartel to flood the United States with fentanyl. One top U.S. official openly suggested that López Obrador was contradicting his own security forces. "They know production-synthesizing is going on in Mexico," the official told reporters, speaking on the condition of anonymity under White House ground rules.

Fueling the U.S. urgency is the soaring toll of fentanyl, which is around 100 times as potent as morphine. Of the roughly 107,000 overdose deaths in the United States in 2021, two-thirds involved synthetic opioids — mainly, fentanyl. The drug is now the No. 1 cause of death for Americans aged 18 to 49, according to a Post data analysis.

To U.S. officials, it's obvious who's producing that fentanyl. Seizures of the drug at the U.S.-Mexican border have tripled since 2020. And Mexican authorities have captured significant amounts of precursor

chemicals used to manufacture it.

Yet the Mexican government has discovered few fentanyl-production labs, both sides say.

Exactly what Mexican authorities have found is unclear, due in part to the vagueness of press releases from the army, the lead agency on drug seizures. It has reported destroying more than 1,000 “chemical laboratories” in four years. But the vast majority, officials and analysts say, have turned out to be methamphetamine labs.

Defense Minister Luis Cresencio Sandoval this month reported that authorities had seized 37 fentanyl pill manufacturing sites since López Obrador took office in December 2018. In what analysts interpreted as a shift in tone, the report acknowledged that the final stage of production — the conversion of the chemical ANPP into fentanyl — was indeed happening in the facilities. Yet the report suggested that the drug’s chemical ingredients came from abroad, and that Mexico wasn’t the main culprit in the fentanyl crisis ravaging the United States.

Republican politicians take such conclusions as a sign that Mexico isn’t willing to fight its drug traffickers. “If Mexico will not cooperate, we’ll have to do what’s in our national interest,” Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) declared last month, as he introduced legislation to label Mexican crime groups as terrorists.

“We are going to unleash the fury and might of the U.S. against these cartels,” Graham said. He pledged to “give the military the authority to go after these organizations wherever they exist. Not to invade Mexico. Not to shoot Mexican airplanes down. But to destroy drug labs that are poisoning Americans.”

Rarely discussed in the dispute are the complexities of tackling fentanyl production.

Fentanyl labs are notoriously hard to find. Unlike the sprawling cocaine installations discovered in Colombian jungles, fentanyl labs are often small and simple. They don't emit heat signatures, chemical fumes, or powerful odors, as methamphetamine labs do. Fentanyl can be made with small amounts of chemicals in kitchens, basements or garages.

"There's even a trend of synthetic drugs made in Airbnbs," said Falko Ernst, senior Mexico analyst for the International Crisis Group.

To find such sites, intelligence is crucial. But Mexico has a critical shortage of well-trained investigators and a weak, corruption-ridden judicial system. The military doesn't employ detectives, and follow-up investigations into seized chemicals or labs often languish.

Further complicating matters, López Obrador has limited the activities of the DEA in Mexico, arguing that the agency has a history of violating national sovereignty. He became incensed on learning DEA agents had secretly investigated a former Mexican defense minister, Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos, on drug-trafficking allegations. Cienfuegos was arrested while on vacation in Los Angeles in 2020 but later freed amid U.S. concerns about the solidity of the case and its potential impact on relations.

U.S. security agencies have compiled extensive information on Mexican cartels' fentanyl production, from cooperating witnesses, informants, and intelligence methods, one former senior DEA official said. But "since you have no bilateral cooperation" in Mexico, he said, "there's no one to pass the information to." He spoke on the condition of anonymity because his current employer continues to work with the anti-drug agency.

A crackdown on fentanyl in Mexico would likely be costly, both politically and in lives lost. Consider what happened in January, when the Mexican army swept into a rural village in Sinaloa to arrest alleged trafficker

Ovidio Guzmán. Cartel lieutenants fought back, killing 10 soldiers, wounding 35 and wreaking havoc. In an earlier attempt to arrest Guzmán, hundreds of cartel gunmen seized control of Culiacan, the state capital, eventually winning his release.

“The Mexican government hasn’t demonstrated they have the ability or capabilities to address this [fentanyl] problem,” said Rand Corp. researcher David Luckey, principal investigator for a U.S. congressional report on fentanyl released last year. That might explain the reluctance of López Obrador — known by his initials, AMLO — to recognize domestic fentanyl production, he said. “By AMLO not acknowledging Mexico has a problem, they can’t be held to account.”

The Mexican government denies it’s failing to respond to the fentanyl crisis. This year, authorities have arrested two alleged fentanyl bosses: Guzmán, the son of the imprisoned former Sinaloa cartel kingpin Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, and José Guadalupe Tapia, said to be close to Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada, another reputed cartel leader. While relations with the DEA are strained, Mexico continues its anti-narcotics cooperation with the CIA and other U.S. agencies, officials say.

López Obrador has intensified efforts to seize precursor chemicals. He’s put the navy in charge of Mexico’s graft-ridden ports and backed new regulations on precursors and pill presses that U.S. officials call among the strongest in the world. Mexican seizures of fentanyl, from warehouses, pill-pressing facilities, package-delivery services and other sites, have surged.

Nonetheless, the flow of fentanyl to the United States continues unabated.

Republicans, irked by the lack of progress, have introduced legislation in both houses of Congress to designate drug cartels as terrorist

organizations. The idea of using U.S. military force against Mexican traffickers has been embraced by GOP presidential candidates Donald Trump, Nikki Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy.

Trump said it would be his policy "to take down the cartels, just as we took down ISIS and the ISIS caliphate" in Iraq and Syria.

Such talk might be dismissed as mere campaign saber-rattling. But according to Rolling Stone magazine, Trump — the front-runner for the GOP nomination — has asked advisers for "battle plans" to confront Mexican traffickers. During his presidency, he twice suggested firing missiles at Mexican drug labs, according to his former defense secretary, Mark T. Esper. The idea was opposed by the U.S. military.

Carlos Pérez Ricart, a professor of international relations at Mexico's Center for Economics Research and Teaching, said he doubts the U.S. military would launch strikes in Mexico. But he worried such talk could become normalized in American politics. "The biggest risk is not that they do it, but that it pushes the Democrats to move toward this extreme," he said.

Analysts say the idea of using the military to bomb drug labs or target traffickers reflects a misunderstanding of how Mexican cartels work. The traffickers aren't small, isolated groups of outsiders, Ernst noted, but people rooted in their communities with ties to local and national politicians, as well as security forces and business leaders.

To destroy such a network, he said, "you'd have to bomb the whole area."

And it's not clear that killing or capturing top traffickers would significantly disrupt the trade. Steve Dudley, co-founder of the think tank Insight Crime, says fentanyl is uniquely difficult to interdict because it's so compact and easy to make. If one crime boss is taken out, another can

step in.

“You can send all the armies you want and it’s not going to make a difference,” he said.

Mexicans have keen memories of major U.S. invasions in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Any unilateral U.S. military action in Mexico would imperil relations with a top trading partner, a country that also helps control irregular migration to the United States.

Ebrard, the foreign minister, said any such intervention would have “a very high cost, and a very poor result. Because the next day, you’d still have fentanyl [being sold] in the streets.”

The U.S. indictments announced this month offered a rare look inside the fentanyl operations allegedly run by Ovidio Guzmán and his brothers, known as the “Chapitos.” To many Mexicans, the case sent a clear message: the U.S. government had the ability to infiltrate the Sinaloa cartel, and undoubtedly also detect its ties with corrupt politicians. López Obrador criticized the DEA investigation as an “abusive interference” in Mexican affairs, reflecting his worries about U.S. spying. “We will talk about under what conditions we’ll cooperate” with the agency, he told reporters.

In public, at least, the U.S. government is now trying to smooth relations. Todd Robinson, the assistant secretary of state for international narcotics, told The Washington Post that the United States isn’t focused on whether fentanyl is produced in Mexico — “it is” — but instead is seeking ways to work better with foreign allies, interdict precursor chemicals, decrease the illegal flow of U.S. weapons to Mexico and reduce demand for fentanyl.

“There’s not one country that’s the silver bullet in this, that can do it all on its own,” he said. “We need a global effort.”