

## **INDIA, CHINA STATE ACTORS ENABLING FENTANYL TRAFFICKING?**

By

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In March 2025, President Donald Trump followed through with his promise to impose sweeping changes on three of the United States' major trading partners: Canada, China, and Mexico. He cited the "extraordinary threat" posed by fentanyl, a lethal and highly potent synthetic opioid and the countries' failure to prevent the flow of illegal fentanyl into the United States. Fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid that is 100 times more potent than morphine, is the most common drug involved in overdose deaths in the US – fuelling an opioid crisis that has become a high-priority issue for the Trump administration.

According to the 2025 Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) of the US Intelligence Community, published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, terrorist and transnational criminal organizations are directly threatening US citizens. "Cartels are largely responsible for the more than 52,000 U.S. deaths from synthetic opioids in the 12 months ending in October 2024 and helped facilitate the nearly three million illegal migrant arrivals in 2024, straining resources and putting U.S. communities at risk.... Non-state groups are often enabled, both directly and indirectly, by state actors, such as China and India, as sources of precursors and equipment for drug traffickers," says the report dated March 25.

Unlike last year's assessment, this time India has been placed on the same level as China in the supply of precursor chemicals used by drug cartels to manufacture the opioid fentanyl. Fighting the trafficking of opioids has been declared a political priority by the Donald Trump administration. The report names India after China, "the primary source country for illicit fentanyl precursor chemicals

and pill pressing equipment.” Mexico-based chemical brokers circumvent international controls through mislabelled shipments and the purchase of unregulated dual-use chemicals. The report also said anti-India groups, including Lashkar-e Tayyiba, is a concern to the US “in part because of their historical links with Al-Qaida.”

In March 2025, an India-based chemical manufacturing company and three of its high-level employees were charged in a federal court in Washington, D.C. in a case related to illegally importing of precursor chemicals used to make illicit fentanyl. Federal agents also arrested two of the top ranking employees of a Hyderabad-based company in New York City on March 20, 2025.

Although this is the first such report to include India and China together, the history of US concerns about India and China in the fentanyl precursor chemicals trade, involving Mexican cartels responsible for all shipments into the US, goes further back in time. A September 2016 US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) report had indicted China as a source of fentanyl precursors, and an earlier 2013 Department of State report had highlighted China as the main source of trafficked fentanyl into the US. The India link was exposed when India’s Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) took down an illicit fentanyl laboratory in Indore in January 2018 acting on inputs provided by the DEA, followed later that year by arrests of individuals with links to the Mexican Sinaloa cartel.

But, the USA fails to appreciate that both countries have taken several proactive domestic measures to address the illegal manufacture, spillovers from legitimate production into the black market, and export of fentanyl precursor chemicals. On May 1, 2019, China became the first country to officially control all forms of fentanyl as a class of drugs. India’s first set of export controls on fentanyl precursors were put in place as early as February 2018, and by January 2020, strictest controls were imposed on the export of most fentanyl precursor chemicals. India and China now have some of the strictest drug control laws globally.

The creation of a US-India Counter-Narcotics Working Group in 2020 to focus on fentanyl and other opioids is a noteworthy bilateral framework between these two nations. Likewise, the US-China Bilateral Drug Intelligence Working Group and the Counter Narcotics Working Group have been engaging on the issue. The trafficking of synthetic drugs like fentanyl are upshots of a new global drugs economy where Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO) have exploited global shipping networks and trade infrastructure and technologies such as cryptocurrencies and the “dark net” to create new distribution channels and expand markets.

Both China and India have huge export-oriented pharmaceutical and chemical industrial sectors. Large trade volumes bring with them challenges in monitoring shipments, which, can lead to mislabelling of consignments and use of third-country transshipments, weaknesses that are exploited to the hilt by TCOs. Another challenge in controlling the illicit trade in synthetics is the synthesizing of new fentanyl-like precursors on a regular basis. These compounds are being synthesised by chemists in various countries by tweaking molecular structures to create new chemicals that circumvent existing legislation and enable TCOs to stay beyond the purview of the “regulatory curve”.

In early March 2025, China released a white paper titled “Controlling Fentanyl-Related Substances — China’s Contribution”. This report highlighted actions taken by China to control illegal production and shipments. It also accused that the fentanyl issue was being used as a US strategy to impose higher tariffs on China, alluding to the orders that President Donald Trump signed on February 1, 2025, issuing tariffs against China, Mexico and Canada due to the continued flow of illicit fentanyl and its precursor chemicals into the US.

Every year, 750 million containers are shipped around the globe, but less than two per cent of these get inspected, due to the physical impossibility of checking every container. When organised criminal groups organise Fentanyl trafficking via merchant ships, they usually use the "rip-on/rip-off" method. The UNODC describes this as a

concealment technique in which a legal shipment is misused to smuggle drugs from the country of origin or the transshipment port to the destination country. The rip-on/rip-off techniques of some "clearers" are so perfected that they can remove 100 kg of cocaine from a container within just 03 minutes. The container is opened and resealed without the sender or recipient even noticing that their cargo has been misused for the transport of drugs!

It is also worth mentioning that the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) currently scans only 3.7% of the roughly 11 million containers entering the US each year, due to insufficient staff. Only about 1% of that total, or 104,000 containers, are checked at ports overseas. Another global rule of thumb is that only one in 10 containers get checked, in order to avoid congestions at ports. This meagre rate of inspections encourages drug traffickers to push in all kinds of illegal drugs, not only into the US market, but also into several other countries. The US cannot keep blaming India, China and other South American countries, if they do not have a robust Customs examination system, or if their Customs examination is cursory, due to lack of sufficient personnel.

Applying the U.S. logic that India should ensure that shipments coming into USA, should not carry illegal drugs, India can also insist that Dubai and Singapore governments, should ensure that, no clandestine gold is brought by passengers coming by flights; Thailand government should ensure that no hybrid Ganja is brought by passengers into India! The U.S. cannot outsource its Customs responsibilities to other nations.

The Fentanyl blame game is likely to get more acerbic in the days to come, and will not cease, unless and until, the USA strengthens its Customs Border Patrol (CBP), and intensifies container checks.

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