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A Border Security Strategy for Bush and Calderón: Improve Cooperation Between the U.S. and Mexico

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When U.S. President George W. Bush and Mexican President-elect Felipe Calderón meet on November 9, the U.S.-Mexico border will be at the top of their agenda. Their first priority should be shared initiatives that make border communities more safe, secure, and prosperous. This will require substantially reducing the illegal border crossing that fuels criminal activity on both sides.

Moving Beyond the Fence

Neither Americans nor Mexicans should be satisfied with the Secure Fence Act of 2006 that President Bush signed into law last month. North of the Rio Grande, U.S. border operations are likely to worsen in the short term, regardless of the measures in the legislation, because it will take months and years to implement them. Over that period, hundreds of thousands seeking to enter the United States will discover new ways to circumvent border protections.

The Secure Fence legislation, while important, is insufficient in itself. Indeed, if all the United States does is try to build a fence, the problem may get worse, not better. Without a broader approach to immigration, more fences, if built, could consume the lion's share of the federal budget for border security, leaving inadequate resources for other critical tasks, such as employer enforcement, detention, and removal.

Mexico is unhappy because the bill symbolizes U.S. suspicions that Mexico cannot be considered an equal partner in securing the border. But the lack of security is as much a threat to Mexico as the

U.S., because the flood of crime and corruption that have accompanied surging illegal flows across the border undermines free trade and travel.

A Cooperative Strategy

For starters, the two leaders must craft an effective strategy to disrupt existing undocumented migrant pipelines and make legal migration a viable alternative. A successful disruption plan should have three components. First is security and enforcement. Mexico should establish floating security checkpoints on its southern border and along known migrant byways, such as the railroads that run from Chiapas to Texas. The United States should ensure rapid, robust border patrol deployment and consistent enforcement along its southwest border. To make legal migration attractive and aid enforcement, employer certification procedures, Social Security and Medicare tax filing, and the visa application process should be simplified and streamlined.

Second, Bush and Calderón must find ways to help border states and municipalities develop their own solutions to protect the frontier while facilitating legal commerce. Platforms already exist for this, from the Border Environment Cooperation Commission and the North American Development Bank

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to the U.S.-Mexico Binational Commission Working Group on Homeland Security and Border Cooperation. Today, the North American Bank is underfinanced, and decisions in Mexico are slowed by the need to deal with its centralized bureaucracy.

Third, they must discuss Mexico's responsibility to foster a more competitive economy and boost employment. Mexico should phase out remaining monopolies in the communications and energy sectors, continue easing cumbersome business regulations, and strengthen its courts and the rule of law so that contracts can have teeth. Education must be improved in rural areas, while the country's 80-year-old land tenure system should be phased out to let occupants farm more efficiently or sell titled property to raise capital.

Fourth, Mexico should revitalize the Fox Administration's project to reduce Central American migration by helping its neighbors to the south

become more economically prosperous. Called *Plan Puebla Hacia Panama*, it would have stimulated industrialization and trade in Mexico's southern states and Central American neighbors.

What would not be welcome at this meeting is posturing, such as statements that Mexicans have an automatic right to migrate to the United States or that fences make good neighbors. The best conversation starter is to say that a secure border is a shared objective and ask what the U.S. and Mexico can do together to realize that goal.

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