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United States Senate

January 28, 2019

SUITE SD-255
DIRKSEN BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2107
202-224-2742

975 JFK FEDERAL BUILDING
15 NEW SUDBURY STREET
BOSTON, MA 02203
617-565-8519

222 MILLIKEN BOULEVARD, SUITE 312
FALL RIVER, MA 02721
508-677-0523

1550 MAIN STREET, 4TH FLOOR
SPRINGFIELD, MA 01103
413-785-4610

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Patrick M. Shanahan
Acting Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Pompeo and Acting Secretary Shanahan:

I write concerning the frightening prospect that adversaries could weaponize synthetic opioids, including fentanyl, to perpetrate attacks against the United States, and to seek your input on the steps that the Departments of State and Defense are taking to prevent such attacks from occurring.

With the nation suffering from a synthetic opioid epidemic that took more than 28,000 lives in 2017,¹ there are compelling reasons to be concerned about the potential weaponization of these drugs: their suitability for and past use in attacks, and their widespread international production.

First, the sheer potency of fentanyl and its analogues make them well-suited for use in lethal attacks. Dr. Rick Bright, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response and Director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was recently quoted as stating that “[f]entanyl-based drugs have been used in conflicts in other countries, so we know it’s possible, and we need to be ready to save lives and protect Americans from potential health security threats.”² Indeed, in 2002, Russian authorities used aerosolized fentanyl in an attempt to resolve a hostage situation in Moscow, a type of weaponization that others could copy.³

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/fentanyl.html>.

² Anna Edney, *This Killer Opioid Could Become a Weapon of Mass Destruction*, Bloomberg (Dec. 12, 2018), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-12-12/killer-opioid-fentanyl-could-be-a-weapon-of-mass-destruction>.

³ *Russia names Moscow siege gas*, BBC (Oct. 31, 2002), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2377563.stm>; *Tackling Fentanyl: The China Connection*, Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations of the H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs, 115th Cong. 89-90 (2018) (testimony of Dr.

Second, the majority of illicit fentanyl is produced in and distributed from foreign countries, primarily China and Mexico. As synthetic opioids are relatively easy and inexpensive to produce, there is a vast supply of these dangerous drugs around the world. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, “[b]ecause of its low dosage range and potency, one kilogram of fentanyl purchased in China for \$3,000 - \$5,000 can generate upwards of \$1.5 million in revenue on the illicit market with the potential of being lethal for 500,000 people.”⁴

These factors make synthetic opioids a potent potential threat to U.S. national security. State and non-state actors wishing to do harm to the United States could use them to injure or kill American citizens at home or abroad, or to engage in assassinations. And fentanyl’s ubiquitous nature makes it readily available to those willing to do violence and extremely difficult to trace back to them.

Like many other national security threats we face, fentanyl is cross-jurisdictional and will require wide-ranging and well-coordinated actions. Addressing this type of multi-dimensional challenge requires a government-wide strategy that brings to bear all elements of American power. To my knowledge, no such strategy exists at present for addressing the threat fentanyl poses.

Given your respective responsibilities to defend the United States and its interests from national security threats through diplomacy — and, if necessary, force — before they reach America’s shores, I am eager to better understand how the Departments of State and Defense are developing a unified strategy to protect America and its citizens from the grave threat of weaponized fentanyl. I ask that, by February 11, 2019, you either respond to the following questions in writing or arrange a briefing for my staff at which you can answer them:

1. Do the Departments of State or Defense view fentanyl and other synthetic opioids as threats to U.S. national security? If not, why not?
2. Have the Departments of State and Defense developed an integrated strategy to address fentanyl production, distribution, and potential weaponization abroad by state and non-state actors? If so, what steps are your agencies taking to address this issue? If not, why not?
3. Are both Departments coordinating specifically with U.S. allies and partners on diplomatic and defense strategies designed to protect our mutual interests?
4. What resources are both Departments allocating to the threat? Do the Departments treat the challenge from fentanyl as being different than from other drugs?

Bruce Pardo, associate policy researcher, RAND Corporation),

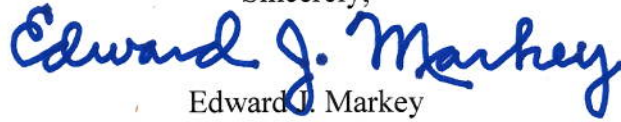
<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA16/20180906/108650/HHRG-115-FA16-Transcript-20180906.pdf>.

⁴ *Tackling Fentanyl: The China Connection*, Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations of the H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs, 115th Cong. 20 (2018) (statement of Paul E. Knierim, Deputy Chief of Operations, Office of Global Enforcement, Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Dep’t of Justice), <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA16/20180906/108650/HHRG-115-FA16-Transcript-20180906.pdf>.

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Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please contact Zach Hosford and Mark Appleton of my staff at 202-224-2742.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Edward J. Markey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator