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## Trump Administration Prepares Military Options Against Drug Cartels

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On August 8, 2025, the administration of President Donald Trump directed the Department of Defense (DoD) to develop plans for potential military action against Latin American drug cartels designated as global terrorist organizations, according to U.S. officials cited by Reuters. This directive, which targets groups like Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel and Venezuela's Tren de Aragua, signals a hardline approach to combating drug trafficking but raises significant legal and diplomatic concerns about respecting national sovereignty and maintaining law and order abroad.

In February 2025, the Trump administration classified the Sinaloa Cartel, Tren de Aragua, and other groups as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), a move tied to heightened immigration enforcement efforts. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio emphasized the shift in strategy, stating, “It allows us to now target what they’re operating and to use other elements of American power, intelligence agencies, the Department of Defense, whatever... to target these groups if we have an opportunity to do it.” He added, “We have to start treating them as armed terrorist organizations, not simply drug-dealing organizations.” This designation enables the use of military resources, including intelligence and potential naval operations, to disrupt cartel activities, particularly fentanyl trafficking, which has fueled thousands of U.S. overdoses annually.

The New York Times reported that Trump signed a secret directive authorizing the Pentagon to prepare military options, though a U.S. official, speaking anonymously, clarified that action is not imminent and specific operations remain undefined. Another official noted that the U.S. Navy could conduct drug interdiction missions at sea, potentially involving targeted raids. The U.S. military has already ramped up airborne surveillance of Mexican cartels to gather intelligence, indicating a proactive stance. However, any escalation risks violating the Posse Comitatus Act, a U.S. law limiting military involvement in domestic law enforcement, and international law, as noted by Brian Finucane of the International Crisis Group, who stated, “Military action in Mexico would be hard to square with domestic or international law.”

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum firmly rejected the possibility of U.S. troops operating on Mexican soil, stating on August 8, “The United States is not going to come to Mexico with the military.” She emphasized Mexico’s sovereignty, noting her government was informed of the directive but clarified it does not involve U.S. military presence in Mexico. Sheinbaum also dismissed claims by U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi linking Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro to the Sinaloa Cartel, saying Mexico has no evidence of such ties and urging the U.S. to share any proof. Tensions over U.S. actions against cartels have long strained bilateral relations, with Mexico viewing them as sovereignty violations.

The directive echoes Trump’s first-term considerations, when, according to former Defense Secretary Mark Esper’s memoir, he proposed missile strikes on Mexican drug labs in 2020, which Esper deemed illegal. The current policy, while aimed at curbing the flow of drugs like fentanyl, risks destabilizing U.S.-Mexico relations and bypassing Congressional oversight, raising questions about accountability in enforcing global law and order. As the Pentagon

prepares options, the administration's approach will test the balance between national security and international diplomacy