

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 23, 2023

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

Thank you for your leadership at a particularly strained time in the bilateral relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). In anticipation of your meeting with Foreign Minister Qin Gang early next month, I request that you prioritize in your discussions the PRC's role in illicit synthetic opioid trafficking. I met with Foreign Minister Qin multiple times during his service as Ambassador from the PRC to the United States and appreciated his willingness to discuss our countries' interconnectedness and the challenges facing our relationship. Synthetic opioid trafficking is an area where even a few meaningful steps from the PRC can play a significant role in combating this worsening epidemic and saving American lives.

As you know, from September 2021 through August 2022, the most recent twelve-month period available, fatal overdoses from synthetic opioids claimed the lives of 73,000 Americans, equal to 200 deaths each day.¹ Tragically, overdose involving fentanyl is now the leading cause of death for Americans aged 18 to 45. Further, Stanford estimates more than 1.2 million Americans and Canadians will die of drug overdoses in this decade alone.² Demand is a significant factor in driving the flow of illicit drugs into our country and, though there is still more work to be done, I'm proud of the steps Congress and the Administration have taken in the past two years to expand prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction strategies. However, reducing the supply of these substances is also critically important, and the PRC plays an integral role.

The U.S. Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking, which I co-chaired along with Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR), found that the majority of chemical precursors, which are manufactured into synthetic opioids, are produced by companies in the PRC.³ At the United States' urging, the PRC scheduled all fentanyl-related substances in 2019. While this drastically reduced the amount of

¹Ahmad, F.B., Cisewski, J.A., Rossen, L.M., and Sutton, P. (2023). *Provisional drug overdose death counts*. National Center for Health Statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>

²White, T. (2022, February 2). *Stanford-Lancet report calls for sweeping reforms to mitigate opioid crisis*. Stanford Medicine News Center. <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2022/02/stanford-lancet-report-opioid-crisis.html>

³RAND Corporation. (2022). *Commission on combating synthetic opioid trafficking: Final report*. <https://www.rand.org/hsrd/hsoac/commission-combating-synthetic-opioid-trafficking.html>

synthetic opioids mailed directly from the PRC to the United States, companies shifted to exporting precursors to Mexico to circumvent these new restrictions. Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), primarily the *Cártel de Sinola* and *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación*, synthesize opioids using Chinese precursors and traffic them into the United States. This supply chain – precursors manufactured in the PRC, then shipped to Mexico where they are synthesized, and then trafficked into the United States – is the main route by which illicit fentanyl enters American communities. Profits are funneled through PRC-based money-laundering organizations and Mexican TCOs, making it difficult to investigate and disrupt criminal actors.

Given the PRC's central role in the deadly synthetic opioid trade, I urge you to seek a commitment from the PRC on three central issues before engaging in other negotiations:

1. Adopt know-your-customer rules. These are a basic step in preventing chemical companies from unknowingly selling precursors to organizations illicitly manufacturing synthetic opioids. Such rules would also preclude companies from feigning ignorance about the intended recipients of their products.
2. Mandate and enforce export regulations for the chemical sector. Chemical companies ship precursors to Mexico through legitimate channels, so the PRC should also enforce strict labeling requirements on shipments and manifests through increased screening at ports of exit. As a business owner, I know that these practices are not unreasonable or exacting.
3. Cooperate with American agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Agency and Office of National Drug Control Policy. It is critical that the PRC collaborate and share information with American agencies tasked with dismantling the drug trade. The PRC suspended important drug trafficking dialogues last year over unrelated political disagreements.⁴ Cooperation between the PRC and American agencies is vital to achieve meaningful progress in disrupting the flow of precursors.

While I recognize that you are tasked with balancing a wide range of pressing matters in your discussions with Foreign Minister Qin, I urge you to prioritize these straightforward measures that the PRC can take to address synthetic opioid trafficking, showing both goodwill in negotiations and an effort to reduce their role in the deadly impacts of the drug trade. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



David Trone
Member of Congress

⁴ Knickmeyer, E., Rising, D., and Miller, Z. (2022, August 5). China cuts off vital U.S. contacts after Pelosi Taiwan visit. *PBS NewsHour*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/china-cuts-off-vital-us-contacts-over-pelosi-taiwan-visit>