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International cooperation in combating drug trafficking: Contemporary challenges

Abstract. The relevance of this topic lies in the fact that drug proliferation is a global issue that impacts the social, economic, and security dimensions of society, necessitating comprehensive measures at the international level. The aim of this study was to analyse the development of international legislation in the field of counter-narcotics, as well as methods of combating modern synthetic drugs. In the course of the study, using historical and genetic analysis, the history of the international fight against drug trafficking was analysed, starting from the International Opium Convention of 1912 under the League of Nations aegis, to the Vienna Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 under the United Nations aegis. Using a systemic approach to the study of social phenomena, the reasons for the widespread distribution of designer drugs in the 21st century were considered. The successes and problems of the implementation and activities of the “United Nations Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs”, the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats were analysed; the plans for the creation of the European Union Drugs Agency were critically examined. The statistics of fentanyl-related deaths in the United States were studied. The cooperation between the governments of the United States and the People’s Republic of China in 2023, which focused on combating the leakage of fentanyl precursor chemicals into the hands of Mexican cartels, was investigated. A problem analysis of the updated strategy to combat fentanyl and other synthetic drugs by the United States Customs and Border Protection, thanks to which already at the beginning of 2024 more than 8 thousand pounds of fentanyl were seized, helped to identify problematic aspects of documents in this area. The results of the study showed that the international community was aware of the drug problem and adopted appropriate resolutions, however, modern international legislation needs to be improved to combat the international drug trafficking of synthetic drugs, which requires political publicity and the activity of political elites. The results obtained can be useful for public service workers engaged in anti-drug activities, for students and lecturers, as well as for public activists involved in social work with drug addicts

Keywords: international cooperation; strategy; artificial intelligence; anti-drug activities; drug cartels

Introduction

Illicit drug trafficking, as defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), encompasses the cultivation, distribution, production, and sale of substances covered by drug prohibition laws (UN – Drug trafficking..., 2011). The study and detailed analysis of international cooperation, the activities of national governments, international organisations, and other subjects of international law in the field of combating the trade, distribution, and production of narcotic substances is important, as the rapid development of transnational criminal groups exerts pressure on the world economy. The phenomenon of drug distribution, in addition to economic problems, also destroys the social aspects of society’s activities and reduces the level of national, regional, and international security.

A detailed study of the topic of international cooperation in combating drug trafficking is critical from the point of view of developing new or systematising existing, most effective strategies and mechanisms for coordinating international efforts to reduce the volume of drug trafficking, ensure law and order, and, of course, protect public health. International cooperation in this area requires the most coordinated actions possible to reduce the negative social and economic consequences. Integration of national strategies, high-quality and rapid exchange of information, as well as technical cooperation can allow national governments to have a greater impact on international drug markets, and at the same time increase the level of international security in the context of globalisation.

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In addition to the obviously harmful effects of narcotic substances on human physical and mental health, illicit drug trafficking is also associated with other forms of crime, such as money laundering and corruption. New types of synthetic narcotic substances appear on a regular basis, which makes it necessary for international and national police organisations and other specialised bodies to always be aware of current trends and products of the illicit drug market. I.M. Legan (2021) studied the problem of transnational crime and methods of international cooperation in its prevention. He identified the historical and legal prerequisites for its formation and development, characterised the main directions and forms of international cooperation in the prevention and combating of transnational crime, including issues related to illegal drug trafficking.

V.Ya. Konopelsky (2024) concluded in his article that close and coordinated interaction between the specialised state authorities of different countries makes it possible to detain criminal groups in their entirety, and not just individuals, which has a qualitative impact on the inability of organised criminal groups to continue their activities.

I. Tikhonenko & A. Chulkova (2023) analysed various forms of international cooperation in the field of preventing the spread of narcotic substances in the countries of the “Golden Triangle”, such as the activities of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and the UN (United Nations). The study by N.J. Johnson *et al.* (2020) investigated the impact of drug trafficking gangs on drug overdose mortality, including from modern synthetic drugs. The researchers concluded that socio-structural factors have an impact on the number of overdose deaths, such as concentrated poverty or physical environmental factors, including neglected residential infrastructure. In addition, the author’s research focused not only on the prerequisites and factors for the high number of drug-related deaths in the USA (United States of America) in the late 2010s, but also on the analysis of possible strategies to overcome this threat at the national level, but without taking into account the factor of international cooperation. D. Luethi & M.E. Liechti (2020) also wrote in their research that the chemical structure and pharmacological profile of designer drugs are similar to traditional drugs. The number of fatalities was extremely high, as designer drugs are 50-100 times stronger than some classic narcotic substances. C.M. Jones *et al.* (2020) showed that the number of overdoses from synthetic drugs continues to create new problems for public health systems around the world.

The problem of fentanyl emerging on the U.S.-Mexico border was investigated by the authors J. Friedman *et al.* (2022). In particular, the authors concluded that the use of fentanyl mixed with heroin significantly alters the risk environment for people who use drugs. To combat this problem, it was proposed to improve epidemiological surveillance of drug sales offers in Mexico. At the same time, it is necessary to improve the minimum monitoring of overdose cases, improve the treatment of drug addiction, and the healthcare system in general. The researchers focused on the national capabilities and shortcomings of the law enforcement system in Mexico but did not investigate the possibilities of international cooperation to combat the spread of fentanyl.

Taking the above into account, the aim of the conducted study was to review international experience and contemporary responses in the field of drug control to systematise best practices in combating the spread of both traditional and modern synthetic drugs. The objectives of the study included analysing international legal documents in the fight against drug proliferation, identifying methods to combat modern designer drugs, and studying the efforts of the U.S. government in addressing the fentanyl crisis.

Materials and Methods

During the study, historical changes in the development of international legal documents under the League of Nations and the United Nations aegis were analysed using historical and genetic analysis. Among those relevant to the research topic were the International Opium Convention of 1912 (International Opium Convention..., 1912) and its 1925 amendment (International Opium Convention..., 1925), the Geneva Convention for the Suppression of the Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs of 1936 (Convention for the Suppression, 1936), the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961), and the Vienna Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 (United Nations Convention..., 1988).

The use of a systemic approach to the study of social phenomena made it possible to understand the dynamics of the international community’s involvement in combating drug trafficking and drug use. For this purpose, the UN depository of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances (Certified true copies..., n.d.) was also analysed. The classification, harm, and mechanism of action of modern designer drugs were analysed using information from the public commercial network on drug addiction treatment, the American Addiction Centers (American Addiction Centers, 2024). Analysis of the Ministerial Declaration involving more than 70 ministers and government representatives worldwide provided insights into the global measures taken to address the widespread issue of synthetic drug proliferation (Ministerial Declaration on Accelerating..., 2023).

Using a problem analysis method, the measures taken to address the fentanyl crisis in the United States were critically analysed. Specifically, to understand the dynamics of fatal cases in the USA due to fentanyl, statistical information was analysed from the global data and business analytics platform Statista (Number of overdose..., 2024) and media publications from the independent non-profit organisation National Public Radio (U.S. drug deaths..., 2024). The study of the challenges posed by the spread of this narcotic substance to the USA was made possible by analysing a briefing by Dr. and Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution Vanda Felbab-Brown, published on the website of the U.S. Department of State (Felbab-Brown, 2024). The importance and effective impact of intergovernmental cooperation in combating the fentanyl crisis in the USA was confirmed through the analysed record of the meeting between President Joseph Biden and the Chairman of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping (Readout of President..., 2023). Further research relied on the analysis of cooperation within the framework of the newly established working group

between the governments of the USA and China (Office of the Spokesperson, 2024). The annual threat assessment published by the U.S. Intelligence Community in February 2024 was analysed, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of combating the fentanyl crisis in the country (Annual Threat Assessment..., 2024).

The updated U.S. Customs and Border Protection Strategy to Combat Fentanyl and Other Synthetic Drugs from 2023 was also examined (CBP Strategy to..., 2023). Additionally, the results of Operation Plaza Strike were analysed within the framework of the updated Strategy (Operation Plaza Strike..., 2024). Based on the fact sheet on President Biden's actions to secure the borders (Fact sheet: President..., 2024), the disputes within the U.S. Congress between Democrats and Republicans regarding the implementation of reforms to combat fentanyl trafficking in the USA were analysed.

Results

History of the development of international cooperation in combating drug trafficking. The first recognition of the transnational nature of the spread of narcotic substances occurred in 1912 with the adoption of the International Opium Convention in The Hague (1912). At the same time, the states that signed the Convention took on the responsibility to take joint action and protect the population from the negative effects of drug abuse. The Convention was signed by the governments of 12 states, including Germany, the United States, China, France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Persia, Portugal, the Russian Empire and Siam.

In a speech on the centenary of the adoption of the Convention, the President of the International Narcotics Control Board noted that the level of drug use has decreased over the past century. For example, if opium was used by 1.5% of the world's population in 1906, but by 2012, opiate abuse was only 0.25%, and the production of coca and opium leaves is also much less widespread than at the beginning of the 20th century. He also added that the international system for controlling the illicit trafficking and use of narcotic substances is a great example of how multilateralism can influence the solution of global, cross-border problems (Keynote speech by professor..., 2012).

Another international legal treaty was adopted in 1925 in Geneva, also named the International Opium Convention. Its adoption was due to the fact that the abuse and smuggling of opium was still on a large scale, so the provisions of the new Convention provided for a more effective reduction in the production of narcotic substances through stricter control and supervision of international trade than under the provisions of the 1912 Convention (International Opium Convention..., 1925).

However, over time, international crime has also transformed in accordance with the transformation of the international legal framework for combating narcotic substances. Some aspects of the illicit drug trade were no longer covered by the provisions of previous conventions, so in 1936 the Convention for the Suppression of the Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs (1936) was adopted. Important innovations in it were that each of the Contracting Parties to the Convention had to adhere to the principle

of extradition of individuals or those who were involved in the activities of organised criminal groups. If the signatory state did not have a provision for extradition in its national legislation, then the person who committed a crime on the territory of another state should be prosecuted and punished as if the criminal act had been committed in the current state's territory.

An important step in combating drug trafficking under the UN aegis was the creation of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in accordance with the 1946 resolution (Resolution of the Economic and Social Council No. 9(I), 1946) to provide additional support to the UN Economic and Social Council in monitoring compliance with international legal agreements in the field of drug control, to consider changes to existing mechanisms for international drug control. The Commission includes 53 UN member states, and its activities are based on the adoption of relevant resolutions in accordance with the decisions of the meetings held throughout the year (United Nations Commission..., 2024).

As a result, in 1961, the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs was adopted (with amendments in 1972). As stated in the preamble of the document, the parties consider it advisable to continue to care for the well-being of humanity but recognise that the use of narcotic drugs in medicine is irreplaceable, as it alleviates pain and suffering for the sick. At the same time, the parties, recognising the competence of the UN, wished to conclude a new universally accepted convention that would replace all existing treaties on narcotic drugs.

It should be added that by the decision of April 21, 2021, medicinal herbs cannabis and cannabis resin were excluded from the provisions of the aforementioned Convention. This was due to the fact that since the mid-2010s, various UN commissions have been considering scientific assessments and reports on the advisability of using these substances for medical purposes (U.N. cannabis scheduling..., 2022). The latest document adopted under the UN aegis was the Vienna Convention (United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988). An important aspect of this Convention was the parties' awareness that the illicit traffic generated superprofits for transnational criminal corporations, thereby enabling them to infiltrate even governmental administrative mechanisms.

However, in addition to the efforts undertaken within the UN framework, there have been and continue to exist other international organisations engaged in combating drug trafficking. For example, the international police organisation Interpol facilitates the coordination of law enforcement efforts worldwide and provides recommendations. In its modern form, Interpol emerged in 1956 with the adoption of an updated statute (Interpol, 2022a). In 1959, G. Yates, Director of the UN Narcotics Division, addressed the international cycle of study on the illicit traffic of narcotics, and this event marked the beginning of active cooperation between Interpol and several other international organisations to address a wide range of transnational crimes, including drug trafficking (Interpol, 2022b). Thus, over the years, the international community has paid increasing attention to the problem of drug trafficking (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of governments that have signed, ratified, acceded to, formally confirmed or adopted international legal acts

International Opium Convention 1912	12
International Opium Convention 1925	16
Geneva Convention for the Suppression of the Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs	36
Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs	154
Vienna Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances	192

Source: developed by the author based on the UN depository (Certified true copies..., n.d.)

Thus, the international community has been making efforts to qualitatively and effectively combat the illicit drug trade around the world since the beginning of the 20th century. The main mechanism for decision-making, which is recommended for all member states to follow, is the UN. Conventions developed on paper are effective and appropriate mechanisms, but it should be understood that along with the evolution of approaches to combating transnational crime, criminal groups themselves are evolving, necessitating the continuous improvement of international mechanisms of cooperation.

Combating the spread of modern designer drugs.

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, designer or synthetic drugs in the United States are considered to be Cannabinoids, Phenethylamines, Phencyclidines or arylcyclohexamines, Tryptamines, Piperazines, Pipradrols, N-ring systems. These substances act in the same way, or almost the same way as classic narcotics. Their advantage is that they do not fall under most international agreements and conventions, as they are modified in such a way that they cannot be classified as illegal (American Addiction Centers, 2024).

One method of combating the spread of designer drugs was developed at Canada's University of Alberta. David Wishart, a computer scientist and biologist, along with his colleagues, used artificial intelligence and so-called deep learning to create an algorithm that can identify potential designer narcotic substances that don't even exist yet. The algorithm was named DarkNPS and, according to the scientists, can qualitatively help governments and other entities in combating drug trafficking identify new psychoactive substances, a process that could take months without artificial intelligence algorithms. However, this approach also has drawbacks in its application. While the DarkNPS algorithm can make certain accurate predictions, it cannot answer the question of the physiological and psychological effects of narcotic drugs. The algorithm could provide illicit chemists and entire laboratory industries with a "roadmap" for developing new designer narcotic substances. Because of this, the algorithm is not public and is under the control of government agencies in the United States and Germany (Johnson & Undark, 2022).

In July 2023, the Ministerial Declaration on Accelerating and Strengthening the Global Response to Synthetic Drugs was published (Ministerial Declaration on Accelerating..., 2023). The meeting of more than 70 representatives from world governments confirmed the readiness of stakeholders to cooperate and coordinate their actions at the national, regional and international levels to respond as effectively as possible to new drug-related threats. The priority area for efforts was identified as training and technical support to achieve progress on this public health issue.

The parties committed to sharing all necessary information, including technical and best practices, data from the scientific community, and to involve all stakeholders in addressing the problem of modern synthetic narcotic substances, such as international organisations, law enforcement agencies, medical personnel, scientific and academic circles, the private sector, etc.

Later, in September 2023, a fact sheet was published on the website of the U.S. Department of State highlighting global efforts to address the health and security threats posed by synthetic drugs through international cooperation. Specifically, in September 2023, agreements were reached to establish working groups with approximately 900 participants from over 100 countries to identify concrete actions related to combating the spread of synthetic narcotics substances. These include, for example, data collection, analysis and information sharing, interagency cooperation and policy development. Additionally, in 2023, the U.S. Department of State allocated over \$100 million to build capacity and provide assistance to partners to combat synthetic narcotics substances, as well as for prevention and treatment. It was also noted that the U.S. government was the largest donor to various UN anti-drug programs, including the "UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs" (U.S. Efforts to Address..., 2023).

As mentioned above, the UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs plays a significant role in understanding the consequences of and preventing synthetic narcotic substances use. It was established following a series of resolutions in 2018 and 2019 by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, which called on the international community and international organisations such as the WHO (World Health Organization), INCB (International Narcotics Control Board), and others to develop innovative approaches to counter the transnational threat of non-medical use of synthetic narcotics substances. Overall, this service offered a wide range of resources for policymakers, experts, healthcare workers, and others from various specialised institutions within the UN system. Experts from WHO, UPU, WCO, and others were also involved in its development. As of the end of 2023, the toolkit has been used by over 100,000 people from over 200 countries around the world (UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs, 2024).

The Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats was established by the Ministerial Declaration on Accelerating and Strengthening the Global Response to Synthetic Drugs. One of the coalition's initiatives, numbered 1201, was called "Strengthen public-private partnerships and industry cooperation to combat the diversion of precursor chemicals". The organization responsible for achieving positive results in this project was the International Narcotics Control Board, as its activities are directly related

to collaboration with industry, particularly the chemical sector. Consequently, global information exchange about suspicious orders and atypical transactions improved, aiming to prevent the diversion of chemical substances and precursors, including designer precursors. As of 2024, the participating states in this initiative were Canada, Germany, India, Mexico, Switzerland, the USA, and Tanzania (Strengthen public-private partnerships..., 2024).

The implementation of Initiative 1202, named “Synthetic Drugs Detection Project”, was carried out with the involvement of the INCB and the WCO (World Customs Organization). The goal of the initiative was to develop high-quality and effective indicators to aid customs services in their work. The project is still in the preparation phase, but its activities will focus on analysing high-risk cargo (with the help of expert groups at customs), identifying issues in national legislation to improve future detection and control of chemical substances at customs, and strengthening the capacity of stakeholders and authorised government bodies in detecting illegally imported chemicals and precursors through training (Precursor Component..., 2024).

Another initiative numbered 1204, was aimed at reducing the flow of synthetic drugs through postal services by enhancing the capacity of customs services and postal units in postal and cargo centres. In October 2023, representatives from the WTO (World Trade Organization) began implementing this initiative. As of 2024, expert group meetings are being held to develop a regional training course for stakeholders from 25 countries in the Asia-Pacific region (Mail channel component..., 2024).

In response to the growing threat of both the use and trade of synthetic drugs, the European Commission has also stepped up its efforts against designer drugs. For example, in July 2024, a new agency will be launched in the EU (European Union), namely the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction will be transformed into the EU Drugs Agency with a greater role and responsibility. Specifically, the new agency plans to conduct comprehensive monitoring of threats from synthetic drugs and track their development in order to be able to develop appropriate countermeasures in time. The European Commission has also noted that the fight against synthetic drugs must be carried out at the global level, which is why European political structures are also cooperating with governments outside the EU and participating in the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats (Questions and answers..., 2023).

In line with the above, the international community recognised the threat posed by modern designer drugs, leading to the development and implementation of projects aimed at strengthening the resilience of both state and management structures, as well as proposing specific AI-based initiatives to help address this problem.

The fentanyl crisis in the USA. Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 50 times more powerful than heroin and 100 times more powerful than morphine. Like most opioids, fentanyl use leads to addiction, a significant portion of it is produced outside the USA and enters the country through the Mexican border. Because fentanyl is an extremely potent designer drug, even a small dose can be fatal (Fig. 1). This high mortality rate is also because

unscrupulous drug dealers may mix fentanyl with other substances, such as methamphetamine, MDMA, heroin, etc., which the end user may not even realize.

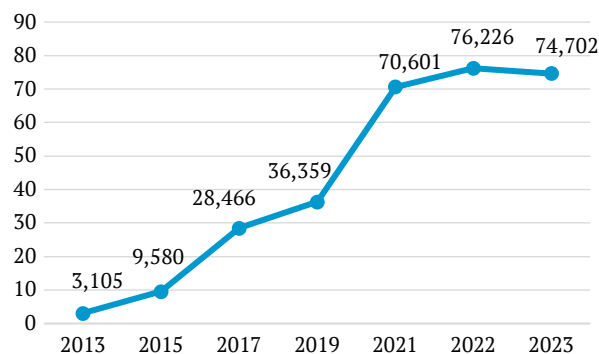


Figure 1. Number of fatalities from fentanyl use in the USA

Source: developed according to Statista data (Number of overdose..., 2024) and National Public Radio (Mann, 2024)

In a briefing on the internal and external aspects of the fentanyl crisis in the USA, it was noted that the two main sponsors of drug influx into the USA were the Mexican cartels Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generación. In addition, precursor chemicals were also coming from China, and only intergovernmental cooperation could help address this issue (Felbab-Brown, 2024).

Since Donald Trump's presidency, a so-called trade war has been ongoing between the USA and China, which continued, albeit to a lesser extent, during Joseph Biden's presidency. However, the year 2023 marked a significant shift in quality decisions made between the two governments. During a high-level meeting in November 2023, President Biden met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. The leaders discussed a range of important issues and, importantly, focused on the problem of illegal drug manufacturing and trafficking, including synthetic drugs like fentanyl. They also reached an agreement to establish a working group for continuous communication between relevant agencies on drug-related issues. President Biden stated that this would help strengthen control and combat the growing threat of synthetic drugs and reduce the flow of precursor chemicals into the hands of drug cartels (Read-out of President..., 2023).

As early as February 2024, the United States and China initiated cooperation within the framework of a joint working group on combating narcotics. The importance of the fentanyl crisis for the U.S. government is further emphasised by the involvement of a wide range of relevant government agencies that joined the working group. These include representatives from the Department of State, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Department of the Treasury, and White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. The need for deep cooperation lay in developing appropriate policies, coordinating between law enforcement and other agencies, exchanging up-to-date information, technical expertise, and best practices that could help address the synthetic narcotic drug problem not only for the USA and China but also the world (Office of the Spokesperson, 2024).

According to the annual threat assessment published by the U.S. Intelligence Community, transnational criminal organizations continued to impact the country's healthcare system by exploiting weaknesses in the international financial system, which worsens security in the USA and among partner nations. Despite record seizures of illicit fentanyl in the USA in 2023, the majority of the over 100,000 overdose deaths in the USA were attributed to fentanyl supplied by Mexican cartels. A primary challenge for government efforts to combat the production and trafficking of synthetic narcotic drugs was identified as the fragmentation of production, with some manufacturing occurring within the USA, where final stages such as pill pressing or packaging for delivery to end consumers were conducted (Annual Threat Assessment..., 2024).

In 2023, along with the increasing number of fentanyl-related fatalities year after year, U.S. Customs and Border Protection developed an updated strategy to combat fentanyl and other synthetic narcotic drugs. Its main strategic goals included promoting active collaboration and information sharing to address numerous networks of illegal synthetic drugs; timely acquisition of relevant information; and conducting coordinated operations. The fentanyl and other synthetic drug threat bulletin also noted that over 27,000 pounds of fentanyl were seized in 2023, nearly double the amount seized in 2022 (CBP Strategy to Combat..., 2023).

According to the updated Strategy, in 2024, U.S. Customs and Border Protection initiated an operation called Operation Plaza Strike. Geographically, the efforts of the USA agency were focused on a natural chokepoint for transporting fentanyl into the USA, specifically in Nogales, Arizona, which borders the U.S.-Mexico border. As a result, from the operation's inception in February 2024, a total of 222,000 pounds of narcotics were seized, including over 8,000 pounds of fentanyl (Operation Plaza Strike..., 2024).

Despite positive developments in addressing the fentanyl crisis in the USA, there were also problems with funding law enforcement efforts. For example, in March 2024, high-tech scanners capable of detecting fentanyl smuggling at border crossings were not in use because the U.S. Congress had not allocated funds for their installation. In Nogales, the epicentre of Operation Plaza Strike, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers continued to rely on their intuition rather than advanced technology when assessing whether a particular vehicle raised suspicions. Such delays in making crucial decisions, especially regarding one of the most dangerous synthetic drugs, can significantly undermine effective measures to combat fentanyl smuggling (Strickler *et al.*, 2024).

President Joe Biden shared a similar view. In a press release on the White House website regarding new government actions to ensure border security, it was emphasised that in 2024, a historic bipartisan agreement was reached between Democrats and Republicans to implement crucial reforms to immigration legislation, which could address a range of issues, including increasing investments for detecting fentanyl smuggling. However, it was noted that Republicans in Congress prioritised party politics over national security, voting twice against these transformative reforms. Nonetheless, despite this, fentanyl seizures at the border continued, and over the past two years, more

fentanyl and precursor substances were confiscated than in the previous five years combined. Cooperation with the Mexican government also continued, allowing for the extradition of one of the most influential fentanyl traffickers, Néstor Isidro Pérez Salas (Fact sheet: President..., 2024).

Therefore, addressing the fentanyl crisis in the USA requires a comprehensive national effort and cooperation with international partners. The influx of synthetic narcotic drugs and their precursors from Mexico and the rising number of fentanyl-related deaths have prompted U.S. law enforcement agencies to intensify their efforts to combat this issue. However, the differing perspectives of Democrats and Republicans on the fentanyl crisis have hindered the effectiveness of countermeasures against transnational criminal organisations. Meanwhile, in 2023 and early 2024, there was a notable improvement in cooperation between the U.S. and Chinese governments regarding drug trafficking issues.

Discussion

In examining the fight against drug trafficking, L. Giomoni *et al.* (2020) emphasised the fluidity international environment that influenced the adoption of new, improved conventions under the UN aegis. The study's findings also reflect this trend, such as the provisions on extradition in the Geneva Convention for the Suppression of the Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs. J. Li & C.X.G. Wei (2022) address an underexplored yet important topic in their study: the pressure exerted by the League of Nations on the Chinese government, which significantly contributed to the emergence of a new opium war in China.

According to the study findings, opium use in 1906 was around 1.5% of the world's population, while at the beginning of the 21st century, it had decreased to 0.25%, considering the slight difference in population size. W.B. McAllister (2020) confirmed that the per capita opium supply of the late 19th century would never be exceeded again. The adoption of the first anti-drug convention in 1912 aimed at taking joint action to protect the population from the harmful effects of drugs, while the supplement to the 1925 convention focused more on controlling international trade. F.X. Dudoet (2023) added that international control in the new conventions helped to monitor exports and imports, which helped to prevent illegal substances from entering legal markets. The 1936 Convention further established the rule that offenders in the field of drug trafficking could be punished as if the crime had been committed on the territory of the current state of residence, even if the act was committed outside the country. R. Lewer (2022) confirmed the significance of this Convention, as it was the first to deal specifically with the drug trade, and also provided for the prosecution and punishment of trafficking.

The next stage in the development of international cooperation in combating drug trafficking can be considered the development of international legislation under the UN aegis. Almost immediately, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs was created, and later the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, which replaced all previous conventions with its provisions. The unifying function, as the basis of this Convention, was also confirmed by J. Collins (2020). The authors Gholiagha *et al.* (2020) drew attention to an aspect not analysed in the research

results, saying that the drug control regime after the creation of the UN with its agreed-upon norms provoked frequent legal collisions in the interpretation of certain norms of international legal documents. The study also noted that medicinal herbs such as cannabis and cannabis resin were eventually excluded from the provisions of the aforementioned Convention, as the benefits of these narcotic substances in medicine were proven. For the Caribbean Community countries, the issue of cannabis use and prohibition has been a contentious one for many decades, and a large number of citizens have lobbied for legal and social reform around it, although some religious and medical communities have opposed it.

In addition to international activities in the areas of adopting conventions and other international agreements, the international police organisation Interpol was also involved in combating drug trafficking. C.S. Ogbodo (2023) also noted in his research the words of the Director of the UN Narcotics Division, G. Yates, about the beginning of Interpol's cooperation with other international organisations to combat drug trafficking, and also added the stages of further development of police cooperation between countries of the world. Z. Zheng & S. Ma (2024) also noted the significant role of international police cooperation as an element of the rule of law in foreign relations.

Artificial intelligence and deep learning methods could play a positive role in the detection of designer drugs, which is already being actively pursued by researchers at the University of Alberta in Canada. In addition to detecting drugs, artificial intelligence can also be used to discover new narcotic drugs due to its high efficiency, accuracy, and speed (Blanco-González *et al.*, 2023). At the same time, the use of artificial intelligence is not new to research in the field of computational molecular design (Brown *et al.*, 2020).

The UN-developed tool, the "UN Synthetic Drugs Toolkit", played an important role in both countering the use and trafficking of new designer drugs. J.N.A. Tetey *et al.* (2022) also confirmed in their work that this tool played a significant role in countering the use and trafficking of designer drugs, as it was positioned as a set of interdisciplinary resources developed by the best UN experts. However, J. Martin *et al.* (2020) noted the growing popularity of cryptocurrencies and the sale of narcotic substances through the Darkweb. This issue was not researched, but national and international efforts should also focus on new blockchain systems as a means of narcotic substance distribution.

In their study of drug trafficking in Pakistan, J. Jamshed & F. Bakhsh (2023) concluded that strong international cooperation ensures effective combat against the illegal use and trade of drugs in the country. This is confirmed by the analysed activities of the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats, as more than 140 world states and the EU had joined the initiative as of 2024.

The study determined that the synthetic drug fentanyl is dozens of times stronger than other, classic types of drugs, such as heroin or morphine. A survey conducted by researchers from USA scientific institutions, P. Fernandez *et al.* (2023), showed that awareness among the population aged 18 to 35 is gradually increasing, but understanding of the risks remains low. The growing number of

fatalities in the USA confirms the authors' thesis (Fig. 1). In his work, J. Johnson (2024) stressed the importance of restoring bilateral relations between the U.S. and Chinese governments on issues of combating the global and illegal production and trafficking of narcotic substances and precursor chemicals used to make fentanyl. The results of the study also indicate the importance of renewing the dialogue between the governments of the two most influential states in the world, since only multilateral cooperation can affect the further functioning of transnational criminal groups. The problem of supplying fentanyl precursor chemicals from China to cartels in Mexico was also noted by J.K. Cogan (2024).

The analysis of scientific contributions allowed for a comparison of the study's results with the theses of other authors. In particular, the growth of international cooperation through the signing of various conventions was confirmed, as well as the importance of intergovernmental collaboration in overcoming the issue of drug trafficking.

Conclusions

During the study, the main international legal documents related to preventing the spread, sale, and use of narcotic substances were analysed. These include, in particular, the International Opium Convention of 1912 and its Supplement of 1925, the Geneva Convention for the Suppression of the Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs of 1936, the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, and the Vienna Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988. In addition, Resolution 9 (I) of 1946 established the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, and since 1959 there has been active cooperation between the international police organisation Interpol and other international organisations to combat drug trafficking.

It was analysed that, under the UN aegis, the "UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs" was created to combat the spread of modern designer drugs, providing a wide range of resources for policymakers, experts, healthcare workers, and others. As of the end of 2023, it has been used by more than 100,000 people from over 200 countries worldwide.

It was noted that the U.S. government is making significant efforts to combat drug trafficking. In particular, the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drugs Threats has been created, with over 140 countries around the world joining. As part of this initiative, a number of projects are being implemented to strengthen the accountability of chemical companies, enhance the resilience of postal and border services, improve national laws, and more.

It was found that a European Union Drugs Agency will be established in 2024. This decision was made to restructure and reform the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and to empower the new agency with greater powers and responsibilities to more effectively respond to drug threats within the EU.

It was noted that to combat the fentanyl crisis in the USA, a working group was established in February 2024 for continuous communication between relevant drug control agencies between the U.S. and Chinese governments. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection adopted an updated fentanyl strategy. As part of this strategy, Operation Plaza Strike was conducted and over 8,000 pounds of fentanyl were seized in a short period of time.

It was also analysed that effective implementation of reforms and legislative initiatives was hampered by disputes within the U.S. Congress between Democrats and Republicans. The limitations of the conducted research include the active phase of the U.S. government's fight against the fentanyl crisis, particularly the initial stage of implementing the new strategy by Customs and Border Protection, which did not allow for the establishment of all the advantages and disadvantages of the strategy. Future research on the topic could include the activities

of other international organisations in combating drug trafficking, in addition to the UN. The work of the EU Drugs Agency, which will begin in July 2024, may also be important for the research.

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None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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