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Secretary Clinton's Mexico Trip: Three Benchmarks for U.S.–Mexican Relations

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This week, during her inaugural visit to Mexico, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton faces a tough but critical challenge: laying the early foundations for a solid, working relationship with America's southern neighbor. The secretary can be certain that during her foray into the cauldron of U.S.–Latin American relations, her every word, her every action, and her every policy option will be closely monitored at home and abroad.

Other cabinet-level visits to Mexico will include a joint visit by Attorney General Eric Holder and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano to participate in a seminar on arms trafficking next week. These visits will set the stage for President Obama's stop-off in Mexico City on his way to the April 17–19 Summit of the Americas meeting in Trinidad and Tobago.

Secretary Clinton needs to demonstrate to President Felipe Calderon and the Mexican people that the U.S. approaches the Mexican drug cartel crisis with a seriousness and commitment commensurate with the efforts and sacrifices made by America's southern neighbor. Secretary Clinton must also convey the executive branch's intention to reverse the decision on the NAFTA pilot trucking program in order to avoid an ugly and very costly trade dispute with Mexico. Finally, Secretary Clinton needs to inform her Mexican hosts that a secure border is not antithetical to good U.S.–Mexican relations.

Oil on Troubled Waters: Mexico's Drug Crisis. The Mexican drug war crisis is now perceived in Washington as a substantial threat to U.S.

national security. Key U.S. military and intelligence officials have expressed concern regarding Mexico's ability to curb the power of the drug cartels and to exert effective control over its national territory. Such statements fuel speculation that America's southern neighbor runs the risk of becoming a failed narco-state, a prediction vigorously rejected by the Mexicans and by most U.S. analysts. Indisputable, however, is the fact that local and state law enforcement in the U.S. border states continue to report increased gang activity, violence, kidnappings, and other crimes that they attribute to a growing presence of Mexican drug cartels' agents.

Secretary Clinton can be expected to brief the Mexicans on the specifics of the Obama Administration's new strategy for dealing with the crisis and beefing up U.S. law enforcement and intelligence assets on the border. On March 24, the Obama Administration announced a plan for deploying and hiring new federal agents for border enforcement—especially augmenting the number of agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms—hiring additional Drug Enforcement Agency agents, and upgrading intelligence efforts.¹ The Administration stopped short, however, of recommending

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the deployment of National Guard reserves along the U.S.–Mexican border.

Secretary Clinton must also review with the Mexicans the current state of the drug cooperation program known as the Merida Initiative. Passed in June 2008, the landmark Merida Initiative offered a new, cooperative U.S.–Mexico paradigm for combating the Mexican drug cartels. With the Merida Initiative, the U.S. committed to providing equipment, training, and technology to upgrade Mexico's law enforcement capabilities. Already as much as \$300 million of the approximately \$1.5 billion program has been delivered.

Clinton needs to explain to her Mexican interlocutors why a Democrat-dominated Congress successfully shorted the Merida Initiative of \$100 million in assistance money for FY 2009, why the drug czar will no longer hold a cabinet-level position in the Obama Administration, and why Democratic Senators, notably Patrick Leahy (D–VT), are placing obstacles in the way of sales of requested items such as helicopters—items that the Mexicans need now.

A Commitment to Resolve the NAFTA Truck Issue. On March 11, President Obama delivered on a campaign promise to Big Labor and signed the FY 2009 “omnibus” spending bill passed by the Democrat-controlled Congress, thereby killing the Bush Administration's “Cross Border Demonstration Project”² that had permitted a handful of trucks from Mexico to operate freely in the U.S. Launched in 2007, the pilot program attempted to resolve a NAFTA dispute with Mexico over protectionist U.S.

regulations that block most Mexican trucks from U.S. highways—a policy that has protected a few feather-bedded Teamster jobs but added \$400 million per year to the price American consumers must pay for Mexican imports.

Although protectionist critics have alleged safety problems with Mexican trucks, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration reports “no accidents involving trucks participating in the program.”³ In fact, “Mexican trucks in the program have a better safety record than their American counterparts.”⁴

On March 18, the government of Mexico retaliated to the elimination of the Cross Border Demonstration Project by slapping tariffs on 89 U.S. agricultural and industrial exports to Mexico from 40 states worth over \$2.4 billion in annual sales for U.S. companies.⁵

The Administration's action threatens thousands of U.S. jobs and puts at risk hundreds of U.S. companies whose tariff-laden products are now less competitive in the Mexican marketplace. For example, Oregon potato farmers “could lose [their] entire \$80 million in annual french-fry exports to Mexico because competitors in Canada won't have to pay \$16 million in tariffs.”⁶

Secure Borders Matter. Clinton must reiterate that part of the U.S. strategy to fight the cartels will be to continue our border security efforts and that the U.S., by enforcing its immigration laws, can also keep Mexicans safe. Discouraging illegal border crossings saves lives by dissuading people from making the dangerous journey across the desert,

1. Devlin Barrett, “White House Unveils Anti-Cartel Effort for the Border,” Associated Press, March 24, 2009, at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5ivNblwMtQTgwPcKIGQUdhnjE10pAD974ESC80> (March 24, 2009).
2. Lyndon Finney, “DeFazio Believes Mexico Truck Program Will Be Halted by Executive Order,” TheTrucker.com, December 30, 2008, at <http://www.thetrucker.com/News/Stories/2008/12/30/DeFaziobelievesMexicotruckprogramwillbehaltedbyexecutiveorder.aspx> (January 15, 2009).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Editorial, “Truckers' Scaremongering on NAFTA,” *The Dallas Morning News*, September 17, 2008, at http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/editorials/stories/DN-trucks_17edi.ART.State.Edition1.270a61b.html (February 4, 2009).
5. E. Eduardo Castillo, “Mexico Slaps Tariffs on 89 U.S. Products as U.S. Ends Cross-Border Trucking Program,” *Newsday.com*, March 19, 2009, at <http://www.newsday.com/news/nationworld/wire/sns-ap-lt-mexico-us-trucking,0,1844741.story> (March 20, 2009); Ken Ellingtonwood, “Mexico Levies Higher Tariffs on U.S. Imports,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2009, at <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-mexico-tariffs19-2009mar19,0,6786035.story> (March 20, 2009).
6. Ellingtonwood, “Mexico Levies Higher Tariffs on U.S. Imports.”

where many have been raped, beaten, or murdered by hired smugglers. And increased law enforcement efforts at the border help to detain drug cartel members and those who support their “enterprises” in the United States, thereby stemming the flow of money and resources that sustain them.

Clinton must let Mexico know that America values it as a friend and neighbor but that the U.S. remains dedicated to the enforcement of American immigration laws. While the unlawful population in the United States and the number of attempted illegal border crossings are on the decline, illegal immigration remains a serious problem that serves to undermine the U.S. rule of law. But Clinton should emphasize that a fundamental part of this border enforcement strategy is policies dedicated to making Americans and Mexicans prosperous through key economic development reforms.

Recommendations. During her brief stay in Mexico, Clinton should:

- Demonstrate that the Obama Administration is committed to an aggressive, sustained, and cooperative anti-drug effort along the U.S.–Mexico border. She must demonstrate that the Administration has the political will to undertake tough law enforcement measures, go after individuals who break U.S. gun and drug laws, and stand fast to fund and implement the Merida Initiative.
- Assure President Calderon that before President Obama visits Mexico next month, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and others in his

Administration will take immediate steps to restore funding to the pilot truck program and then expand it and make it permanent.

- Support the development of Border Enforcement Security Taskforces (BEST). These taskforces allow U.S. and Mexican law enforcement to work together on issues of mutual concern, without ceding sovereignty or submitting to a binding agreement. Participants share information and best practices—information that can be used to tackle the drug cartels and protect both borders from crime and violence. Congress and DHS should support the extensive use of these taskforces.

Clinton has an opportunity to make progress on each of these three issues. If she can also build on the cooperation begun by the Bush Administration, demonstrate that the Obama Administration will make concerted efforts to rein in a runaway Congress, and, finally, reassure the American people that Administration views border security and Mexico’s stability as national security priorities, her visit to Mexico will be a success.

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