



Five-Year Global Plan of Action to Combat Emerging Synthetic Drug Threats

Department of State
United States of America

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States is in the midst of the deadliest drug crisis the country has ever faced, with more than 300,000 Americans dying from opioid-related overdoses since 2000. Between 2012 and 2016 alone, the number of overdoses involving synthetic opioids increased by nearly 640 percent, and this trend is likely to continue. The vast majority of these drugs originate from outside our borders, and will continue to do so. Synthetic drugs, including synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and its analogues, as well as other new psychoactive substances (NPS), represent the most significant drug threat of the next decade. This new threat compounds the traditional threats posed by cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, which continue to pose a major concern.

Synthetic drugs can be manufactured virtually anywhere, in facilities ranging from sophisticated laboratories to remote hideouts. Production costs are low, and criminals tailor the psychoactive effects of new NPS formulas to meet evolving consumer demand. Traffickers exploit the boom in global access to information and technology to facilitate their lethal trade. Illegal drug producers exploit the anonymity and convenience of the internet, including the “dark web,” encrypted peer-to-peer messaging applications, and other emerging information and communications technologies to produce, market, and sell drugs aggressively to global clients, including directly to American drug users.

To deter and disrupt production and trafficking of illicit synthetic drugs into the United States, the Department of State will need to attack this new business model of illicit international drug supply chains at all points to increase the cost, risk, and difficulties associated with producing, trafficking, and misusing these drugs.

THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE WILL ATTACK THE BUSINESS MODEL OF TODAY'S ILLICIT DRUG SUPPLY CHAIN WITH THE GOALS OF:

- Reducing diversion and illicit production of synthetic drugs.
- Strengthening capacity to detect, interdict, and share information on synthetic drug threats.
- Building capacity to target online synthetic drug sales.
- Shrinking the drug market by reducing global drug demand.
- Developing and enhancing partnerships with governments, industry, and international organizations.

DOS will leverage its tools -- foreign assistance, capacity building, and international engagement -- to develop the national and international architecture required to address 21st century threats and increase the barriers of access to this illegal trade. By implementing the activities identified in this strategy, DOS will seek to save American lives by decreasing the volume of deadly drugs and their precursor chemicals trafficked into the United States.

These efforts will help the United States and international community to expand their drug-control capabilities from ones designed for 20th century threats to ones that are agile and nimble enough to keep pace with the rapidly evolving production and use trends of the future. Ultimately, the Department of State's goal is to protect Americans and the American way of life by reducing the impact of the most significant emerging drug threat.

THREAT OVERVIEW

According to preliminary data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 72,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2017, making drug overdoses the leading cause of accidental deaths in the United States. Many drug users unknowingly expose themselves to synthetic opioids, namely fentanyl, that is cut into heroin or pressed into counterfeit pain medication pills. A recent study¹ in Massachusetts found that nearly nine out of ten people in treatment for opioid use disorder tested positive for fentanyl, including a majority of the subjects who reported that they had never been exposed.

The vast majority of the illicit drugs responsible for this phenomenon originate from outside the United States. Although traditional drugs such as cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine remain major challenges requiring urgent action, synthetic opioids and NPS are adding to these traditional drug threats given their deadly nature and the difficulties surrounding their detection and interdiction.

Trafficking in synthetic drugs offer numerous advantages to 21st century criminals. Unlike drugs derived from plant-based crops, synthetic drugs are not weather dependent and do not require large tracts of land outside the reach of state authorities. These drugs can be manufactured virtually anywhere, in facilities ranging from sophisticated laboratories to remote hideouts. Production costs are low, and criminals can tailor the psychoactive effects of new NPS formulas to meet evolving consumer demand.

The extreme potency of synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl and its analogues, allow criminals to reap high profits while trafficking in small volumes. These criminals often operate independently from large trafficking organizations, minimizing their exposure to detection by law enforcement. A kilogram of fentanyl purchased online from vendors in China for as little as \$5,000 can be pressed into one million pills and sold illegally for \$10-20 million in the United States.

Criminals adopt new production methods quickly to evade law enforcement detection, and are increasingly adjusting transit routes to exploit countries with limited enforcement and regulatory capacity, such as in Central America. This adaptability increasingly challenges traditional enforcement approaches designed to address 20th century drug threats. Traffickers now exploit the tools of modern global commerce to expand new methods for trafficking drugs and chemicals, including the use of internet-based marketing and sales, social media platforms, virtual currencies, and international postal and express consignment services. The perceived anonymity and convenience of the internet, including use of the “dark web” and encrypted peer-to-peer messaging, allow criminals to complete illicit transactions easily, often using unregulated cryptocurrencies, while broadening their customer base. These modern tools afford traffickers greater physical security, lower operational costs, and reduced risk of arrest.

Illicit manufacture, trafficking, and use of synthetic opioids and NPS are poised to continue to expand and diversify to new countries and regions. Any village, city, or country with access to the internet and mail service is vulnerable to this crisis. U.S. authorities currently estimate that the majority of synthetic opioids and NPS available within the United States originate from China, where they are synthesized in clandestine laboratories

¹ Kenney SR, Anderson BJ, Conti MT, Bailey GL, Stein MD (2018) Expected and Actual Fentanyl Exposure among Persons Seeking Opioid Withdrawal Management. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 86:65-9

or, to a lesser extent, diverted from legal trade. Mexico is an important secondary route for fentanyl and other synthetic drugs, sometimes in the form of adulterated fraudulent pharmaceuticals or mixed with heroin, as well as a key source of methamphetamine used in the United States. While fentanyl and other synthetic drugs trafficked into the United States from China and Mexico will remain prevalent threats, United States and international authorities anticipate that illicit production and distribution will expand to additional countries and regions. Several countries in the Middle East and West Africa are already reporting increased trafficking and misuse of the synthetic opioid tramadol. Misuse of tramadol could lead to a demand for even more toxic forms of synthetic drugs, such as fentanyl. Southeast Asia is primed for an explosion in illicit manufacture of synthetic drugs given its large chemical industry and limited regulatory framework. Australia is already experiencing a spike in drug overdoses linked to opioids. Clandestine laboratories synthesizing fentanyl have been discovered and dismantled in the Western Hemisphere, and there is evidence that NPS and synthetic opioid production may be expanding to additional countries in Europe.

Trafficking routes for synthetic drugs will undergo even greater diversification as criminals adapt to enforcement efforts and seek to develop additional markets. This expansion of trafficking activity and consumption is already well underway. In 2012, governments reported just three new synthetic opioids to the United Nations, increasing to 10 in 2016. According to the International Narcotics Control Board's (INCB) 2018 annual report, 37 countries have reported seizing 40 different opioid-type NPS, mostly fentanyl or fentanyl-related substances. Trafficking and abuse of synthetic opioids has become a top concern of governments in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East, particularly as related to falsified or illicitly manufactured tramadol. Within the European Union, 38 new synthetic opioids have been detected since 2009, with 13 reported in 2017, including 10 fentanyl analogues.

The international legal framework for drug control – the collective body of national laws and international treaties that control substances – was developed before widespread misuse of synthetic drugs, and cannot keep pace. The United Nations drug control treaties, as well as the laws of most countries, continue to control drugs individually according to their chemical structure, which is a time consuming and ineffective approach when today's criminals create a new NPS each week. The number of distinct NPS products identified by the United Nations exceeds 800 – some 80 new substances per year on average since 2009 – and the number of potential fentanyl analogues alone is estimated in the thousands. In addition to new fentanyl analogues and related opioids, counterfeit variations of oxycodone, tramadol, and other pharmaceuticals continue to make new inroads into the United States and international criminal markets. Criminal innovations in synthetic drug design and production will continue to accelerate.

We project the synthetic drug threat will intensify over the five-year scope of this strategy. Traffickers will increasingly adapt production methodologies by creating new synthetics using different precursor chemical combinations. They will diversify trafficking routes by exploiting online platforms, and broadening consumer markets. The ever-evolving nature of these threats requires a coordinated global response.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE: COORDINATING A GLOBAL PLAN OF ACTION

The vast majority of synthetic drugs in the United States will continue to be produced outside of our borders, so the Department's efforts to reduce the availability of synthetic drugs in the criminal markets will focus on securing international cooperation and building partner capability through targeted foreign assistance.

Within the State Department, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) is the lead bureau in responding to these challenges. It manages assistance programs throughout the world, providing the critical foundation needed to engage like-minded governments in generating concrete cooperation to address the global threat of synthetic drugs. Enhancing global law enforcement capacity to combat these threats works in tandem with U.S. diplomatic engagement, and is coordinated with our U.S. law enforcement partners.



Over the next three to five years, the Department of State will leverage its foreign assistance and diplomatic engagement to expand international efforts to address these emerging synthetic drug threats. Importantly, the international drug control infrastructure must be updated to account for the rapid changes underway in the production, trafficking and misuse of NPS and controlled synthetic drugs.

While we adjust our posture to address emerging 21st century threats, DOS will continue to combat traditional drug threats that plague our country and threaten our national security. Surging cultivation and production of plant-based drugs in Colombia, Mexico, and Afghanistan will remain among the Bureau's highest priorities, in keeping with Administration policy. Building capacity to address the synthetic drug threat will not distract us from advancing important programs and diplomatic engagement to stop cocaine, heroin, and other traditional drugs from entering our country. DOS programs must address both emerging and traditional threats in tandem, particularly in light of the fact that traffickers are increasingly adulterating traditional drug supplies with new synthetics. The spread of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids into the illicit drug supply exacerbates the deadly effects of the prescription opioid and heroin crisis. At the same time, fatal cocaine overdoses are increasing, with record production in Colombia and escalating domestic use creating a fertile ground for traffickers to introduce deadly synthetic opioids, cathinones, and cannabinoids to the illicit drug supply.



The Department of State cannot address these enormous challenges alone. This work is predicated on close partnerships within the U.S. interagency, especially law enforcement, and a range of other actors, including civil society, public health practitioners, U.S. state and local criminal justice practitioners, international organizations, private sector actors, and our international partners. Within the U.S. government, DOS will work in close coordination with law enforcement agencies to ensure resources and diplomatic engagement properly align to meet emerging threats. We will work with the research community to better map the synthetic drug threat and expand knowledge of how the synthetic drug trade operates, which will help us to better target new threats. New and enhanced partnerships with the private sector play a critical role across all strategic goals in this strategy.

Success depends on the political will of like-minded governments. The Department of State will build political awareness of the urgency of the synthetic drug threat and common approaches to counter it. We have strong foundations upon which we can build and expand. Through the North America Drugs Dialogue, the United States, Canada, and Mexico created a common alignment of national positions to interrupt the flow of fentanyl and fentanyl precursors to North America. The Group of Seven (G-7) nations remain seized on the issue, and use the G-7's Roma-Lyon Group to advance concrete international action to strengthen controls on synthetic drugs and the chemicals used to produce them. The United Nations, including the INCB and the World Health Organization (WHO), identified emerging synthetic drugs as a pressing global concern, calling upon all UN Member States to cooperate against the threat.

Working through regional bodies, multilateral channels, and bilaterally through diplomatic engagement, the Department of State will use foreign assistance funding and diplomatic engagement to promote a united international response against synthetic drugs that develops and identifies pathways for greater international action on the variety of drug-threats plaguing the world in the 21st century.

STRATEGIC GOAL #1:

REDUCE ILLICIT SYNTHETIC DRUG PRODUCTION

Synthetic drugs are produced from chemicals used around the world for legitimate purposes, and production of these substances isn't as geographically constrained as plant-based drug crops. Synthetic drugs can be produced virtually anywhere. Criminals shift to new production methods, including the use of different uncontrolled precursor and pre-precursor chemicals, to evade law enforcement detection. Preventing illicit diversion of precursor chemicals remains one of the most difficult challenges in reducing synthetic drug supplies.

United Nations treaty obligations require national authorities to take measures to prevent criminal diversion of controlled chemicals, but the responsibility for enforcing these diversion prevention regimes rests with individual governments. China will likely remain the predominant source country of precursor chemicals used to produce fentanyl and NPS, but criminals have the ability to shift to source and transit nodes around the globe, particularly in countries with large chemical and pharmaceutical industries.

Through diplomacy, the Department of State will work to win support for international controls on new and emerging dangerous drugs and precursor chemicals. DOS will develop and implement new capacity-building initiatives to help countries enforce strong regulatory and enforcement regimes to safeguard the integrity of chemical supply chains and prevent illicit diversion of precursor chemicals. Because global chemical supplies rest largely in the hands of private industry, DOS will pursue new initiatives to enhance cooperation between the public and private sectors in this field. DOS will put foreign assistance to work to help foreign partners detect and dismantle clandestine laboratories used to manufacture synthetic drugs.

PICK UP THE PACE: ACCELERATE INTERNATIONAL CONTROLS ON DANGEROUS NEW SYNTHETIC DRUGS

To keep pace with the innovation of criminal drug producers, DOS will lead efforts to boost the capacity of the drug-scheduling frameworks at the international and national levels to increase effective controls on synthetic drugs. DOS will do this by working to expand the volume of UN drug-control scheduling reviews, including deploying innovative new methods, within the scope of international law, to review new synthetic drugs based on their psychoactive effects, rather than precise chemical structure.

To supplement this global control framework, DOS

will work bilaterally with partner governments of key chemical source and transit countries and through multilateral channels to promote the adoption of national frameworks better suited to keep abreast of the volume and speed that these substances enter the global supply chains.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Form** new partnerships with WHO to increase the number of treaty-mandated scientific reviews of substances for international control.
- **Implement** new assistance programs with key partner countries along significant transit routes to help law enforcement detect and identify new synthetic drugs.

- **Push** countries to enforce existing domestic regulations effectively to increase the identification and detection of synthetic drugs.
- **Develop** and secure adoption of a UN model law that countries could use to implement class-wide scheduling of synthetic drug analogues within national frameworks.

ACCESS DENIED: KEEP PRECURSOR CHEMICALS AWAY FROM CRIMINALS

DOS will develop and deploy new training initiatives to strengthen the capacity of governments – including in Asia where there are large chemical industries – to prevent illicit diversion of precursor chemicals from commercial supply chains. These initiatives will include dissemination of effective practices to improve the monitoring and control of chemical sales and storage, in addition to further steps to foster and enhance information sharing on exports and imports between national authorities. DOS will put foreign assistance resources to work to build capacity of governments, particularly those in Central America, to identify and interdict diverted precursor chemicals and safely dispose of them, to prevent these supplies from becoming environmental concerns or from re-entering the illicit supply chain.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Deploy** U.S. experts to train foreign partners on best practices to safeguard chemical supply chains, including in Asia and Europe, and identify precursor chemicals.
- **Press** China to strengthen its oversight and enforcement of its chemical and pharmaceutical industries, pursuant to international obligations and share data with the international community.
- **Develop** and disseminate reference material to help law enforcement practitioners identify precursor chemicals used to illicitly manufacture synthetic drugs.



Precursor chemicals seized by Mexican authorities.
Released by the Office of the Attorney General of Mexico (PGR)

- **Develop** and disseminate best practices for the safe disposal of seized precursor chemicals, in particular in Central America.
- **Expand** engagement with governments in key chemical source and transit countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe to strengthen diversion safeguards.
- **Develop** a coalition of like-minded governments to coordinate international action to strengthen global precursor chemical controls.
- **Leverage** existing platforms, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, to prioritize action in this area.

MAKE NEW FRIENDS: FOSTER NEW PARTNERSHIPS WITH INDUSTRY

Increased cooperation with industry will be important to preventing precursor chemical diversion. Working with interagency and international partners, DOS will support efforts to develop new public-private sector partnerships in this field, particularly with chemical, pharmaceutical, and shipping industries, to promote the implementation of voluntary diversion-prevention measures.

CHINA: A CRITICAL SOURCE OF SYNTHETIC DRUGS AND PRECURSOR CHEMICALS

China is a major source of NPS and other synthetic drugs, including fentanyl and its analogues, and domestic consumption of synthetic drugs (though not fentanyl) is becoming increasingly prevalent there.

China's large chemical and pharmaceutical industries and inconsistent regulatory oversight provide a target rich environment for criminals to divert precursor chemicals. As a result of close bilateral cooperation, since 2015, China has taken significant action to deter diversion of chemicals, including by domestically controlling the two essential fentanyl precursor chemicals, NPP and ANPP, as required by international drug control treaties.

Working with our interagency partners, INL will seek greater engagement with China to increase the effectiveness of its precursor chemical control efforts, as well as to increase the number and significance of substances scheduled in China and work towards China scheduling fentanyl as a class.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Expand** information sharing and cooperation with relevant industries, including chemical, pharmaceutical and transport industries, to prevent diversion.
- **Promote** coordination on chemical controls between the private sector and partner-nation law enforcement entities.
- **Establish** better business practices and peer-to-peer standards to prevent chemical diversion.
- **Engage** with chemical and pharmaceutical companies, including in Europe and Asia, to ensure they are part of an effective and comprehensive response to these threats.

STOP THE PRESSES: ENHANCE CONTROLS ON TABLETING EQUIPMENT

DOS will seek voluntary cooperation with industry and partner nations to prevent criminal access to the equipment necessary for illicit drug production, including pill presses and other tableting equipment. To provide a legal framework for countries seeking to regulate the sale of tableting equipment, DOS will support efforts to develop and export voluntary model legislation, drawing from U.S. domestic practices in line with Article 13 of the UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs (1988 Convention).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Increase** monitoring and oversight of the use of tableting equipment to prevent illicit manufacture of counterfeit pills.
- **Develop** and disseminate model legislation on tableting equipment, including pill presses, modeled from the Controlled Substances Act.
- **Develop** reference materials for law enforcement practitioners detailing the equipment used in the illicit manufacture of synthetic drugs.
- **Advance** the U.S. interagency's efforts to tighten regulations on tableting equipment through diplomatic engagement.

BREAKING BAD ACTORS: DETECT AND DISMANTLE CLANDESTINE LABS

DOS will expand its training and equipment to specialized units in partner governments, to help them detect and dismantle clandestine synthetic drug labs.

This support will draw upon lessons learned from ongoing DOS training in Mexico, and will include training on how to safely and effectively preserve evidence from the labs and destroy the labs' equipment and volatile precursor chemicals. DOS will train and mentor investigators, forensic

scientists, and prosecutors on how to use collected evidence to investigate supply chain and synthetic drug trafficking networks and to prosecute synthetic drug cases successfully. DOS will promote expanded information-sharing efforts between U.S. law enforcement partners and key international counterparts, including those in Mexico, Canada, and China, to counter the production of synthetic drugs.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Support** capacity building through interagency partners, including DEA and CBP, to safely identify, collect evidence on, and ultimately dismantle clandestine laboratories used in the illicit manufacture of synthetic drugs.
- **Train** international law enforcement and justice officials, through interagency partners, how to use evidence collected at drug labs to investigate synthetic drug supply chains and bring cases to court.

3-5 Year Vision: Production

Enhanced national and international precursor chemical controls, including regularized public-private cooperation and multilateral action, prevents diversion of legitimate chemicals into the illicit supply chain.

STRATEGIC GOAL #2: STRENGTHEN CAPACITY TO DETECT AND INTERDICT ILLICIT SYNTHETIC DRUGS

Criminals will remain flexible and innovative by using new forms of NPS, adjusting trafficking patterns, and exploiting new concealment methods. Department of State programming will require similar flexibility and innovation, and promote information sharing between law enforcement officials to increase detection and identification of substances in the illicit supply chain. These efforts will help national law enforcement officials remove these drugs from criminal markets and reduce overall drug availability.

EAR TO THE GROUND: APPLY ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY TO DETECT ILLICIT DRUGS

Significant volumes of synthetic drugs will continue to be trafficked into the United States through the mail and across our land borders, and through other ports of entry. DOS will expand programs to support a number of interdiction methods in Mexico and other key transit countries, including canine detection and non-intrusive inspection equipment (NIIE) at airports, seaports, and land ports of entry.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Partner** with U.S. law enforcement to export new advances in inspection technology to foreign partners along key synthetic drug transit routes.
- **Disseminate** mobile forensic technology capable of identifying and sharing chemical profiles of seized substances.
- **Broaden** and advance use of technological solutions to identify specific adulterants in illicit drugs.
- **Increase** education and awareness among international law enforcement partners, particularly in developing countries, on new and emerging drug trafficking trends.



A U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer uses a Raman laser device to determine the contents of a package suspected of containing an illegal drug at the JFK airport mail inspection site. Photo: Seth Harrison, The Journal News

EYES ON THE GLOBE: EXPAND GLOBAL COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

To counter the global proliferation of emerging synthetic substances, national authorities must be able to share quickly information on new emerging substances and trafficking trends. DOS will work with allies to strengthen international institutions to track the trade of these drugs and provide warnings so governments can mobilize their public health and law enforcement agencies to counter the threats.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Train** expert-level international counterparts to participate actively in the international data-collection and information sharing platforms supported by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the INCB.
- **Expand** participation by U.S. experts in UNODC and INCB online information sharing platforms.
- **Strengthen** foreign partner capacity to participate at the expert level in international intelligence sharing operations aimed at dismantling criminal organizations fueling the illicit supply of synthetic drugs.

EXTEND THE BORDER: CURB TRAFFICKING THROUGH MAIL AND EXPRESS CONSIGNMENT SHIPPING

To counter the growing misuse of the international postal services and express consignment shippers as vehicles to traffic synthetic drugs, DOS will develop new initiatives to help partner countries enhance their ability to detect and intercept illicit drugs in their domestic mail systems before those drugs enter the U.S. mail system.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Enhance** collaboration and cooperation with U.S. law enforcement partners to increase inspection of suspicious packages shipped through the international mail and express consignment couriers.
- **Train** canine units within international law enforcement partners, including in Mexico, to

3-5 Year Vision: Detection and Interdiction

Increased national and international capacity to identify, control, and interdict synthetic drugs comprehensive data collection and forensic analysis and the deployment of enhanced technological innovations, and new interdiction methodologies, increases seizures of synthetic drugs and gives law enforcement partners a better understanding of synthetic drug trafficking trends and effective tools to quickly detect and interdict these dangerous illicit drugs, particularly those destined for the United States.

UNODC'S GLOBAL SMART

Launched in 2008, UNODC's Global Synthetics Monitoring: Analysis, Reporting, and Trends (Global SMART) Program has developed into an essential global platform for sharing information on new emerging synthetic drug threats.

Global SMART's Early Warning Advisory network is an online data collection platform that monitors, analyzes, and shares information worldwide on trends related to synthetic drug trafficking and use, and serves to link national drug monitoring efforts worldwide. This data collection platform is essential in informing the international community about which synthetic drugs are present in the illicit market, as well as providing forensic profiling for new synthetic drugs.

Global SMART also provides training to law enforcement and helps countries implement international scheduling decisions.

enhance national capacity to identify and detect synthetic drugs.

- **Expand** global capacity to capture and share advance electronic data for international mail parcels destined for the United States
- **Strengthen** capacity of foreign law enforcement partners to target suspicious shipments.
- **Establish** new partnerships, including with the Universal Postal Union (UPU), to increase detection and interdiction of parcels containing synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals.

STRATEGIC GOAL #3:

TARGET ILLICIT ONLINE SALES AND FINANCIAL FLOWS

Over the next several years, criminals will continue to expand their exploitation of information and communications technologies to traffic synthetic opioids and other NPS into the United States and other markets, in tandem with the global spread of connectivity and advancing Internet-enabled commerce. Trafficking networks will continue to market and sell over the open web, as well as increasingly through a subset of the Internet known as the “dark web” or “darknet.” These non-indexed websites require unique software, configuration, or authorization to access, granting greater perceived anonymity to users. Online purchases increasingly use virtual currencies, also known as cryptocurrencies, which are designed for anonymous use. Virtual currencies also increasingly feature prominently in cyber-enabled money laundering. Virtual currencies represent one of the greatest challenges in the 21st century drug-threats because they are widely unregulated internationally and make illicit transactions extremely difficult to detect and disrupt.

DOS, and the broader U.S. government, is not currently equipped to effectively address the illicit financing that facilitates these illegal activities. DOS will enhance its expertise in cybercrime to help global partners to better understand the problem, including through targeted engagement with key countries that are also working to address this challenge, such as those in Europe. DOS will expand assistance to target investigations into the use of virtual currencies in illegal synthetic drug sales as well as supporting ongoing U.S. interagency efforts to synchronize global anti-money laundering responses with those targeting the illicit financing methodologies fueling online drug trafficking.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: FIGHT ONLINE TRAFFICKERS USING COMMON STANDARDS

Online synthetic drug trafficking networks respect no borders, and online drug sales will likely continue to expand across additional jurisdictions in the years to come. Effective law enforcement cooperation to investigate and dismantle online trafficking requires legal standards and mechanisms to enable cross-border evidence sharing and assistance. It is crucial that more countries – particularly developing countries increasingly vulnerable to online trafficking – become parties to the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime (the Budapest Convention), the only international, legally binding instrument dealing with computer-based crime.

G7 CYBERCRIME NETWORK

Confronting borderless online crime requires effective real-time international law enforcement cooperation. One platform that enables this cooperation is the Group of Seven (G7) Cybercrime Network. The G7 includes Canada, France, U.S., UK, Germany, Japan, and Italy.

The 84 member countries of the Network provide points of contact available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to respond to urgent requests from members to investigate cyber-enabled crime and preserve digital evidence for subsequent transfer through legal channels.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Launch** major diplomatic initiative to increase membership in the Budapest Convention.
- **Support** developing countries (e.g., in Southeast Asia and Central America) to strengthen national laws to the level needed to accede to the Budapest Convention.
- **Convene** multilateral fora to enable U.S. experts to exchange best practices and lessons learned.

A SERIES OF TUBES: TRAIN INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS TO CURB ONLINE TRAFFICKING

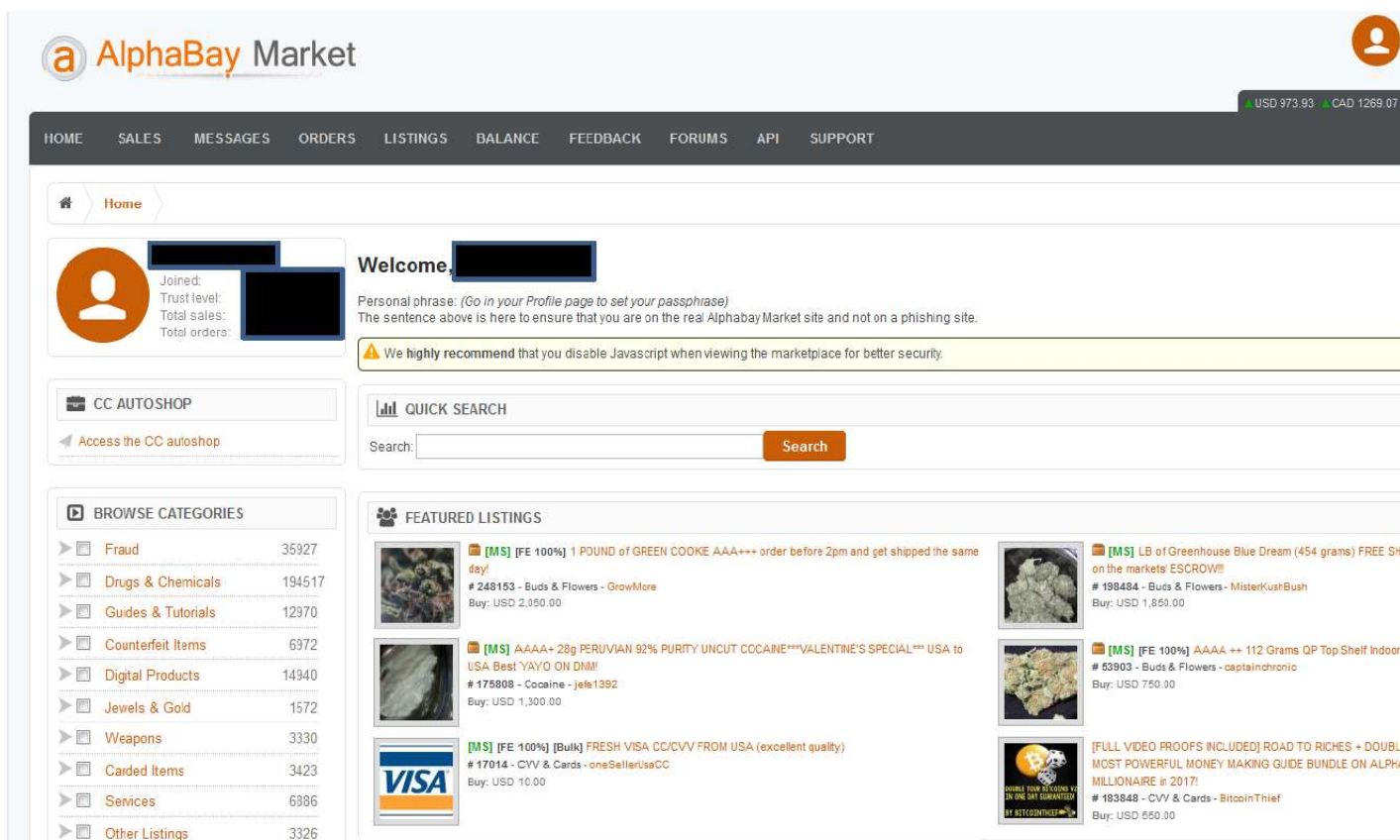
Dark web marketplaces, by their nature, require skilled law enforcement personnel and extensive multilateral cooperation to disrupt and dismantle. DOS will expand specialized training delivered by U.S. experts to build foreign partner capacity to combat online trafficking of synthetic drugs and

chemicals, with the goal of strengthening international law enforcement cooperation globally.

To help target DOS capacity-building projects and inform law enforcement and regulatory efforts, DOS will support data analytic research to map the proceeds amassed by synthetic drug production and trafficking, including the illicit diversion of precursor chemicals. Findings could also identify correlations between synthetic drug criminals and other forms of illicit activity, which can then be used to strategically inform DOS programming.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Deploy** U.S. law enforcement experts to regions around the world to provide training and technical assistance as part of a new U.S. Transnational and High Tech Crime Global Law Enforcement Network (GLEN).
- **Deploy** U.S. digital forensics experts to train international counterparts on investigating



Screenshot of the now-defunct Dark Web marketplace AlphaBay, showing illicit drugs being advertised for sale.

online traffickers, including by using and applying digital evidence against them.

- **Export** best practices in curbing dark web drug trafficking.
- **Develop** software and algorithms to analyze data on the most influential dark web drug traffickers.
- **Enhance** DOS staff capacity to undertake predictive analytics analyses on existing online trafficking trends to better inform programmatic interventions.

FOLLOW THE MONEY: ADVANCE TECHNOLOGICAL CAPACITY TO IDENTIFY MOVEMENT OF PROCEEDS FROM ILLICIT SALES OF SYNTHETIC DRUGS

Despite a growth in new technologies to facilitate money laundering, criminals use traditional money laundering techniques, such as bulk cash smuggling, trade-based money laundering, and funnel accounts. In many places, cash remains the most anonymous currency at hand. DOS will build partner capacity to investigate networks using traditional money laundering techniques.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Build** the capacity of money laundering investigators by providing training and mentoring by U.S. law enforcement agencies, and by implementing essential equipping programs, including Judicialized Wiretap Intercept Programs (JWIPs).
- **Engage** with international partners to increase oversight and monitoring of virtual currency transactions to prevent money laundering.

WEAKEN LINKS IN THE BLOCKCHAIN: PREVENT CRIMINAL MISUSE OF VIRTUAL CURRENCIES

Global regulatory approaches to prevent criminal misuse of virtual currencies differ considerably, creating the potential for enforcement gaps and

inconsistent, if any, international cooperation. DOS will seek to expand existing legal frameworks to target criminal misuse of virtual currencies.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Partner** with U.S. agencies, including the U.S. Department of Treasury, to promote the international dissemination of best practices aimed at preventing the criminal misuse of virtual currencies.
- **Leverage** ongoing efforts within relevant multilateral bodies to develop a global framework to prevent the criminal misuse of virtual currencies.

GET THE MOST WANTED: SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS TO TARGET TRAFFICKING NETWORKS

Working with the U.S. interagency partners, DOS will support new opportunities to bring international sanctions, asset seizures, and utilize rewards programs against criminals trafficking online in synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

- **Expand** use of the Narcotics Rewards Program (NRP), visa sanctions, and asset freezing and seizures to target synthetic drug traffickers.
- **Support** U.S. Department of Treasury sanctions efforts by training and messaging foreign partners on U.S. Kingpin Act requirements, and how they apply to synthetics traffickers.

A DAY IN COURT: SUPPORT EFFORTS TO BRING SYNTHETIC DRUG TRAFFICKERS TO JUSTICE

Many of our foreign partners still struggle to effectively build cases against and prosecute drug traffickers. Emerging synthetic drugs will make the justice sector's job harder because of evolved criminal methodologies used to traffic them, including advanced money laundering techniques.

DOS will provide training and technical assistance to boost the capacity of international justice sector to prosecute synthetics traffickers, including those using online marketplaces and virtual currencies.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTIONS INCLUDE:

– **Expand** and develop new technical assistance programs in collaboration with U.S. interagency

partners to boost the capacity of international justice systems to build cases against and effectively prosecute synthetics traffickers, including those using new virtual technologies.

– **Increase** diplomatic messaging on the importance of targeting criminals’ illicit assets as a tool for dismantling drug trafficking organizations.

3-5 Year Vision: Sales and Financial Flows

Increased international oversight of virtual currencies and a growing global regulatory framework, including corresponding national-level regulatory bodies, reduces the utility of virtual currencies in anonymizing illicit drug transactions. Key target countries are better able to successfully investigate and prosecute cyber criminals by leveraging existing tools, such as the Budapest Convention.

STRATEGIC GOAL #4:

REDUCE GLOBAL DEMAND FOR DRUGS

People suffering from substance use disorders represent an inexhaustible revenue stream for producers and traffickers of synthetic drugs, as the physical dependency produced by drugs creates a high demand that persists in spite of changes in the supply. Globally, criminals easily exploit individuals dependent on drugs, as the price of the drug has little effect on their willingness to purchase it. Long-time users often develop tolerance to a drug's effects, requiring ever larger doses or more potent substances to retain close-to-normal functioning. This high, inelastic demand for drugs promotes the production of new synthetic substances, as traffickers respond to legal barriers and interdiction efforts by modifying chemicals structures to skirt regulations, evade law enforcement, and increase the potency of their products. These synthetic drugs are frequently added to the conventional drug supply, and are often consumed unknowingly by the end user. Global drug demand reduction through effective treatment and prevention is critical for the sustainability of this strategy, as it removes potential buyers from the market, and reduces the risk of accidental exposure to a dangerous synthetic drug.

The Department of State will enhance national and international drug-control architectures to effectively respond to the threats posed by synthetic drugs.

DOS will need to foster political will to implement the national-level capacity building required to effectively respond to these challenges, and offering drug demand reduction programming can help to strengthen this will. Furthermore, DOS can leverage the eagerness for drug demand reduction programming to exact concrete cooperation in areas that advance U.S. interests, such as increasing interdiction and detection of synthetic drugs.

WHO, WHAT, WHERE: IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION AND INFORMATION SHARING ON DRUG CONSUMPTION TRENDS

The extent of the synthetic drug problem is underestimated due to a lack of precise data on global drug use. In order to promote the collection of sophisticated data in this area, DOS will support regional and host nation drug observatories to conduct surveys of drug use and drug treatment systems. DOS will support the development of new technologies and epidemiological networks that can facilitate data collection and sharing between governments, and will leverage existing networks and diplomatic engagement to encourage data collection and sharing.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION INCLUDE:

- **Support** drug observatories at national and regional levels to promote mapping of substance use hotspots and treatment capacity.
- **Build** epidemiological networks to encourage sharing of public health data on drug trends.
- **Increase** capacity for toxicological testing to identify emerging threats to public health from new synthetic drugs.

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION: DEVELOP INITIATIVES TO PREVENT THE MISUSE OF SYNTHETIC DRUGS

While certain prevention interventions are known to be effective at reducing the prevalence of substance

use disorders, there is a dearth of evidence-based practices for prevention in many contexts, including families, schools, and workplaces. DOS will support the development of evidence-based protocols for prevention in these contexts, as well as the furtherance of existing community-based prevention programs.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION INCLUDE:

- **Develop** simple and sensitive screening tools that can be deployed rapidly to pediatricians and schools to identify those with a high risk of developing a substance use disorder.
- **Identify** experts in prevention science, and encourage their involvement in the design of prevention programs.
- **Support** the development of context-specific prevention guidelines, including for schools, workplaces, and families.

A POUND OF CURE: EXPAND ACCESS TO EFFECTIVE TREATMENT FOR SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

DOS will support the development of the global treatment workforce through training and capacity building, while promoting the adoption of evidence-based treatment policies and practices at the national level. DOS will also work to inform practitioners in the field of the latest scientific developments in treatment, including best practices in medication-assisted treatment and overdose reversal technologies.

3-5 Year Vision: Demand Reduction and Health

Increased international commitments on demand reduction of the misuse of synthetic drugs improve evidence-based treatment and prevention programs abroad and in the United States. The Department’s internationally developed trainings and protocols also support better domestic treatment for those with substance use disorders. As a collateral benefit of enhanced demand reduction efforts, there is a greater commitment and cooperation from partners in disrupting the global production and trafficking of synthetic drugs.

THE UNIVERSAL PREVENTION AND TREATMENT CURRICULA

The Universal Prevention Curriculum (UPC) and the Universal Treatment Curriculum (UTC) are a series of training programs for those wishing to develop their professional knowledge, skills, and competence in addressing substance use prevention and delivering treatment services to individuals and their families.

These curricula were developed by teams of international experts in the field, and are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that they continue to reflect the best scientific evidence and the changing needs of the workforce.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION INCLUDE:

- **Expand** access to treatment services for people with substance use disorders through global capacity building and workforce development.
- **Enhance** the quality of treatment services through the development of international quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms.
- **Build** a coalition of like-minded governments to increase support for evidence-based global demand reduction.
- **Increase** training to foreign counterparts on use of overdose reversal agents to prevent overdose deaths..

STRATEGIC GOAL #5:

EXPAND GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS AND ACTION

As the global synthetic drug threat evolves and expands, The Department’s efforts to confront and combat it will require new crosscutting partnerships to support effective responses to the synthetic drug threats. These partnerships must include an array of traditional and non-traditional actors: governments, the private sector, international organizations, domestic state and local government partners, and civil society. DOS will build upon its longstanding partnerships with U.S. law enforcement agencies to target emerging capacity requirements and open new pathways to cooperation.

DIPLOMATIC OFFENSIVE: BUILD A GLOBAL COALITION AMONG GOVERNMENTS

National governments will remain the most important actors against emerging synthetic drug threats, and DOS will work to mobilize governments to expend resources and synchronize efforts in these fields. Through targeted, high-level interventions and by sustained engagement, DOS will expand unified responses against the production, trafficking, and use of these drugs. Without this political commitment, few if any interventions will bear fruit.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIP INCLUDE:

- **Reduce** diversion and illicit production of synthetic drugs.
- **Strengthen** national capacity to detect, interdict, and exchange information on the trafficking and misuse of synthetic drugs and the precursor chemicals used to produce them.
- **Curb** online sales of synthetic drugs and chemicals, including the financial flows that facilitate these illicit transactions.
- **Reduce** demand for drugs and promote access to drug abuse treatment.

SYNTHETICS TOOLKIT

With support from the Department of State, UNODC is developing a “ToolKit” of programming options, as well as cooperative measures and exchanges, to help governments develop the national architecture required to effectively respond to the threats posed by the misuse of synthetic drugs and their precursor chemicals.

The ToolKit’s offerings will include opportunities for intervention across the law enforcement, justice, and health sectors, including examples of legislative best practices to broaden national controls on synthetic drugs, such as class-wide scheduling for fentanyl analogues, and temporary emergency schedules options modeled from U.S. best practices. To address the substantial gap in national data-collection and sharing on the existing and emerging threats related to the trafficking and misuse of synthetic drugs, governments can also use the ToolKit to strengthen capacities in this area, both within their governments and with international partners.

Broad use of the ToolKit can mobilize the strategic and coordinated international action required to make a significant impact in the goals outlined in this Strategy.

INDUSTRIOUS OUTREACH: ESTABLISH EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Preventive efforts to stop illicit synthetic production, diversion, and trafficking requires expanded cooperation with private industry. The majority of the world’s chemical and pharmaceutical industries remain privately owned. In partnership with other governments and international organizations, DOS will broaden cooperation with these private actors to encourage voluntary measures to strengthen supply chains and prevent diversion of legitimate commodities toward drug production. DOS will seek greater voluntary cooperation with private sector industries increasingly misused by traffickers – information communication technologies, social media platforms, express consignment shipping carriers, online-payment providers, and other relevant sectors – to share information on emerging threats, reduce vulnerabilities, and deny access to criminal actors.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIP INCLUDE:

- **Develop** platforms to enable regular information sharing with industries on emerging synthetic drug threats.
- **Elevate** discussion of public-private sector cooperation in key multilateral bodies, including the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), US-EU Drugs Dialogue, Organization of American States, and North American Drug Dialogue.
- **Target** bilateral diplomacy to encourage governments to elevate public-private sector cooperation within their jurisdictions.
- **Raise** public awareness to increase consumer pressure on industry to prevent the diversion and misuse of synthetic drugs and chemicals.
- **Promote** a “code of conduct” with agreed best practices in industry for preventing the diversion, illicit manufacture, and misuse of synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals.



The Vienna International Center in Austria: Headquarters of the UNODC, INCB, and Commission on Narcotic Drugs

GLOBAL ACTION: LEVERAGE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Because synthetic drug manufacturing, trafficking, and use evolve rapidly on a global scale, international organizations provide an essential framework to share information, and coordinate actions to counter the threat. DOS will channel the reach of international organizations to expand global platforms to detect emerging patterns on synthetic drug threats, work with private sector actors, and reduce information-sharing bottlenecks to accelerate responses. DOS will leverage the membership of organizations including the UNODC, WHO, World Customs Organization (WCO), and INCB to support capacity building in countries where direct U.S. assistance is impractical. DOS will utilize the frameworks provided by international organizations to lobby additional donors to share the burden of developing global capacities against synthetic drugs.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIP INCLUDE:

- **Increase** data sharing across United Nations, including through an agreement between UNODC, INCB, and WHO, to ensure the international information sharing portals aggregate the most comprehensive sets of data on the trafficking and misuse trends of synthetic drugs and chemicals and ensure UN members actively contribute to those data sets.

- **Develop** national early warning systems through UNODC and INCB to increase data collection and information on the latest trafficking and misuse trends related to synthetic drugs and the chemicals used to produce them.
- **Leverage** ongoing efforts within relevant multilateral bodies to develop a global framework to prevent the criminal misuse of virtual currencies.
- **Use** subsidiary bodies of the CND to mobilize national and regional action to control effectively illicit synthetic drugs and chemicals.
- **Develop** a coalition of like-minded governments to coordinate international action to strengthen global precursor chemical controls.
- **Expand** training within the International Law Enforcement Academies (ILEAs) to include precursor chemical control, cybercrime, identification and detection of fentanyl and its analogues, and safe handling and disposal of synthetic drugs and their precursors.

NEW SOLUTIONS: NEW PARTNERS, POLICIES, AND PROCESSES

Meeting the objectives of this strategy requires DOS to review existing partners, policies, and processes to ensure effective responses to these challenges. New partnerships must span the full spectrum of expertise available and should advance activities on capacity-building disseminated by key law enforcement partners, including CBP, DEA, and DOJ; disseminating innovative solutions from state and local practitioners; and harnessing the contributions

of civil society, the research community, and medical professionals to build knowledge and technical solutions to counter the synthetics threat.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIP INCLUDE:

- **Increase** the use of data analytics across DOS to ensure programming targets the latest trends in the trafficking and misuse of synthetic drugs and the chemicals used to produce them.
- **Develop** new interagency agreements with U.S. law enforcement partners specific to synthetic drug threats.

THE INCB: A CRITICAL ALLY

The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) is an independent monitoring body for the implementation of the three UN drug control conventions. The INCB serves as the central global focal point for preventing precursor chemical diversion. Through its online information sharing platforms, the INCB facilitates real-time cooperation among government authorities working together to stop suspicious shipments that may be destined for illicit diversion. The INCB spearheads international engagement with the private sector, including by developing recommendations for private sector actors involved in the chemical and pharmaceutical industries to prevent illicit diversion. INCB coordinates time-bound international law enforcement operations targeting synthetic drugs and criminals, and partners with the Universal Postal Union to advance cooperation against the trafficking of fentanyl-related substances through international mail.

3-5 Year Vision: Global Partnerships

Coordinated international action from governments, private sector entities, and international organizations slows the proliferation of illicit synthetic drug production and trafficking, and increases the risk to traffickers of detection when engaged in the illicit production, distribution and sale of synthetic drugs.