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From Operational Disruption to Strategic Effect

Achieving Strategic Success in Countering Narcotics and Transnational Organized Crime

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About This Paper

This paper is written for U.S. Department of War (DOW) senior leaders and policymakers engaged in or overseeing counternarcotics and counter–transnational organized crime missions.[1] Its purpose is to help this audience consider whether and how DOW's three principal instruments—interdiction, counter-threat finance, and security cooperation—contribute to broader U.S. government strategic objectives in this space.

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From Operational Disruption to Strategic Effect: Achieving Strategic Success in Countering Narcotics and Transnational Organized Crime

This paper is intended for U.S. Department of War (DOW) leaders, policymakers, and other professionals engaged in or overseeing government counternarcotics (CN) and counter–transnational organized crime (CTOC) missions.[2] Its purpose is to help them think about whether and how DOW's three principal instruments—interdiction, counter-threat finance (CTF), and security cooperation—contribute to broader U.S. government strategic objectives in countering drug-linked organized crime. The CN/CTOC field spans a large and diverse body of research, from public health and criminology to development economics and military effectiveness. This paper engages that literature selectively rather than comprehensively, drawing on it to clarify what DOW instruments can reasonably accomplish, where they fall short, and under what conditions they are most likely to produce strategic effects.

U.S. government CN/CTOC missions have not historically been military missions in any primary sense. The broader U.S. government strategic objectives they are meant to serve—reducing drug-related harms, dismantling criminal networks, and limiting the violence, corruption, and institutional erosion associated with trafficking—originate in public health, law enforcement, and civilian foreign policy more than in warfighting. Nonetheless, the 2026 National Defense Strategy elevates homeland defense as DOW's top priority, including a call to counter narco-terrorists in the Western Hemisphere, and Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and Specially Designated Global Terrorist designations expanded the authorities and policy rationale for using military, intelligence, and counterterrorism tools against these actors (DOW, 2026; Berg et al., 2025; Roy, 2026; Mehta, 2026).

These developments increase DOW's role in CN/CTOC, but they also highlight a basic strategic problem: **What exactly counts as success, and how—if at all—do DOW instruments contribute to it?** We suggest that answering that question requires separating three models of strategic success in CN/CTOC that are often not clearly distinguished in policy and performance assessments. In a *public health* model, success means reducing illicit drug use, addiction, and overdose deaths. In a *law enforcement* model, success means disrupting and durably dismantling the criminal networks that produce, move, and distribute drugs. In a *security and stability* model, success means reducing violence, corruption, and institutional erosion associated with transnational organized crime activity in affected

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states and regions. Each model implies different causal logics, different types of evidence, and different expectations of what DOW can reasonably accomplish. The same operational result—a seizure, an arrest, a financial designation, a trained partner unit—can be meaningful in one model and irrelevant or even counterproductive in another.

This distinction matters because DOW's instruments do not contribute equally or directly to all three models of success. They are most directly connected to the law enforcement and security and stability models, although the strength of the evidence varies by instrument and outcome. Their connection to public health outcomes is more indirect: Disrupting supply may contribute to reducing drug-related harms, but the ultimate effects of such disruption depend heavily on factors largely beyond DOW's control.

Three recurring problems limit the strategic effects of these instruments or complicate assessments of their effectiveness. First, each instrument has significant limitations when pursued as a separate line of effort. Interdiction is designed to disrupt illicit transactions, CTF is designed to target the financial mechanisms that sustain and regenerate criminal operations, and security cooperation is designed to strengthen partner institutions' abilities to sustain pressure and consolidate gains. When these tools are not synchronized against common networks, their effects may be temporary or fragile: Criminal networks can replace lost shipments, routes, personnel, and financial channels, while improvements in partner capacity may prove vulnerable to criminal co-optation.

Second, assessments may judge an instrument against a model of success to which it can contribute only indirectly or under demanding conditions. A seizure may disrupt a shipment or generate intelligence without reducing drug use or overdose deaths in the United States. Similarly, strengthening a partner unit may improve institutional capacity without dismantling the criminal network it confronts. Whether such results constitute strategic progress therefore depends on the objective being pursued and on evidence that connects the immediate result to that objective.

Third, even when an instrument is plausibly connected to the relevant model, assessments often treat operational outputs as evidence of strategic success. Seizure volumes, financial designations, and numbers of personnel trained demonstrate activity but do not by themselves show that (1) criminal networks were durably dismantled, (2) violence and corruption declined, or (3) drug-related harms were reduced. Meaningful measurement requires specifying the relevant model of success and tracing the steps between DOW activities, intermediate effects, and strategic outcomes.

In this paper, we argue that the most plausible way that DOW activity can contribute to broader U.S. government strategic objectives lies in integrating these instruments as a coherent portfolio against common threat networks. Integration does not guarantee success but offers the most plausible way to make DOW contributions meaningful. Such an approach recognizes instead that DOW's distinctive value lies in capabilities that other agencies cannot replicate at scale—detection and monitoring, intelligence and analysis, operational reach, and partner capacity-building—and that these capabilities are strategically meaningful only when combined, sustained, and aligned with a shared definition of success. This argument applies most directly to the law enforcement and security and stability models. DOW's contribution in terms of the public health model is more attenuated and most contingent on demand-side interventions that DOW does not control.

Below, we outline the three models of strategic success that shape CN/CTOC policy and against which efforts are evaluated, explicitly or implicitly. We then highlight some of the evidence on the

effectiveness of DOW's principal CN/CTOC instruments, including interdiction, CTF, and security cooperation, against those models. Finally, we articulate what interdiction, CTF, and security cooperation each contribute, where each falls short, and opportunities to better align these tools through improved measurement, integration, and interagency coordination.[3]

Models of Success in the CN/CTOC Missions

Any assessment of whether DOW instruments are working requires clarity about what success means. In the CN/CTOC space, the U.S. government has historically pursued, explicitly or implicitly, **three models of strategic success: public health, law enforcement, and security and stability**.[4] These models overlap in practice, but they imply different causal logics, different standards of evidence, and different expectations of what DOW can reasonably accomplish.

Why the Distinction Matters

The distinction between the three models has practical consequences for policymakers. Evaluating DOW instruments against only one model produces misleading assessments, overstating progress in some areas and missing opportunities to shift effort. A seizure may look meaningful under a law enforcement model even if it has no measurable public health effect. Attacking organizations may disrupt supply chains and produce temporary public health effects but can also fragment cartels into smaller, more adaptive, and sometimes more violent entities. A campaign that strengthens partner control over territory may look successful under a security and stability model even if trafficking is displaced outside that territory rather than durably reduced. A supply disruption that affects overdose mortality may matter under a public health model even if no major network is dismantled. Plan Colombia, the Mérida Initiative, and U.S. CN operations in Afghanistan have each been characterized as both successes and failures by credible government and oversight sources, depending on which strategic ends were used to evaluate them (Gerstein et al., 2022; U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2018; GAO, 2010; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], 2018; Schultze-Kraft and Befani, 2014).

Debates about how and whether DOW tools are effective often obscure the more basic question of **which model of success is being used to evaluate those tools**. In this paper, we therefore consider interdiction, CTF, and security cooperation against these three broader U.S. government strategic

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[3] This paper was written with the aid of large language models (LLMs). In particular, we used RAND's version of Claude Opus 4-6-v1 and Sonnet 4-6 in the following ways: (1) to revise or synthesize language into clearer and/or shorter passages and better emphasize key claims, (2) to suggest alternative ways of structuring the flow, (3) to suggest title and section heading options, and (4) to generate a first draft of the references. All LLM output was edited and verified by the authors.

[4] These models are reflected, among other sources, in DOW's 2019 *Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks*, which emphasizes degrading and dismantling illicit threat networks, reducing drug flows into U.S. markets, and strengthening partner efforts (Department of Defense [DoD], 2019); in Executive Order 14157 (2025), which frames cartels as threats to the safety of the American people, U.S. security, and regional stability; and in the *Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 Budget Estimates, Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities*, which links DOW's CN mission both to drug poisoning deaths in the United States and to the security and stability of U.S. partners in the Western Hemisphere (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense [Comptroller], 2025).

objectives. Doing so also helps explain why the same tool can produce visible operational gains while still falling short strategically.

Public Health

In a public health model, CN/CTOC efforts succeed to the extent that they reduce illicit drug use, poisoning, and overdose deaths in the United States.[5] This objective is not usually framed as a military one, but it is implicit in DOW's counterdrug mission and explicit in recent budget language linking cartel activity to "drug poisoning" deaths (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense [Comptroller], 2025). The logic is supply-side: If fewer drugs cross the border, fewer Americans die. In this model, supply-side actions succeed primarily insofar as they affect availability, price, purity, or market stability in ways that reduce harm.

This is the most demanding model for DOW instruments. DOW does not control the main drivers of drug mortality, and any contribution it makes is indirect and mediated by many other factors. That does not make the objective irrelevant but does make DOW's contribution more challenging to demonstrate.

Law Enforcement

In a law enforcement model, success means disrupting, degrading, and durably dismantling the criminal organizations responsible for trafficking. This model is the most explicit in DOW doctrine. Two of the three DOW-specific strategic objectives identified in 2019 align with this model of success: "disrupt and degrade threat networks" and "reduce drug trafficking and criminal activity" (GAO, 2024, p. 30). Several budget and designation authorities reinforce this focus on the criminal organizations and networks rather than only the commodities they move (DoD, 2019; GAO, 2024; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense [Comptroller], 2025). The CTOC mission codified in U.S. Code, Title 10, Section 284, and DoD Instruction 3000.14 (2020) reflects this model of success as well.

In this view, success consists of **organization- or network-level effects** and depends on whether organizations lose the capacity to operate, regenerate, and corrupt institutions and sustain trafficking. It is also the model most closely aligned with DOW's counter-network and counter-threat network concepts.

Security and Stability

In a security and stability model, success means reducing the violence, corruption, and institutional erosion associated with trafficking and transnational organized crime, especially in partner nations whose weakness creates broader risks for the United States. The 2019 framework

[5] Public health practitioners and scholars often use the term *public health* more narrowly to refer to demand-side interventions (treatment, harm reduction, prevention). In this paper, we use the label as shorthand for the strategic objective of reducing U.S. drug-related mortality and morbidity, regardless of which supply- or demand-side tools are employed to achieve it.

explicitly states this goal: DOW "builds international partnerships to prevent transnational threat networks from undermining sovereign governments, decreasing regional stability, and threatening the United States" (DoD, 2019). Post-2025 policy language strongly reflects this model as well, emphasizing cartel threats not only to U.S. security but also to the stability of the Western Hemisphere and the security of partner states.

This vision of success is broader than the law enforcement one and less attributable to any single instrument (Willis et al., 2010, p. 24; Rabasa et al., 2017, pp. 31, 34, 181, 187, and 188). It treats narcotics and transnational organized crime not only as a trafficking problem but also as a challenge to state authority, institutional integrity, and regional order. It is therefore the model under which security cooperation appears to be most strategically relevant but also the hardest model to assess rigorously because these outcomes depend on conditions far beyond DOW's control.

Operational Environment

The effectiveness of DOW's CN/CTOC tools depends on the operational characteristics of the environment in which they are deployed. Research suggests that two factors consistently shape whether operational gains translate into lasting strategic effects: (1) how quickly criminal networks adapt and rebuild and (2) whether partner nations have the capacity to sustain progress over time. These factors provide important context for understanding the effects of interdiction, CTF, and security cooperation.

Adversary Adaptation, Displacement, and Regeneration

Research consistently finds that when CN/CTOC approaches intensify, traffickers alter routes, fragment shipments, shift jurisdictions, corrupt new officials, substitute methods of transport, and reconstitute organizations after leaders or nodes are removed. In interdiction, these dynamics are captured by the well-known "balloon effect" (Rouse and Arce, 2006) and "cockroach effect" (Bagley, 2013; Magliocca et al., 2019). Pressure in one production area or transit corridor displaces cultivation, trafficking routes, or shipment methods: For example, research on Plan Colombia, the Central Andes, and maritime trafficking shows that enforcement can shift activity geographically and organizationally without reducing overall trafficking flows (Bagley and Rosen, 2015; McSweeney, 2020). Similarly, organizations facing sanctions, asset freezes, or pressure on traditional financial channels can migrate toward trade-based laundering, informal transfer systems, new intermediaries, or cryptocurrencies rather than lose access to resources altogether (Rosenberg et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2023; Dion-Schwarz, Manheim, and Johnston, 2019; GAO, 2021).

Adaptation also occurs organizationally. Research on leadership targeting shows that removing key individuals often disrupts networks but does not necessarily dismantle them. Successor organizations emerge, markets fragment, and violence can increase as groups compete for control, especially when underlying revenue streams remain intact (Phillips, 2015; Dickenson, 2014). As a result, operational success is often temporary because the adversary is adaptive, networked, and sustained by durable market incentives.

Partner-Nation Capabilities

The ability to translate operational successes into strategic effects also lies in the conditions of partner nations. DOW can help detect and monitor trafficking, enable partner operations, contribute to financial analysis, and build partner capabilities. But whether those efforts translate into durable law enforcement or security and stability outcomes depends on state institutions that are often weak, politically constrained, or penetrated by the very networks they are meant to counter.

This problem is evident in all three DOW instruments. Interdiction depends on a functioning endgame of boarding, arrest, prosecution, and follow-on enforcement that DOW usually does not control. CTF depends even more heavily on legal, regulatory, investigative, and judicial institutions that are capable of acting on financial intelligence and insulated enough from corruption to do so credibly (Johnston et al., 2023; SIGAR, 2018; Levi, Reuter, and Halliday, 2018). Security cooperation, for its part, is only as durable as the partner institutions are able to absorb, sustain, and put to good use the capabilities provided. Yet GAO has repeatedly found that DOW train-and-equip efforts often lack absorptive-capacity analysis, sustainment planning, and measurable outcome objectives, and partner forces in several transit-zone countries have been unable to use U.S.-provided assets because of fuel, maintenance, or staffing shortfalls (GAO, 2008a; GAO, 2023).

Corruption intensifies all of these constraints. Illicit trafficking proceeds can be used to penetrate police, military, customs, port authorities, financial regulators, and judicial institutions, blunting the effects of both operational and financial pressures. Where partner institutions are compromised, capacity-building can be misused, intelligence can leak, prosecutions can fail, and enforcement pressure can produce only temporary or selective effects (Correa-Cabrera, 2022; Hunt, 2019; U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, 2022).

Translating Operational Success into Strategic Effects

What does the evidence suggest about the effectiveness of DOW's principal CN/CTOC tools? Before reviewing that evidence, we address a common crosscutting weakness in terms of how success is measured.

Metrics Misalignment

The most commonly used indicators of effectiveness in CN/CTOC are measures of activity or outputs rather than measures of outcomes or strategic effect (GAO, 2024). In interdiction, such measures include the number and volume of seizures, interdiction rates, the number of arrests, and leader removals. In CTF, they include, among others, the number or value of financial networks disrupted, the volume of cash assets seized, and intelligence indicators of reduced operational funding. In security cooperation, they include, for example, the numbers of personnel trained, equipment delivered, exercises conducted, and partner units established. These indicators are not meaningless. They can show that an instrument is being used and that it is producing immediate outputs. But they say much less about whether those outputs are translated into outcomes that are advancing broader U.S. government strategic objectives.

This problem is well established in the literature. Seizure volumes lack a reliable denominator: Without knowing total trafficking volume, increasing seizures may reflect more trafficking as easily as better enforcement (McSweeney, 2020; Magliocca et al., 2019; Rabasa et al., 2017). Financial metrics have a similar weakness. Cash asset seizures or reduced operational funding in a criminal network indicate that activity against a network occurred but not whether the network's overall operating capacity has been durably reduced or merely rerouted through other channels (Johnston et al., 2023; Levi and Reuter, 2006; Levi, Reuter, and Halliday, 2018; Rosenberg et al., 2016). Security cooperation metrics are likewise not informative strategically. The number of training events, transferred equipment, or newly established partner units reveals little about whether partner institutions can sustain performance, resist corruption, or convert new capabilities into durable constraints on illicit trafficking (GAO, 2023; GAO, 2024; Marquis et al., 2016). Data on institutional capacity-building activities remain particularly sparse, limiting the understanding of the landscape of such activities and whether they produce measurable improvements in partner institutional performance over time (Watts et al., 2023; Watts, Noyes, and Tarini, 2022).

The result is a persistent tendency to infer strategic progress from what are, at most, proximate operational indicators. This matters because the three models of success identified above require different evidence. A law enforcement model demands proof of durable network degradation, not simply disruption. A public health model requires evidence that enforcement actions contribute to the reduction of drug-related harms. A security and stability model requires evidence of lasting reductions in violence, corruption, or institutional erosion. Existing metrics are not well aligned to all three, as Table 1 summarizes. The most common success indicators can register apparent progress even as strategic conditions deteriorate. Seizure volumes can rise while violence escalates and trafficking adapts through new routes. The number of personnel trained can increase while institutional corruption deepens. In each case, the indicator captures real activity while a worsening outcome goes undetected.

Table 1. What Common CN/CTOC Metrics Can and Cannot Show About Broader U.S. Strategic Objectives

Instrument	Commonly Used Metrics	What the Metrics Can Show	What the Metrics Cannot Show
Interdiction	• Volume or value of seizures • Interdiction rates • Number of arrests, removals • Drug price or purity	Whether enforcement is detecting and disrupting trafficking events in the near term	Whether • trafficking is durably reduced • networks are dismantled • public health harms decline • violence or governance outcomes improve
CTF	• Number or value of financial networks disrupted • Volume of cash assets seized • Reduced operational funding	Whether financial enforcement actions are being taken against identified nodes or facilitators	Whether targeted networks are • durably deprived of resources • unable to regenerate • less able to corrupt institutions • less violent
Security cooperation	Numbers of • personnel trained • equipment delivered • exercises • vetted units • volume of intelligence-sharing outputs	Whether capacity-building activities occurred and produced some immediate operational outputs	Whether partner institutions • sustain capability • resist corruption • improve governance • impose durable constraints on illicit trafficking networks

These metric challenges are not unique to CN/CTOC but reflect broader systematic problems in assessing the effectiveness of various DOW instruments relevant to campaigning activities (i.e., exercises, force presence). Comprehensive analysis of overseas activities confirms that most commonly used indicators measure activity or outputs rather than strategic outcomes and that capability improvements are particularly difficult to measure over time (Watts et al., 2023; Watts, Noyes, and Tarini, 2022). Even where the United States has devoted substantial resources to assessment frameworks, evaluation remains hampered by poor data quality, inconsistent collection methods, and a lack of systematic outcome tracking (Watts et al., 2023).

These limitations underscore why attributing strategic effects to specific instruments remains so difficult. And such limitations are a vital context when drawing inferences from evidence of the effectiveness of interdiction, CTF, and security cooperation, to which we now turn.

Interdiction

Interdiction is DOW's most visible CN/CTOC instrument and the one most closely tied to the department's established role in detection, monitoring, and operational support to law enforcement (DoD, 2019). Its comparative advantage is straightforward: tracking and helping disrupt trafficking movements across domains and distances that civilian agencies cannot cover at comparable scale. Interdiction is therefore best understood as a tool for disrupting trafficking transactions: raising risks and costs, forcing traffickers to alter routes and methods, and removing shipments or nodes from circulation.

The evidence shows that DOW-supported interdiction can produce these kinds of operational results. In Colombia, U.S.-supported interdiction contributed to large seizure volumes and, as part of a broader CN effort, pressure on criminal organizations, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC; Gerstein et al., 2022). Across the Western Hemisphere, interdiction programs have generated large seizure volumes and repeated disruptions to trafficking activity (McSweeney, 2020). But even operationally, these results are less decisive than the headlines imply. In fiscal year 2018, for example, authorities intercepted only about 6 percent of known cocaine trafficking events in the Western Hemisphere transit zone, and seizure volumes alone cannot show whether enforcement is constraining the market or simply reacting to increased trafficking (McSweeney, 2020; Rabasa et al., 2017).

This gap between operational activity and strategic effect is most apparent when interdiction is judged against broader U.S. government strategic objectives. Under a **public health model**, the record is weak and sometimes counterproductive. Sustained enforcement against crop-based drug markets did not prevent illicit drugs from becoming cheaper, purer, and more available in the United States over time (Rosen and Bagley, 2017), and transit-zone interdiction has shown little observable effect on U.S. cocaine prices (McSweeney, 2020). Research on synthetic opioids suggests that supply shocks can, in some cases, reduce overdose deaths (Vangelov et al., 2026), but whether interdiction can reliably generate shocks of that kind remains unclear. Some evidence suggests the opposite dynamic: Enforcement-driven instability can increase overdose risk by prompting substitution toward more-dangerous products (Beletsky and Davis, 2017).

Under a **law enforcement model**, interdiction contributes more directly, but its effects remain limited by adaptation and regeneration. It can disrupt shipments, generate intelligence, and support action against trafficking networks. What it does not reliably do is prevent those networks from rerouting, fragmenting, and reconstituting under continued demand and strong profit incentives (Rouse and Arce, 2006; Bagley, 2013; Magliocca et al., 2019). Even where interdiction helps dismantle specific organizations, it rarely suppresses the market conditions that produce successors.

In a **security and stability model**, the record is mixed. Plan Colombia coincided with some security gains even though it did not durably suppress coca production or trafficking (Gerstein et al., 2022; Bagley and Rosen, 2015). In Mexico, by contrast, CN pressure has been associated with fragmentation, route displacement, and escalating violence, suggesting that disruption can worsen instability when it outpaces institutional control (Dell, 2015; Felbab-Brown, 2019; Felbab-Brown, 2025; Hunt, 2019). Interdiction can therefore support stability in some contexts while undermining it in others.

The literature does identify conditions under which interdiction appears to be most useful. It performs best when traffickers face constrained operating environments, credible consequences, and concentrated enforcement, as in the Peru-Colombia Air Bridge Denial Program (Anthony, 2004). It is also more effective when integrated with intelligence, law enforcement, and partner operations rather than treated as a stand-alone removal function (Bañares Martín and Prieto, 2024; Gerstein et al., 2022). But these conditions are demanding, especially in expansive maritime and overland environments, where traffickers have multiple alternatives.

Interdiction is best at imposing transactional friction on trafficking networks. By itself, however, it does not address the financial mechanisms that allow organizations to regenerate or the institutional conditions needed to sustain gains over time. Those are the domains of CTF and security cooperation.

Counter-Threat Finance

If interdiction is designed to disrupt trafficking transactions, CTF is designed to target the financial architecture that allows trafficking organizations to conduct business, survive disruptions, and regenerate. In the CN/CTOC context, that means identifying and disrupting the revenue streams, money laundering mechanisms, facilitators, and financial networks that enable criminal groups to pay operatives, corrupt officials, move value across borders, and rebuild after suffering enforcement losses. This is the instrument most directly aimed at the problem that interdiction leaves unresolved: an organization's ability to recover, regenerate, and continue operating.

In CTF, DOW has traditionally played a support role rather than a leading one. The U.S. Department of the Treasury, Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN), U.S. Department of State, and U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) control most of the core authorities for sanctions, financial regulation, intelligence-sharing, and prosecution. DOW's contribution has been primarily analytic and operational: network mapping; the gathering, sharing, and analysis of intelligence; campaign planning; and, in some cases, specialized threat finance capabilities developed primarily in the counterterrorism context (DoD Directive 5205.14, 2017; Joint Publication 3-25, 2016; Johnston et al., 2023). In practice, that operational contribution has included embedding specialized threat finance cells within interagency task forces to analyze and act on financial intelligence, supporting partner-nation financial enforcement capacity, and tracking the value transfer mechanisms that criminal networks use—including trade-based arrangements and, increasingly, cryptocurrency transactions. The 2025–2026 designations of certain cartels as FTOs may create more room to integrate these capabilities into CN/CTOC campaigns, but the institutional architecture remains fundamentally interagency, with DOW in a support role.

The case for CTF is therefore strongest at the conceptual level. Research on cartel leadership targeting and CN enforcement repeatedly shows that organizations regenerate when underlying financial flows remain intact. Groups fragment, successors emerge, corruption persists, and violence can rise as new actors compete for control (Phillips, 2015; Dickenson, 2014; Hunt, 2019). CTF is designed to interrupt that cycle by identifying and targeting the resources that make regeneration possible. In principle, CTF has an especially important role in a **law enforcement model** of success, in

which the question is not just whether networks are disrupted but whether they are durably dismantled.

The empirical record for CTF, however, is much thinner than that for interdiction. The open-source literature provides relatively little systematic evidence on the operational effects of CTF in the CN/CTOC context, in part because financial outcomes are harder to observe and in part because declassified data are sparse (Johnston et al., 2023; GAO, 2020; GAO, 2025a). Publicly available evidence suggests that financial targeting can support investigations, expose facilitators, and help structure multiagency campaigns. DOW-integrated threat finance cells in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated that specialized analytic and operational teams can act quickly on financial intelligence and contribute to broader campaigns against violent nonstate actors (Bahney et al., 2010; Blum and Conway, 2015; Johnston et al., 2023).

However, RAND research on violent nonstate actor financing cautions that no single set of CTF tools works reliably across all nonstate armed group types and that both revenue and expenditure patterns matter when identifying vulnerabilities (Johnston et al., 2023). More broadly, decades of research on the anti–money laundering regime show that such efforts facilitate investigation and prosecution of individual actors, but there is little evidence that they have materially suppressed the underlying crimes or significantly reduced the proceeds available to traffickers (Levi and Reuter, 2006; Levi, Reuter, and Halliday, 2018).

Among the three models of strategic success, CTF's strongest case is in law enforcement. Its distinctive value is that it may reduce a network's capacity to regenerate after disruption. That is a strategically important function if durable dismantlement is the goal. The problem is that no published evidence yet shows that CTF has demonstrably reduced a CN/CTOC network's capacity to regenerate or the conditions under which it reliably does so. In a **security and stability model**, the logic is plausible but less tested: Constraining financial flows might reduce the resources available for corruption and violence, especially if combined with broader institutional reforms, but the causal chain is long, and empirical support remains limited. Under a **public health model**, the connection is most attenuated. Any health effect would have to run through financial disruption, to trafficking capacity, to supply shock, to health outcome, and each link in that chain remains uncertain.

The literature identifies some conditions under which CTF appears to be more promising. First, it is most useful when **integrated with broader campaigns against the same networks** rather than pursued as stand-alone sanctions or compliance functions (Johnston et al., 2023). Second, it requires sustained effort rather than episodic actions because adversaries adapt across channels and jurisdictions. Third, it depends heavily on capable partner institutions to act on financial intelligence—often the scarcest condition in CN/CTOC environments, in which corruption undermines legal and regulatory systems (SIGAR, 2018; U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, 2022; Levi, Reuter, and Halliday, 2018). And fourth, it requires analytic tradecraft suited to criminal financial systems, because tools developed for terrorist financing may not transfer cleanly.

CTF, therefore, is strategically important, but evidence of its effectiveness is underdeveloped. It addresses a problem the other instruments do not: organizational regeneration. But its value should not be overstated. The fact that financial disruption is necessary to durable network degradation does not mean that existing CTF practices are sufficient to achieve such degradation. What the evidence

supports most clearly is a narrower conclusion: **Without financial disruption, operational gains are more likely to be temporary; with it, they may become more durable—but only under demanding institutional and interagency conditions.**

Security Cooperation

Whereas interdiction targets transactions and CTF targets network regeneration, security cooperation addresses relationship-building with partner militaries and the institutional conditions that determine whether interdiction and CTF can produce lasting effects. In the CN/CTOC context, this includes training, equipping, advising, intelligence-sharing, and institutional development intended to strengthen partner nations' abilities to counter trafficking and transnational organized crime.

At the operational level, security cooperation can produce real gains. U.S. support under Plan Colombia—encompassing DOW training, advising, and capacity-building alongside Department of State–led assistance programs—helped professionalize Colombian CN units, build airmobile capacity, and strengthen the operational capabilities of security forces engaged in interdiction and related missions (Gerstein et al., 2022; Collins, 2021; GAO, 2008b; Muller, 2006). More broadly, U.S. efforts have improved interoperability, intelligence-sharing, and coordination across partner forces in transit-zone countries, including through multinational structures, such as Joint Interagency Task Force South (Tidd, 2018; Richardson, 2023). These are meaningful operational outputs: Partner forces can become more capable of conducting operations, sharing information, and acting with U.S. support.

But the strategic record is more mixed. The Colombia case offers an illustration. Security cooperation activities contributed to major state-level gains: improved security, stronger defense institutions, and the prevention of state failure (Gerstein et al., 2022; Marsh 2020). Yet the program did not achieve durable cocaine supply reduction, and trafficking adapted through displacement, fragmentation, and organizational reconstitution (GAO, 2008b; GAO, 2019; Rosen and Bagley, 2017). That suggests that security cooperation can help partners perform better operationally and even strengthen defense institutions, but those gains do not necessarily translate into durable suppression of trafficking.

In a **law enforcement model** of success, security cooperation has perhaps the strongest documented record of the three instruments. Where it professionalizes military units and operational capacity, it can enhance partners' abilities to dismantle trafficking organizations. However, organizational dismantlement is not the same as durable suppression of trafficking because market incentives and successor groups remain. Moreover, this effect can be temporary, can be undermined by corruption and weak institutions, and often is limited in the absence of judicial, political, and economic reforms (Rabasa et al., 2017; Felbab-Brown, 2025).

In a **security and stability model**, security cooperation is conceptually the most important instrument but empirically the hardest to assess. The logic is strong: Partner states with more capable, more accountable, and more sustainable defense institutions should be better able to resist criminal penetration, limit violence, and sustain pressure on illicit networks over time. Colombia provides partial support for that logic at the macro level. But the broader literature is more cautionary. Security

cooperation that emphasizes operational capacity without addressing corruption, accountability, and partner ownership can fall short or become counterproductive (Felbab-Brown, 2025; Sullivan, Alvarez, and Marx, 2025; Hunt, 2019). In Mexico, for example, military pressure on cartel structures without corresponding institutional consolidation contributed to fragmentation and violence (Felbab-Brown, 2019; Felbab-Brown, 2025). Capacity-building can also be misused if partner institutions are penetrated by criminal networks or if trained personnel defect, as in the well-known case of former Mexican special forces contributing to the formation of the Zetas (Grayson, 2008; Correa-Cabrera, 2017). The risk of insider compromise extends beyond defection: The commander of a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration–supported Mexican Sensitive Investigative Unit was convicted in federal court for accepting bribes and disclosing U.S. investigative information to a trafficking organization, illustrating that vetting and elite unit design reduce but do not eliminate penetration risk (U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of New York, 2022).

In a **public health model**, security cooperation has the weakest connection. Any contribution must run through the same indirect supply-side chain as must interdiction and CTF, with even greater problems of time horizon and attribution. The available evidence does not support strong claims that partner capacity-building, however valuable for other reasons, produces measurable reductions in drug-related harms in the United States.

The conditions for effectiveness are also demanding. Security cooperation works best when it is oriented toward **institutional capacity and accountability rather than narrow tactical proficiency**, when it is delivered through **sustained engagement rather than short programming cycles**, and when it is embedded in **genuine partner ownership and interagency coordination** (Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, 2018; Marquis et al., 2016; GAO, 2017; GAO, 2009). These conditions are often absent. GAO has repeatedly found that—alongside the need for DOW train-and-equip efforts, absorptive-capacity analysis, and sustainment planning and for setting measurable objectives—partners have at times been unable to operate U.S.-provided assets because of maintenance, fuel, or personnel shortfalls (GAO, 2025b; GAO, 2023; GAO, 2016). In CN/CTOC environments, corruption and weak rule-of-law institutions make those problems more acute.

Security cooperation therefore has a paradoxical place in the CN/CTOC toolkit. It is the instrument most clearly aimed at long-term durability and the one most plausibly linked to security and stability gains. It is also the instrument whose strategic effects are slowest to materialize, hardest to attribute, and most vulnerable to short U.S. planning horizons. The literature supports a measured conclusion: **Security cooperation is essential to sustaining gains, but it is unlikely to produce durable strategic effects unless paired with accountability, partner integrity, and pressure on the networks themselves.**

Implications and Conclusion

Each of DOW's CN/CTOC tools addresses a different obstacle to achieving broader U.S. government strategic objectives—which remain largely nonmilitary in origin. How much value those tools deliver depends on whether they are **integrated as a coherent portfolio within DOW**, **synchronized with broader interagency efforts**, and **assessed against a shared, measurable definition of success**.

Interdiction is most valuable at disrupting trafficking transactions but weak at producing durable effects on its own; it operates most directly within a law enforcement frame. CTF addresses the financial mechanisms that allow organizations to regenerate after disruption and has its strongest rationale under the same law enforcement model, though the public evidence base remains limited. Security cooperation is most aligned with a security and stability model, building the institutional conditions that determine whether gains endure, but its effects are slow, difficult to measure, and contingent on accountability and partner integrity. No instrument reliably contributes to the public health model on its own, and none advances any broader U.S. government strategic objectives in isolation.

A holistic counter-threat network approach would connect tools that address different failure points in the chain from operational disruption to strategic effect. If interdiction, financial targeting, and partner capacity-building are planned, executed, and measured in separate stovepipes, they cannot be expected to produce durable effects against adaptive networks whose physical, financial, and political resilience are mutually reinforcing.

Translating operational gains into durable effects requires synchronization across agencies with different authorities, incentives, and timelines. The evidence on all three instruments points in the same direction. Interdiction is more effective when coordinated across military, intelligence, and law enforcement actors than when pursued in isolation (Gerstein et al., 2022; GAO, 2024). CTF is strongest when integrated with broader campaigns against the same networks rather than treated as a discrete targeting action (Johnston et al., 2023). Security cooperation is more likely to endure when delivered through coordinated, long-term interagency efforts rather than short programming cycles (Paul et al., 2015; GAO, 2024). Existing coordination mechanisms provide important foundations, but GAO (2024) found conflicting understandings among combatant commands regarding roles and responsibilities and no agency-wide mechanism for assessing DOW CN/CTOC effectiveness, and organizational responsibilities continue to evolve. Existing mechanisms do not need to be replaced. They need to be aligned around common threat networks, shared strategic objectives, and consistent measures of success.

Strategic underperformance in CN/CTOC also often reflects the absence of a shared model of success. Different parts of the interagency enterprise can be active and simultaneously failing to advance shared objectives because the objectives are not jointly defined. Better integration can address the operational dimension of that problem. Agreeing on a measurable definition of success addresses the strategic dimension. That definition must also be reflected in how effectiveness is measured. The most common CN/CTOC metrics—seizure volumes, financial designations, personnel trained—track activity rather than outcomes and do not confirm progress under any of the three models. Whatever model of success agencies converge on, assessing real progress requires metrics that can show whether operational gains are translating into durable effects. Activity metrics confirm that instruments are employed and are producing immediate outputs. That information is useful. What such metrics cannot confirm, on their own, is whether operational gains are translating into the end states that the models require, such as durable network degradation, reduced corruption, and sustained stability gains. Outcome-level evidence of that kind is genuinely scarce in the public record. Intelligence assessments of network reconstitution, independent estimates of corruption trajectories, and violence trend data are harder to collect and rarely systematized, but they can shed more-direct

light on the conditions that the models are actually trying to change. The practical implication is to pair activity data with that kind of analysis so that activity counts are interpreted in the context of the outcomes they are meant to produce.

Expanded authorities and increased military involvement do not alter the character of the broader objectives the mission is meant to serve. The risk is mistaking visible operational activity for strategic progress. DOW's distinctive contribution lies in capabilities that other agencies cannot replicate at scale—detection and monitoring, intelligence, operational reach, and partner capacity-building—and those capabilities are strategically meaningful only when they are integrated, sustained, and aligned with a shared definition of success.

Implications for DOW

Strengthen Departmentwide Assessment and Integration Mechanisms

DOW should consider planning its three principal CN/CTOC instruments—interdiction, CTF, and security cooperation—as a coherent portfolio rather than parallel lines of effort. When these instruments are deployed against the same networks, DOW should consider requiring that they be planned jointly around explicit objectives that specify which strategic success model is being pursued and how each instrument is expected to advance it. This would allow assessments to measure compound effects rather than activity counts that cannot be connected to outcomes.

Further Improve and Mature Interagency Coordination Mechanisms

The interagency coordination landscape is undergoing considerable organizational change: Roles and responsibilities across DOW, the Department of State, the Department of the Treasury, DOJ, and law enforcement agencies, as well as new coordinating bodies, are not yet clearly delineated; coordination processes between these entities are still evolving; and there is no publicly articulated, jointly agreed definition of what success looks like for the CN/CTOC missions. These conditions create a real risk of duplication, gaps, and strategic incoherence even as the organizational architecture expands. Progress relies on specifying the roles of DOW and its instruments within this broader system, particularly where DOW's contribution is supporting rather than leading and where its operational outputs need to connect to law enforcement or diplomatic processes that other agencies own. And progress requires a jointly agreed, measurable definition of CN/CTOC success. Without shared criteria, each agency tends to optimize for its own institutional priorities and its own implicit success model.

Abbreviations

CN	counternarcotics
CTF	counter-threat finance
CTOC	counter–transnational organized crime
DoD	Department of Defense
DOJ	U.S. Department of Justice
DOW	U.S. Department of War
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
GAO	U.S. Government Accountability Office
LLM	large language model
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

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