



Helping Win the War on Our Doorstep

By Roger F. Noriega

Most of the fiercest opponents of the comprehensive immigration reform legislation saw no higher priority than securing our borders. With that divisive bill shelved for the foreseeable future, controlling our frontiers remains an urgent challenge. As we focus our attention on that task, many will be surprised to discover that our neighbor to the south is in the fight of its life. Unless we provide Mexico with the substantial help it needs and wants to battle the deadly drug syndicates that terrorize that nation, we may soon find our southern border more porous, dangerous, and unmanageable than ever.

The good news is that last year Mexicans chose a leader, Felipe Calderón, who has made it a priority to rescue his country from a criminal drug machine, and who welcomes increased U.S. support for these urgent efforts. Even in its waning months in office, the George W. Bush administration must rally Congress to support an ambitious international plan to help Mexicans save their country.

How to Save a Country

Paradoxically, the stepped-up violence we hear about from Mexico lately is not necessarily a bad sign. Criminal bands are raging against Calderón's policy of confronting these murderous drug cartels with new vigor and resources. For too long, these billion-dollar criminal syndicates have operated with virtual impunity. Calderón has said "enough already." Consider this blunt analysis of Mexico's predicament:

The narco-trafficking cartels . . . have strategically shifted from being transporters of drugs to assuming leadership of these operations. These groups no longer see Mexico as a transit country, but look to make it a drug

consuming country. Narco-trafficking generates insecurity and violence, tears at the social fabric, harms the well-being of the individual, and poses a risk to the physical and mental health of our children and youth—our most valuable resource. . . . [N]arco-trafficking challenges the state and presents a serious national security threat.¹

The foregoing stark assessment was not written by a judgmental outsider. It is the candid, purposeful diagnosis found in President Calderón's own national development plan. Less than a year into his six-year term, he recognizes that dealing with organized crime must be a central part of a plan to build a modern Mexico where honest people can live, work, and prosper.

The stakes are high for the United States, too. According to the U.S. Department of State, 90 percent of the cocaine entering this country transits Mexico.² Criminal gangs in that country produce a large share of the heroin and methamphetamines sold here, and Mexico is our largest foreign source of marijuana. U.S. ambassador to Mexico Antonio O. Garza Jr. has repeatedly cautioned U.S. citizens against visiting border cities, where drug-related violence rages unabated.

Even intensified U.S. border security measures could never hold back the tide of immigrants from a Mexico steeped in internal unrest sparked by an

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all-out drug war. Calderón realizes that Mexico should be producing adequate employment to occupy its people, but a nation in turmoil cannot reach its full potential. Remember that one of the highest concentrations of displaced people in the world is comprised of Colombians who sought refuge from the ravages of an unchecked drug war in the 1990s. As in Colombia, where the resolve of a courageous leader, President Álvaro Uribe, was crucial in getting the upper hand in a deadly conflict, Calderón's personal fortitude may make all the difference in Mexico. As with Colombia, U.S. support in Mexico will be indispensable and justifiable.

A Troubled History of "Cooperation"

Before the democratic breakthrough that came with the election of Mexican president Vicente Fox in 2000, Mexico's unwillingness or incapacity to challenge the cartels sparked a bitter debate in the U.S. Congress and with Mexico. Many U.S. lawmakers demanded that Mexico be sanctioned for failing to shoulder its share of the anti-drug fight. Others sympathized with Mexico, and Mexicans angrily rejected this "unilateral" assessment. The administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton stressed the need to cooperate and pointed to glints of good news to deflect scrutiny of Mexico. Clinton was fond of scolding Americans for their illicit consumption as a way to downplay Mexico's failures on this front.

During the Clinton years, working groups—led by then-U.S. drug czar and retired Army general Barry McCaffrey—were reenergized to measure cooperation across the board on border security and anti-drug programs. The idea was to supplant the unilateral "certification" exercise—the annual process whereby the U.S. government would "certify" Mexico's anti-drug cooperation. McCaffrey's team worked with Mexican counterparts—in an exercise led on both sides by earnest diplomats—to diagnose the roots of the problem and clumsy "performance measures of effectiveness," whose primary purpose was to placate skeptics and critics in the U.S. Congress. This bureaucratic process was supposed to get both sides together to assess jointly what each should be doing to tackle the drug threat, using a checklist of dozens of minute indicators. Hampered by

these extraneous exercises, however, the certification process lost all credibility both in the United States and Mexico, becoming an irritant that actually stifled cooperation.³

The joint analysis was genuinely useful, but all that busywork came crashing down when McCaffrey's counterpart, Mexican army general José de Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, was found to be on the payroll of one of the cartels. Gutiérrez was actually misusing the resources of the Mexican state to wage war against a rival gang, with the "successes" heralded as a sign of progress. The Gutiérrez episode represented the nadir of U.S.-Mexican cooperation and confirmed the worst suspicions of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence authorities who had long been wary of sharing information with their Mexican counterparts.

Democratically Elected Governments Open to U.S. Cooperation

Only after the stunning democratic election of Fox in 2000 did Mexican authorities demonstrate the political will to confront the deadly drug trade and, just as important, to welcome more active U.S. cooperation. Newly elected U.S. president George W. Bush was eager to make relations with Mexico a priority, and the prospects seemed bright for substantial improvement in bilateral relations.

Given Fox's openness toward the United States, substantial material support and law enforcement cooperation began in earnest, with U.S. aid directed at improving databases, law enforcement training, and border-crossing posts. Stepped-up law-enforcement cooperation led to the capture and conviction of several Mexican kingpins who had once operated with virtual impunity. The Fox administration worked to overcome the legal obstacles to extradition of such criminals, although the Mexican Supreme Court did not clear the final hurdles until late in Fox's six-year term. In 2006, Mexico extradited sixty-three individuals to the United States.⁴

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 posed new challenges in this relationship. Mexico, in particular, felt the pinch when honest commerce and migration across the border was virtually halted in the days after the Twin Towers fell. The United States and Mexico (as well as Canada) saw the urgent need to retool their border infrastructure and

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policies to make them safe for legal crossings, but to close them to terrorists and the tools of their trade (chemical, biological, or even nuclear materials). The governments agreed quickly to a host of practical measures to tighten security at their frontiers. Mexico had once offered this sort of cooperation as a quid pro quo for Bush's promised immigration reform. After 9/11, however, unprecedented cooperation was extracted from Mexico (and Canada), just as plans for immigration reform took a backseat to security measures.

Mexicans realize now that the hopes for a temporary worker program were swamped by the security tidal wave and the preoccupation with Afghanistan, Iraq, and the broader Middle East that followed 9/11. Fox had hoped Bush would deliver a big win for him on the migration front.

Instead, Mexico found itself pressed to get its house in order just to keep up with U.S. border security needs. (Ironically, the illegal migration pressure mounted as antiterrorist surveillance at the border discouraged undocumented workers from voluntarily returning to Mexico, while others merely continued to pass through traditional smuggling routes that avoided the enhanced security at border crossings.)

Calderón Steps Up to the Challenge

Notably, during his 2006 campaign, Calderón refused to scapegoat the United States for Mexico's migration, economic, or security challenges. Instead, he blamed his country's political class for failing to offer viable solutions. While some concluded that the affable President Fox surrendered on major battles, most credit Calderón with the energy, ideological commitment, and toughness to advance an ambitious agenda for taming Mexico's problems.

Since Calderón's razor-thin victory just over a year ago, Mexican authorities continue to break down barriers to anti-drug cooperation. Calderón has subjected hundreds of senior-ranking police officials to polygraph tests and has dismissed thousands more suspected of corruption. Notorious major traffickers wanted in the United States for years have been captured by Mexico and extradited in historic numbers. A Mexican state governor has been captured and is set to become the highest-ranking elected official surrendered to U.S. justice. Mexican law enforcement has tracked down and killed or arrested the leadership of a

notorious gang of former military men who formed a squad of assassins. Conceding the corruption or weakness of some local police forces, Calderón has deployed 20,000 Mexican soldiers to help match the firepower of murderous drug gangs. Mexican officials—as jealous of their national sovereignty as we are of ours—have set aside historic sensitivities and invited unprecedented law-enforcement cooperation and intelligence sharing.

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Toward a Genuine Partnership

Surely, Calderón and the vast majority of decent Mexicans realize that the battle will get worse before it gets better. That is why they welcome a substantial increase in U.S. support for these valiant efforts.

Recognizing our self-interest in helping Mexico is a start. We must also acknowledge our shared responsibility in dealing with narcotraffickers who garner billions shoveling illicit drugs in the direction of voracious U.S. consumers. True, Mexico has an inescapable obligation to enforce its laws to combat this terrible trade, and Calderón is doing that. But we can and must help him by cracking down on demand on our end by increasing education and treatment, tackling distribution networks that operate in our country, and denying criminal gangs such easy access to unscrupulous banking and illegal guns.

Now that Mexico is apparently prepared to accept unprecedented levels of collaboration, we must embrace it as an opportunity to forge a genuine partnership. If we go in with a list of preconditions, bureaucratic demands, and turf consciousness, the effort will be doomed from the start.

An Integrated Strategy and Tactical Operations

Transnational collaboration can bear fruit soon if both the United States and Mexico assign their most creative law enforcement professionals to a joint task force that will draft an integrated, binational strategy. This job requires can-do, out-of-the-box thinking to overcome the preconceived notions that have hamstrung cooperation for decades. In light of Calderón's forward-leaning posture, U.S. counterparts should take yes for an answer, and test the willingness and strengthen the capability of Mexican authorities to work with us.

This binational planning team must move urgently on two parallel tracks. First, it should sketch out an optimal vision for what both sides want out of this anti-drug cooperation five and ten years down the road. Second, it should work backward to develop a practical plan for achieving that vision and setting near-term objectives. This latter exercise should develop mechanisms to execute real-time tactical operations to identify high-value drug targets and bring our combined resources to bear against them *now*—not next month, not next year.

Seamless Law Enforcement and Intelligence Cooperation

Criminal organizations operate seamlessly and fluidly across our common border. We must strike them with combined law enforcement and intelligence teams that match their integration and agility. It is not easy for any government to interact with the half-dozen U.S. agencies that have a piece of action in the anti-drug fight. Also, Mexico admits that it does not have a “deep bench” of agents that can operate with the absolute reliability that tactical law enforcement actions demand.

By developing a genuinely collaborative binational team to hone tactics and targets, we can compensate for relative weaknesses among our Mexican partners and pick up the pace of cross-border operations without further delay. Of course, along the way, we must work to fortify institutions on both sides of the border to expand the cadre of trusted professionals who have the training, resources, and mandate to cooperate across the border.

From the outset, these binational efforts must be integrated with Colombia’s superb intelligence and law enforcement agencies, which have been sharpened by years of U.S. technical assistance and training. Colombian authorities have perhaps the most intimate knowledge about who makes up these illicit syndicates on the far end of the supply chain and how they operate. U.S.-Mexican efforts will be strengthened immeasurably by integrating Colombia’s human and technical resources into planning and executing activities. Ideally, Colombia and Mexico will gradually assume greater responsibility in training and readying their Central American counterparts, knitting together an international law enforcement network that can begin to match the vertical integration

of the criminals. The successful Europol mechanism may provide a useful template for developing an effective regional anti-drug response team.⁵

Congressional Buy-In and Generous Funding

This historic project demands a long-term commitment that requires Congressional buy-in from the outset, as the best ideas always do. Congressional leaders should build a consultative team, perhaps led by former Border

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Patrol official and House Intelligence Committee chairman Silvestre Reyes (D-Tex.), to work with the executive branch and Mexican counterparts to forge an ambitious, comprehensive, and adequately funded plan. We should not think small, either. Considering the billions of dollars in economic damage and immeasurable social costs due to illegal drugs, we should be thinking of a multi-year, billion-dollar response. Our essential security and well-being are worth the investment. Of course, it would be unwise for Congress to micromanage these activities. Congressional over-

sight, however, could prove crucial to sustaining funding and political support for this worthy endeavor.

Urgent, Supplemental Funding Required

The United States already provides some aid for legal reform, training, and border infrastructure in Mexico. But these sums are not sufficient. Moreover, this task cannot wait for the regular appropriations cycle, which will require at least another eight months before funds would be available for these urgent tasks. Instead, the president should move quickly to present a request for urgent supplemental funds to identify resources this fall. By identifying sufficient resources now, his team can begin making solid pledges to their Mexican counterparts and reassure them that meaningful help is on the way.

The president’s strategy should include plans for cultivating and developing transnational cooperation with the anti-drug authorities in the so-called source countries in the Andes (particularly Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia), up through the transit states of Central America and the Caribbean, and in Mexico. In Mexico, increased funding should be afforded to train

law enforcement and judicial personnel, focusing on the screened, elite, specialized teams charged with taking down high-value drug kingpins, prosecuting them, confiscating their ill-gotten gain, and dismantling their operations. Mexico has made strides in modernizing its judicial system to make it more agile and effective. There is no substitute for building strong, national institutions that can apply the rule of law on Mexico's soil. An honest police force, transparent courts, and a professional penal system are essential to making long-term gains against the narcotraffickers and other agents of organized crime that hamper Mexico's development.

Our National Interest

Every fifth-grade geography teacher lectures on the positive role of friendly, stable neighbors to U.S. security and prosperity. That lesson is driven home by the post-9/11 reality. The United States should want a neighbor that is growing and generating jobs for its people. It needs a partner that can help stem the northward flow of illegal cocaine, methamphetamines, heroin, marijuana, and other drugs. We need a neighbor that is sound, secure, and stable. No single government—least of all one that recognizes the weaknesses of its institutions—can prevail against the agile and ruthless transnational illicit drug syndicates. And no government—least of all one that is close to the United States in so many ways—should have to face this challenge alone. The United States should act boldly, generously,

and urgently to help Mexico. The opportunity to build this alliance against a deadly foe may not come again, and we pass it up at our own peril.

AEI research assistant Megan Davy contributed to this article. AEI editorial associate Nicole Passan worked with the author to edit and produce this Latin American Outlook.

Notes

1. Presidencia de la República de México, *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo*, “Crimen Organizado,” available at <http://pnd.calderon.presidencia.gob.mx/index.php?page=crimen-organizado>.
2. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, vol. 1, *Drug and Chemical Control* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2007), 167.
3. The presidential “certification” process was replaced by Congress in 2001 with a procedure whereby only those countries that have “failed demonstrably” to take steps to fight illegal drugs are identified in a less prominent State Department report.
4. U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, vol. 1, 167.
5. Europol's original mission was law enforcement against drug trafficking, and was later expanded to prevent and combat international organized crime and terrorism. While leaving enforcement responsibilities to national and local police, Europol generates threat assessments and crime analyses, facilitates information exchange, and provides operational analysis and technical support for investigations.