

View



U.S.-China Counternarcotics Cooperation Indicates Improved Relations?



U.S.-China officials at the launch of the U.S.-China Counternarcotics Working Group/ IMAGE/REUTERS

Abstract

The cooperation between the U.S. and China in cracking down drug-trafficking activities has been full of twists and turns. Before the summit meeting between Joe Biden and Xi Jinping took place in November 2023, San Francisco, during which both the U.S. and China agreed to promote and strengthen dialogue and cooperation in various fields, the most recent momentous U.S.-China counternarcotics cooperation was in November 2019, when the law enforcement of the U.S and China both announced that they had jointly uncovered a fentanyl smuggling ring.¹ On January 30, 2024, Chinese Minister of Public Security and State Councillor Wang Xiaohong met U.S Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy Homeland Security Advisor Jen Daskal and the interagency delegation she led in Beijing, announcing the official launch of the U.S.-China Counternarcotics Working Group. On February 18th, Wang met again with U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas in Vienna to discuss promoting cooperation between the U.S. and China in combating fentanyl. In just a few months, high-level officials from the U.S. and China have held multiple meetings on counternarcotics cooperation. Such frequent meetings are rare between the U.S. and China in recent years. As the U.S. presidential election approaches this year, China-related issues will once again come into focus, and U.S.-China relations will face greater challenges. How the U.S. promotes the resumption of counternarcotics cooperation with China will be an important factor in maintaining the stability of U.S.-China relations and predicting their future direction.

Introduction

Over the past few years, overdose deaths in the U.S. have continued to worsen, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to National Centre for Drug Abuse Statistics, in 2020, there are approximately 42,687 fentanyl overdose deaths nationwide.² And in Los Angeles alone, fentanyl overdose deaths have increased 1,652% from 109 in 2016 to 1,910 in 2022, according to a data report revealed by Los Angeles County in November 2023.³ This rising trend in mortality rates is largely attributed to the surge in synthetic fentanyl in the U.S. illegal drug market. Fentanyl-related substances can have numerous variations due to their unique chemical structure, which makes it easy for the replication of various drugs with similar effects.⁴ Therefore, the U.S. is facing urgent counternarcotics needs.

The U.S. claims that the sources of domestically circulating fentanyl come from China and Mexico. A press release issued by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Public Affairs on October 3, 2023, stated that Chinese chemical companies have shipped fentanyl precursors, fentanyl analogs, xylazine, and nitrazepam to Mexico. Fentanyl is synthesized in Mexico and then mixed by drug cartels and traffickers before being brought into the U.S. for sale.⁵ Therefore, from the perspective of the U.S., international cooperation in global drug control is necessary for it to completely curb the manufacturing and circulation of fentanyl at the source.

However, Beijing has completely different propositions from the U.S regarding the serious fentanyl problem. China believes that this problem lies with the U.S. itself, as it does not permanently and legally control and supervise fentanyl-related substances. A "China-U.S. Drug Control Facts List" released by the Chinese Embassy in the U.S. on June 29, 2023, states:

"...It is the legal obligation of the importing country's government to ensure that internationally traded goods are not used for illegal purposes, in accordance with international conventions and common practices. The responsibilities that should be borne by the importing party should be imposed on the exporting party."

At the same time, China also declares in the list that it has conscientiously fulfilled its obligations under the *United Nations 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances* and effectively prevented scheduled chemicals from flowing into drug manufacturing channels through international trade channels.⁶

Twists and Turns in U.S.-China Counternarcotics Cooperation

On May 1, 2019, China officially listed all forms of fentanyl-related substances by placing the entire category under control.⁷ Until the end of 2019, the cooperation between the U.S and China. on counternarcotics facilitated the regulation and coordination of the control of fentanyl and other opioids in both countries, benefiting both parties. However, due to the escalation of the China-

U.S. trade war and the rising tensions in China-U.S. relations, counternarcotics cooperation between the U.S. and China has gradually come to a standstill. On June 23, 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted Chinese citizens Wang Qingzhou and Chen Yiyi for the illegal trafficking of chemicals used to manufacture fentanyl, after they were deported by Fijian authorities on June 8, 2023.⁸ China believes that this move violates international law and damages the basic human rights and interests of Chinese citizens, fundamentally destroying the foundation of U.S.-China counternarcotics cooperation.⁹

Several state-run web portals in China, including *China.org* and *Global Times*, also criticized the U.S.' previous 'accusations' and 'sanctions' against China regarding fentanyl as the two countries resume counternarcotics cooperation recently. A report from *China.org* comments:

“While Beijing has always adhered to a humanitarian spirit and a responsible attitude, and actively cooperated with the U.S. in counternarcotics cooperation, the U.S. unilaterally destroyed the good situation by bringing charges against Chinese citizens and imposing sanctions on China.”

The article also listed Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 as another important factor for the suspension of U.S.-China counternarcotics cooperation, which also strained the already tense relations between the two countries.¹⁰ Therefore, the resumption of the cooperation is even more hard-won.

The Chinese National Narcotics Laboratory, established in 2008, is the most important and authoritative counternarcotics technical department in China. It is primarily responsible for tracing and analyzing large quantities of seized drugs, screening and assessing the hazards of new or unknown drugs and addressing all aspects of drug abuse prevention. It especially plays a key role in controlling fentanyl-related substances. Since 2017, delegations from the U.S. Congress, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have visited the Chinese National Narcotics Laboratory many times, and the Laboratory has also maintained a cooperative relationship with the laboratory of the U.S. DEA.¹¹

In 2020, the Chinese National Narcotics Laboratory was added to the *Entity List* by the U.S. Department of Commerce. The *Entity List* is a trade restriction list published by the U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security, which includes foreign persons, entities, or governments.¹² Being placed on the Entity List imposes restrictions on the export, re-export, and/or transfer of certain goods, technologies, and services to those entities, and limit their ability to conduct business with entities subject to U.S. jurisdiction. In accordance with the implementation of the consensus reached during the meeting between Biden and Xi in San Francisco, China was removed from the *Entity List* on November 16, 2023. Regarding the U.S.-China cooperation in the field of counternarcotics, which has experienced twists and turns, relevant industry experts in China have a relatively positive attitude towards the resumption. Dr. Hua Zhendong, the head of the Chinese

National Narcotics Laboratory, says in an interview with Chinese media *Global Times*, " The U.S. and China are the two countries with the highest level of counternarcotics technology in the world. The establishment of the U.S-PRC Counternarcotics Working Group provides an opportunity for both sides to restart technical exchanges and cooperation".¹³

Impact on Future U.S.-China relations

The current cooperation between the U.S. and China in the field of counternarcotics is not just about counternarcotics itself, instead, both countries, especially China, view counternarcotics as the starting point and attempts to seek broader cooperation within the larger framework of maintaining and improving the current U.S.-China relations. As Vanda Felbab-Brown,¹⁴ a senior fellow at Brookings pointed out in her commentary, China views counternarcotics and international law enforcement cooperation as strategic tools that can be leveraged to achieve other objectives in U.S.-China relations.

What impact will such cooperation have on U.S.-China relations in the future? It is likely both parties will focus on combating the circulation of fentanyl through practical means such as relevant policies, technology, and law enforcement. However, the cooperation in counternarcotics do not indicate a fundamental change in the U.S.'s China policy: the U.S. and China are still in a state of competition, but neither of the two parties are seeking conflict. The presence of competition between the two countries in certain areas does not

necessarily result in the failure of regular collaboration in other areas. It is evident that the leaders of both nations are keen on maintaining the stability of the current relationship between the two countries, and officials from both countries are trying to put into practice the positive outcomes of the meeting in San Francisco. However, despite the recent close interaction between the U.S. and China, it is unlikely that there will be a major breakthrough in their relationship in 2024, especially during the upcoming U.S. election. The resumption of counternarcotics cooperation and the frequent meetings during this period are aimed at strengthening the relationship between the two countries in this sensitive year. For Biden, proving to the American public before the election that he can maintain stable diplomatic relations with China while promoting American interests is highly advantageous to his bid for re-election, as it can show to the public that the current government's China policy is effective.

Furthermore, the resumption of counternarcotics cooperation between the U.S. and China is expected to lay the foundation for the two countries to carry out significant coordination and cooperation in maintaining regional and global stability. Cooperation between the U.S. and China in various aspects can be expected in 2024, including the resumption of in-person high-level communication in the military field and the high-level event on subnational climate action in the environmental field.^{15 16} In addition, the two governments have also announced a new bilateral channel for consultation on artificial intelligence, and plan to hold a dialogue this spring on the development and

risks of the field.¹⁷ Despite occasional tensions, it is evident that the overall common interests of the U.S. and China have not decreased under the current circumstances. Counternarcotics cooperation could serve as a starting point for maintaining a stable and sustainable relationship between the two countries, which is expected to have a positive effect on future relations.

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