

It's Time to Declare Fentanyl a National Security Threat

By

Curtis McGiffin

In testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee on March 1, 2024, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director, Christopher Wray, confirmed a wide array of national security [threats are coming across](#) America's border. These threats include violent criminal gangs, prison gangs, human trafficking, and illicit drugs. Director Wray also stated, "The FBI alone seized enough fentanyl in the last [two years to kill 270 million](#) people." [Wray continued](#), "The vast majority of the fentanyl that is killing Americans is coming from Mexico, and the vast majority of the precursors for that fentanyl is coming from China."

The Problem

In a population of [336 million](#), the potential death of 270 million Americans is 80 percent of the citizenry. Yet, fentanyl remains undesignated as a weapon of mass destruction (WMD). A 1961 [analysis](#) suggested that a Soviet nuclear attack on the United States, consisting of 553 nuclear weapons with a total yield of over 2,000 megatons, would kill 50-60 million Americans out of a population of 179 million—30 percent of the American population.

According to the [US-China Economic and Security Review Commission](#), the highly lethal China-Mexico fentanyl nexus is a [sophisticated enterprise](#) of illicit trafficking of precursor ingredients and refined product, as well as money laundering designed to evade authorities at all levels of government. Drug Enforcement Agency Administrator Anne Milgram [stated](#), "Today, drug cartels in Mexico are mass-producing fentanyl and methamphetamine largely sourced from chemicals in China, and they're distributing these substances throughout the United States. We are finding these deadly drugs in every state; in cities, suburbs, rural areas, and local communities spanning the country."

As recently as December 2022, the DEA announced it seized "[more than 379 million potentially deadly doses of fentanyl](#)." This is enough to [kill the entire population of the United States](#) and Canada.

The Director of National Intelligence's 2024 [Annual Threat Assessment](#) notes that "Mexico-based TCOs (transnational criminal organizations) are the dominant producers of illicit fentanyl for the US market and that China remains the primary source for illicit fentanyl precursor chemicals and pill pressing equipment." However, the report offers no explanation for the [76,725](#) fentanyl deaths in 2023.

This is more than just transactional narco-crime. It is a complex and deliberate example of gray zone warfare. Twenty-five years ago, two Chinese People's Liberation Army colonels penned [Unrestricted Warfare](#), which proposed asymmetric tactics for China to "fight a non-military war."

The book describes a potential attack vector as "drug warfare," which is "obtaining sudden and huge illicit profits by spreading disaster in other countries." In other words, the trafficking of lethal fentanyl allows China to weaken the fabric of American society, burden the United States with [\\$1.5 trillion in annual costs](#), and potentially kill catastrophic numbers of

American citizens. This is done without firing a single shot. Colonel Qiao Liang wrote, "The first rule of unrestricted warfare is that there are no rules, with nothing forbidden."

China and the US have [different approaches](#) to counternarcotics cooperation. While the US tries to keep it separate and distinct from the overall bilateral geostrategic relationship, China views its counternarcotics cooperation as subordinate to its quid pro quo geostrategic relations. As the rapport between the two countries worsens, China's willingness to cooperate with or acquiesce to the US on counternarcotics efforts decreases. This was demonstrated when China "[formally suspended bilateral](#) counternarcotics cooperation in August 2022, in response to then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan."

A Solution

It is time to address the fentanyl scourge with a new approach. First, the American government must acknowledge the China-Mexico fentanyl crisis for what it is—gray zone warfare. The 2022 [National Defense Strategy](#) describes gray zone methods as "coercive approaches that may fall below perceived thresholds for US military action and across areas of responsibility of different parts of the US government."

[Gray zone actions](#) are performed by actors seeking to challenge or violate international customs, norms, and laws in pursuit of their national security interests without provoking a direct military response. Moreover, gray zone attacks from foreign powers can challenge national stability by exploiting societal divides and domestic vulnerabilities to destabilize or undermine societal harmony or confidence.

This risk is not limited to cyber-attacks upon critical infrastructure or terrorist attacks in American cities. Simply viewing the fentanyl crisis strictly from a criminal point of view limits responses to the law enforcement tool. Acknowledging the fentanyl crisis as a form of warfare will allow the integrated responses of the military to proactively engage the threat and begin to execute a real deterrence strategy for the future.

Second, it's time to declare fentanyl a weapon of mass destruction (WMD). The federal government defines a [WMD](#) as "any weapon that is designed, intended, or has the capability to cause death or serious bodily injury to a significant number of persons through the release, dissemination, or impact of toxic or poisonous chemicals or their precursors." We can all agree that the potential death of 80 percent of America's population meets these criteria.

In 2019, the Trump administration considered but declined to [declare fentanyl a WMD](#), instead declaring the opioid crisis a public health emergency. In 2021, the [Biden administration issued](#) an [executive order](#) declaring a national emergency with respect to international trafficking of illicit narcotics, including fentanyl.

Congress recently introduced [HR 7190](#) "to require the Assistant Secretary for the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office of the Department of Homeland Security to treat illicit fentanyl as a weapon of mass destruction and for other purposes." Designating fentanyl as a WMD would elevate the threat of fentanyl to the American people from criminal behavior to a national security threat status and from a narco-trafficking burden to a class of gray zone warfare.

Third, the United States, a member of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, also known as the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), must designate fentanyl as a chemical weapon. To do this, the CWC definition of chemical weapon, which includes toxic chemicals

that “[can cause death, temporary incapacitation, or permanent harm to humans](#),” including their precursors, must be updated to include -- intent.

Many CWC and WMD thinkers remain focused on traditional weaponized chemical munitions rather than the weaponization of synthetic opioids, like fentanyl, for the intentional exploitation or [purpose of attacking a person or group or for spreading discord](#). Whether the attack vector is a 105-millimeter mustard gas munition or sold on the streets of America through the Chinese-sponsored fentanyl pipeline, the intent is the same: to kill.

Congressman David Trone (D-MD) [declared](#) in 2022 that China was “critically involved in the 64,000 deaths we had because they are pretty much the lone supplier of [fentanyl] precursor chemicals, which they are shipping to Mexico.” This is corroborated by the 2024 *Annual Threat Assessment* and the FBI director’s testimony.

Of the over 107,000 deaths-by-overdose [in 2022](#), 68 percent were attributed to synthetic opioids like fentanyl. This is almost double the number of [traffic fatalities](#) for the same year. Since dead customers are not repeat customers, the motive is not profit but death and societal destruction through the calculated use of gray zone warfare.

America embarked on a twenty-year war on terror after 2,977 people were killed by a single terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. Fentanyl “[has killed more Americans](#) than the Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam Wars combined” and one kilogram of fentanyl is [enough to kill](#) 500,000 people.

Despite recent [sanctioning of 25](#) China-based companies and individuals allegedly involved in the production of chemicals used to make fentanyl, China appears disinclined to actually stop precursor exports. As Attorney General Merrick [Garland stated](#), “We know that this global fentanyl supply chain, which ends with the deaths of Americans, often starts with chemical companies in China.”

Treating fentanyl as a national security threat would allow a truly integrated approach to first combating and then deterring the drug with a Department of Defense response. It is time to hold China accountable for an activity emanating from within its borders. After all, the United States has gone to war for far fewer deaths.

Col. Curtis McGiffin (U.S. Air Force, Ret.) is Vice President for Education at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies and visiting professor at Missouri State University’s School of Defense and Strategic Studies.

The views expressed in this article are the author’s own.