

# BTR: Intelligence in the Gray Zone – Rethinking U.S. Strategy in the New War on Cartels

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, October 2, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The United States has entered a new phase in its fight against transnational organized crime. When the federal government formally designated criminal cartels as foreign terrorist organizations by an executive order in early 2025, the move signaled that drug trafficking groups are no longer seen solely as law-enforcement targets. They are being recognized as highly capable non-state actors with advanced military-style operations.

For Cormac Meiners, a retired U.S. Army Green Beret now leading federal engagement for the I2 Group, the implications are profound. I2 Group is a long-established provider of intelligence analysis software, best

known for its Analyst's Notebook platform used by defense, law enforcement, and security agencies worldwide. In a recent BizTechReports executive vidcast interview, Meiners stated that the nation faces a "gray zone conflict" against adversaries whose sophistication requires a rethinking of intelligence priorities, technologies, and alliances.



Cormac Meiners, i2 Group

## A Strategic Reorientation

The shift comes at a time when the U.S. defense establishment has been focusing heavily on conventional threats posed by near-peer adversaries such as Russia and China. Since a pivot away from the global war on terror (GWOT), Meiners noted that the Pentagon has spent the past several years re-posturing toward conventional battlefields—Eastern Europe and the Pacific theaters—only to be pulled back into asymmetric warfare against drug cartels that now wield quasi-military capabilities.

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cartels have drones, armored vehicles, signals intelligence, and even cyber capabilities. They aren't Al-Qaeda from 20 years ago. They're behaving like non-state actors with nation state-like tools."

The reorientation forces intelligence agencies, law enforcement, and the Department of Defense (DoD) to revisit analytic tradecraft reminiscent of the Cold War: tracking orders of battle, mapping supply chains, and anticipating adversary capabilities, while simultaneously managing the blurred lines between criminal activity,

terrorism, and military conflict.

## Law Enforcement Meets National Security

Unlike past campaigns that treated narcotics as a criminal issue, today's conflict is a hybrid mission. Meiners stressed that military operations and law enforcement must now converge into a coordinated strategy that spans federal, state, local, and international jurisdictions.

"This is not just a military activity," he said. "It's also a law enforcement activity that requires multifaceted relationships—federal, state, local, and partner nations—with varying degrees of trust and interoperability."

Meiners noted that this need for collaboration has already translated into a heightened level of cooperation across the region. Mexico, in particular, has deepened its coordination with U.S. counterparts, creating a stronger foundation for joint operations and intelligence sharing than was seen in past decades.

Mexico has extradited dozens of cartel leaders in recent years. Meiners sees this as evidence of unprecedented bilateral coordination. Still, the complexity of intelligence sharing across governments, agencies, and even private-sector organizations operating in cartel-dominated regions poses challenges.

The key, Meiners argued, is interoperability—making sure that intelligence systems, data sets, and analytic frameworks can communicate seamlessly across entities with different missions and authorities.

## Technology as the Glue

For I2 Group, a long-time supplier of analytic software to both law enforcement and defense, the "war on cartels" is as much about technology integration as it is about tactics. The company's flagship product, Analyst's Notebook, has been widely used for link analysis, network mapping,

and financial investigations for more than three decades.

Meiners stressed that the solution has evolved significantly from what many remember from the GWOT era. “With version 10 [of Analyst’s Notebook], and the additional solutions we’ve developed, we’re light years ahead of where we were even just a few years ago,” he said. “We’ve integrated unstructured text processing, big-data enterprise deployment, and automation that allows analysts to go deeper, faster, and with more precision.”

These advances matter because cartels themselves are evolving. They are not just smuggling drugs; they are diversifying into fuel theft, human trafficking, cybercrime, and drone warfare. Targeting leadership alone is no longer sufficient, since cartel bosses can be quickly replaced. Instead, analysts must identify facilitators, financiers, and supply chain actors who are critical to operations.

“Financial targeting is crucial,” Meiners emphasized. “Whether it’s laundering drug money or smuggling fuel, following the money and disrupting those networks is as important as tracking individuals.”

### Gray Zone Threats and Emerging Capabilities

Cartel activity increasingly resembles “gray zone” warfare, where adversaries exploit ambiguity between crime, terrorism, and military aggression. Meiners cited examples of cartels operating drones for targeted assassinations, developing rudimentary cyber capabilities, and even recruiting mercenaries with battlefield experience from Ukraine.

Countering these threats requires not only kinetic action (direct military or law-enforcement operations in the field) but also analytic tools that can model supply chains, anticipate counterintelligence risks, and assess cyber vulnerabilities. I2 Group’s software, for instance, can be used both defensively—to protect U.S. supply chains from hostile infiltration—and offensively, to disrupt cartel procurement of drones and weapons.

“If you understand what drones the enemy is flying, who’s supplying them, and how the money flows, you can target those vulnerabilities proactively,” Meiners said.

### Training and Human Capital Gaps

Even with powerful tools, success depends on the people using them. Meiners noted that with stressed budgets and under-staffed agencies, many initiatives to train intelligence analysts have been eroding. Where once agents and staff might have received a full week of instruction on a single platform, compressed schedules now limit exposure. As a result, agencies often fail to take advantage of advanced features in tools that could prove decisive.

“There are parts of the solution that aren’t being used, and leadership may not even realize the

capabilities exist,” he explained.

To address the gap, I2 Group has expanded direct training, webcasts, and user engagement programs—moving away from reliance on third-party providers. By embedding training within the company itself and integrating it into the solution delivery process, Meiners says analysts can master the latest analytic tradecraft at a time when adversaries are learning quickly.

As he put it: “If cartels are adapting fast, analysts must be trained just as quickly and thoroughly to stay ahead.”

### Entering the AI Era

The good news is that artificial intelligence promises to reduce some of the training burden by automating tasks that once required manual effort. Advances in natural language processing also break down barriers to accessing key features, enabling analysts to work more intuitively with complex tools. Moving into production environments, AI-augmented intelligence professionals are better focused and far more productive. Meiners sees AI not as a replacement for human judgment, but as a force multiplier that accelerates the intelligence cycle.

“With AI integration, we can shorten the learning curve for analysts,” he said. “Eventually, it may take only a couple of days to learn the system end to end.”

Just as importantly, I2 Group is designing its tools with open architecture to ensure compatibility with other AI systems that agencies may adopt. “We don’t want to be a black box,” Meiners stated. “We want to integrate with the other tools analysts already depend on.”

### A Multi-Front Campaign

Ultimately, the fight against cartels will not be won through any single channel—military, law enforcement, or intelligence. It will require a multi-front campaign that blends conventional tactics with advanced analytics, international cooperation, and emerging AI capabilities.

Cartels have evolved from flamboyant crime syndicates flaunting wealth on social media to disciplined organizations practicing operational security and leveraging modern warfare techniques. In Meiners’ view, this evolution makes the cartels more dangerous than ever, as they combine traditional criminal networks with emerging military-style tactics and technologies. At the same time, they are also more vulnerable, provided the U.S. and its partners can align their intelligence capabilities to expose critical facilitators, financial pipelines, and supply chain dependencies that keep these organizations running.

“Leadership is relatively easy to replace,” he concluded. “It’s the facilitators, financiers, and networks that sustain these organizations. By understanding and targeting those deeper structures, we can disrupt their operations in a lasting way.”

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