

**Statement of Todd D. Robinson
Assistant Secretary of State for
International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Before the
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
“Countering Illicit Fentanyl Trafficking”
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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the Department of State’s efforts to address the global health and security threat posed by illicitly manufactured fentanyl and other synthetic drugs. Addressing international trafficking of synthetic drugs is an essential element of foreign policy that delivers for the American people.

As you and too many of our fellow Americans know from personal experience, synthetic drugs, particularly synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl, continue to ravage our communities. At last week’s State of the Union address, President Biden shared the all-too familiar and tragic story of a family grieving the loss of their daughter to a fentanyl overdose. I share the President’s commitment to stop fentanyl production, sale, and trafficking.

The State Department is leading the way to ensure our foreign assistance tools and diplomacy help drive a global response to the synthetic drug threat that is oriented toward protecting public health by expanding evidence-based prevention, treatment, and recovery support measures, while disrupting the ability of transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) to push synthetic drugs into our communities.

Since fentanyl and other synthetic drugs can be produced virtually anywhere – often using perfectly legal chemicals and equipment – and traffickers adapt quickly to evade regulatory controls, addressing this threat requires a more agile and comprehensive approach beyond traditional law enforcement and import control measures. That includes

a strong focus on harm reduction, substance use prevention, treatment, and recovery support services, both at home and abroad, even as we unstintingly work to address the illicit drug supply. Secretary of State Blinken has made clear we have to bring to bear the full power of American diplomacy, as part of a whole of government effort, to address this challenge. We will seek bilateral collaboration, conveying that responding urgently to this mutual challenge is a shared responsibility. We will continue to urge our international partners to act, and we will support their efforts to do so. We will advance cooperation and galvanize action more broadly through our leadership in multilateral fora such as the UN. And, recognizing the key role of the private sector to help prevent the diversion of precursor chemicals and better monitor and share information about fentanyl and precursor chemicals shipped by air, sea, or express consignment, we will intensify our collaboration with the business community.

While our focus is global, we will continue partnering with countries key to current production trends. Most of the fentanyl seized in the United States is synthesized in Mexico, using precursor chemicals sourced primarily from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and then smuggled into the U.S. via the U.S. southern border. Our enduring security cooperation with Mexico is critical to our efforts to address fentanyl trafficking, reverse our overdose crisis, and prepare to confront emerging synthetic drug threats in the future. The U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities guides our counternarcotics cooperation as well as other important shared security priorities. At the October 2022 High-Level Security Dialogue (HLSD), Secretary Blinken, Attorney General Garland, DHS Secretary Mayorkas, Director of National Drug Control Policy Dr. Gupta, and their Mexican counterparts recommitted to the Framework and our joint efforts to better protect the health and safety of our citizens, prevent criminal organizations from harming our countries, and pursue criminal networks and bring them to justice.

In addition to both countries' seizing historic amounts of fentanyl in 2022, Mexico created a watchlist to flag chemicals that can be diverted to illicit drug production for additional scrutiny; it subsequently expanded this list from 14 to 69 chemicals. The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) has sponsored U.S.-Mexico forensic chemist exchanges on synthetic drug synthesis, held fentanyl awareness trainings for Mexican law enforcement, and donated detection canines and protective equipment to facilitate fentanyl interdiction. INL-donated canines in Mexico helped seize more than 75,000 fentanyl pills from January to August 2022. Still, as we noted during the last HLSD, Mexican resource constraints limit the reach of our cooperation. The United States government invested billions of dollars, both domestically and abroad, to address synthetic drugs and other bilateral security challenges in 2022. We hope Mexico will make similar investments in all aspects of combatting the synthetic drug threat, from prevention, treatment, and recovery to investigations and prosecutions.

At the last HLSD, recognizing the need to broaden our approach beyond law enforcement, the United States and Mexico committed to a joint synthetic drug action plan. This plan complements ongoing cooperation between our law enforcement agencies, which continue to focus on dismantling the transnational criminal organizations that synthesize and traffic these dangerous drugs. The action plan brings in additional entities not traditionally involved in counternarcotics efforts – regulatory agencies, health- and trade-focused agencies, and the private sector – to harmonize our regulatory and public health approaches and focus together on building the capacity needed to disrupt the broader synthetic drug supply chain.

Our efforts extend beyond Mexico across all of North America through the North American Drug Dialogue. This longstanding partnership with Mexico and Canada is a crucial element to address the movement of deadly drugs like fentanyl into the United States. However, our efforts to disrupt the illicit synthetic drug supply chain

must broaden to encompass all countries where chemicals are produced or shipped.

The PRC has an important role to play. The United States remains committed to meaningful counternarcotics cooperation with the PRC, despite the PRC's limited willingness to engage on the issue of late. Past cooperation between the United States and the PRC on counternarcotics has proven to be fruitful and effective, as exemplified by the PRC decision in 2019 to schedule fentanyl-related substances as a class, essentially ending PRC-origin shipments of these substances to the United States. However, transnational criminal organizations have since adapted to this change and now use PRC-sourced precursor chemicals to synthesize fentanyl, methamphetamine, and other synthetic drugs in Mexico and around the world. The PRC can and must do more to act meaningfully in this regard beyond its class-wide control of fentanyl-related substances. Through all available channels, we continue to press the PRC to take meaningful, concrete actions to curb criminal diversion of precursor chemicals for the illicit production of synthetic drugs. We have encouraged the PRC to improve information-sharing on global chemical flows, strengthen enforcement of customs manifesting agreements, and implement know-your-customer standards to restrict sales of precursor chemicals to only customers with legitimate needs.

As the PRC is not the only potential source of precursor chemicals and equipment used in illicit drug production, we also work with other international partners. India is a key partner in this global approach. We have yet to see significant flows of fentanyl or related precursors from India to the United States or Mexico, but as we increase pressure on criminal networks elsewhere, some criminal organizations could look to India as a possible source. Recognizing India's role as the global leader in the chemical and pharmaceutical industry, expanding our bilateral counternarcotics cooperation with India is a priority, and we're investing heavily in working with India. Since the U.S.-India Counternarcotics Working Group started in 2020, we have strengthened our counternarcotics cooperation, most recently by establishing three topical

steering groups that are building a robust annual calendar of meetings to identify specific actions we can partner on together across law enforcement, regulatory, multilateral, and public health spectrums.

This is a global problem, and multilateral fora play a critical role in driving coordinated global action against these threats. We will leverage U.S. engagement in the UN, G7, G20, and OAS and with the EU to mobilize strategic action at the national, regional, and international levels, building information sharing, fostering exchange of best practices, and galvanizing uptake of international tools that can help countries take action. Through targeted advocacy, we secured commitments from our G7 and EU partners to enhance cooperation in multilateral fora to address synthetic drug challenges. We will broaden and intensify this cooperation in 2023. Additionally, we are collaborating closely with India on ways to introduce a dedicated workstream in the G20 focused on counternarcotics as part of India's G20 presidency.

International scheduling under the UN drug control conventions remains a valuable tool because it requires State Parties to enact commensurate controls – in other words, regulation – within their national frameworks. At the UN Commission on Narcotics Drugs (CND) in 2022, as a result of U.S. leadership, the CND decided unanimously to place three emerging fentanyl precursor chemicals under international control. This disrupts the illicit market by forcing traffickers to find alternative ways to illicitly manufacture fentanyl and reduces the presence of dangerous substances in the illicit supply chain.

Recognizing that traffickers can quickly adapt to international scheduling actions by shifting to alternative, unscheduled precursor chemicals, the United States also leveraged the CND in 2022 to proactively address this workaround by sponsoring a resolution on diversion and trafficking in unscheduled and designer precursors. This resolution, adopted by consensus, will advance international efforts to outpace criminals working in this illegal trade by providing Member

States with concrete, actionable steps and tools to preemptively restrict access to chemicals likely to be used as substitutes for existing precursors. We also support the World Health Organization efforts to accelerate the rate at which the Expert Committee on Drug Dependence can review new psychoactive substances and make recommendations for international control.

We supported the development of and are amplifying global tools that facilitate international law enforcement cooperation, establish best practices for denying criminals access to the tools of modern commerce, and strengthen norms to prevent the sale of precursor chemicals and tableting equipment. We support the International Narcotics Control Board's (INCB) Precursor Chemical Control Program, which enables real-time intelligence sharing and international law enforcement cooperation to prevent the diversion and illicit manufacturing of precursor chemicals and support transnational investigations. INL funds the INCB's Global Rapid Interdiction of Dangerous Substances Program, or GRIDS, which supports the real-time exchange of intelligence on shipments or trafficking of new psychoactive substances, including fentanyl-related substances. With the information provided through GRIDS, the INCB is facilitating more multilateral investigations that result in the disruption of international trafficking cells and high-profile arrests.

To further enhance international awareness of synthetic drug risks, INL funded the development of the UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The online platform has helped governments better address synthetic drug challenges, including by enacting legislative responses to the emergence of new psychoactive substances, strengthening air cargo and aviation security, and developing drug surveillance and early warning systems. The Toolkit also provides a wealth of information to support countries to improve drug prevention, treatment, and recovery programs. Over 30,000 users from 200 jurisdictions have accessed the Toolkit's manuals, guidelines, and e-learning videos.

Private industry must also play a role, since many precursor chemicals used in illicit drug production have legitimate uses. The U.S. government will partner with global pharmaceutical, chemical, and shipping industries, as well as online marketplaces, to share information and galvanize further action, and we ask that other countries do as well.

To reinforce our diplomatic efforts, INL employs deterrence and disruption tools to discourage high-level corruption and support the work of law enforcement. Specific to illicit drug trafficking, INL manages two rewards programs targeting high-level drug traffickers and other transnational criminal leaders. These rewards programs have helped our law enforcement partners bring more than 75 international drug kingpins and crime bosses to justice. INL also coordinates action across the Department to provide foreign policy guidance to the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control on the use of financial sanctions to target individuals and businesses facilitating or supporting the illicit drug trade.

As promoting public health is a critical component to addressing this challenge, INL made that an important element of its cooperation with other countries. INL programs build our partners' capacity to deliver life-saving drug use prevention, treatment, and recovery support interventions worldwide.

Finally, Congress can play a vital role in supporting our efforts. We are assessing whether new authorities would help to fight fentanyl more effectively – and will not hesitate to ask for your support. Right now, we need Congress to lead in permanently controlling fentanyl-class substances. Our approach of successive temporary controls undercuts the power of our arguments to encourage other countries to take action. Adopting this approach helps countries stay one step ahead of the narco-chemists and protects our citizens. Additionally, we ask that as you engage foreign leadership, you join us in calling for increased partnership on this shared threat.

Synthetic drugs are a shared global challenge requiring a global approach. Any overdose is one too many and each overdose death is devastating to the families and communities that experience a loss. Every country must do its part. At the State Department, we will continue to engage our foreign partners to protect global health and security by disrupting the illicit synthetic drug supply chain and supporting the effective prevention, treatment, and recovery of substance use to end this epidemic and save American lives. We are committed to working with our international and interagency partners, and with Congress to develop sustainable solutions for a safer and more secure future.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today, and I look forward to your questions.