

Could Trump Invade Mexico? The Risk of an Escalation Is Real

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***Donald Trump** has repeatedly announced he is preparing a war against drug cartels, and James Bosworth, a global fellow at the Wilson Center's Latin America Program, [argues](#) that Trump's threats should be taken seriously.*

There is in any case a larger context to Donald Trump's "war on drugs" promises: he has after all vowed to employ the military for mass deportations (of illegal migrants) and to do so, he plans to declare "national emergency" – the plan does not rule out deporting whole families altogether. Several [immigration "hard-liners"](#) have been tapped by Trump to serve in his future administration (he will take the oath in January 2025). Such measures would be a great shift for the US military, normally not involved with domestic law enforcement matters. It has been tried before, though: the so-called Operation Wetback, under then President Eisenhower, in 1954, deported around 1 million Mexicans and [even some US Americans of Mexican descent](#).

This might not be just about providing a very harsh answer to illegal migration and border problems (such as the Fentanyl crisis). Trump has at times even promised that thousands of American troops from overseas would be moved to the border. Think about it: mobilizing the military domestically and declaring a "national emergency" is a great way to increase one's own power. And, as I [wrote](#) before, Trump's war with part of the so-called "Deep State" is (to a large extent) all about that. It is about "taming" the intelligence services, expanding the Executive (as outlined in Project 2025) and [boosting presidential powers](#).

Back to the border issues, in September 2023, Foreign Policy published a [piece](#) by Cato Institute's researchers Justin Logan and Daniel Raisbeck about the ([still ongoing](#)) Fentanyl crisis. US Americans have long been facing an [opioid crisis](#) and a large share of the drug's supply comes from Mexico. The issue fuels political tensions: for instance, American authorities have been vocally accusing Chinese companies of supplying Mexican cartels with the ingredients needed to manufacture fentanyl. In May 2023, Washington sanctioned 17 individuals and entities in China and Mexico over the issue. Amid American-Mexican tensions, increasingly heavy rhetoric against the Mexican cartels involved in this illegal trade has often included calls for "military solutions."

Already in May 2024, Trump announced his plans to send "kill teams" to Mexico to "take out" cartel leaders. He is no lone voice on that, though. In August 2023, during the Republican Party presidential debate (before Donald Trump was made the party's nominee), Florida **Governor Ron DeSantis** promised to send US Special Forces into neighboring Mexico to combat drug cartels if elected president. **Bryan Griffin**, his spokesperson, elaborated the promise thusly: "Ron DeSantis will declare the cartels to be narco-terrorists, and change the rules of engagement on the border.

The full force of the federal government will be utilized to ensure that illegal drug flow is stopped, and he will bring to bear every tool he has to this end.” DeSantis did not make it to become his party’s nominee, but his statements back then go to show that this kind of rhetoric (which fails to take into consideration Mexico’s sovereignty) goes beyond Trump, and, in fact, Mexico is (no surprise here) a big part of the US debate on foreign policy.

Newly-sworn Mexican **President Claudio Sheinbaum** appears to have taken a more aggressive approach domestically towards Mexican cartels, employing Mexico’s military to combat them. However, thus far she has refused US security assistance and has even limited cooperation and intelligence-sharing since she took office in October. Putting it mildly, bilateral relations are not good right now – again, no surprise here.

Such typical American aggressiveness can only further alienate the neighboring country and push it away towards Beijing, for instance: Chinese pragmatic diplomacy after all contrasts quite dramatically to American belligerency. Mexican civilian authorities are not the only actors who could object to any such US incursion on their territory: we are talking about a heavily militarized nation, and this includes sophisticated and tremendously wealthy and heavily armed paramilitary groups such as the drug cartels themselves.

Any such cross-border militarization (with potential for some degree of armed confrontation) could have escalating consequences and unpredictable repercussions in terms of diplomatic and economic impacts, gang violence, and domestic and cross-border inter-ethnic tensions: the two countries not only share a 2,000-mile border but are also very much integrated, with Mexican-Americans [being 11.2% of the US population](#) in 2022. In Texas, 31.6% of the local population has Mexican ancestry

Besides the military and diplomatic angles (taken together with mass deportation plans impacting millions of people which would cost billions of dollars), there is a potential for economic disaster, as the two countries complement each other in this realm as well: for one thing, in 2021 Mexico was the US second largest trading partner, with a total of \$725.7 billion goods and services trade. By July 2023, Mexico had already surpassed China, becoming the top trading partner.

In addition to that, Trump’s plans are sure to trigger a legal battle at home, lawsuits from state governors and so on. It also opens the room for some level of armed conflict with different actors with a neighboring country. The aforementioned James Bosworth warns that the potential for a “Blackhawk Down scenario” in which US troops “end up pinned down in a violent standoff with criminal forces or even Mexican troops defending the country’s sovereignty from US intervention—is real”, for a “simple’ operation” could “rapidly escalate into something more complex and deadly.”

He adds that Washington should also consider “potential responses by the cartels”, because “some Mexican criminal groups may decide to fight back and even escalate violence by targeting US interests, businesses and citizens”. Moreover, according to Bosworth, they can do “plenty of damage to US forces operating in Mexico, and they have the capabilities, weapons and personnel to take the fight into US territory in a way that al-Qaida and the Islamic State could only dream of.”

As is the case with so many belligerent US policies and plans, the risk lies in the unpredictability of escalation scenarios. One may only wonder whether such risks will be worth it, even from Trump’s perspective.

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