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Mexico's Calderon and Obama Meet: Time for a Ronald Reagan Moment

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When Mexico's President Felipe Calderon meets President Obama in Washington on March 3, the atmosphere will be tense. Even White House media management cannot camouflage gathering tensions in the U.S.–Mexican relationship.

Mexico's bloody battle with drug cartels and criminal violence dominates media headlines and fuels growing uncertainty about Mexico's future stability and the potential spillover effects on the United States. Most recently, the February 15 murder of U.S. immigration agent Jaime Zapata by drug criminals is a consequence of growing U.S. law enforcement involvement in Mexico's drug fight. This comes on the tail of the WikiLeaks release of cables sent from the U.S. embassy in Mexico City that questioned the coordination and effectiveness of Calderon's security team in the drug fight.

At the same time, Mexico's drug war has made it difficult for the two leaders to address other pressing issues, from economic and trade matters to needed cooperation in everything from border management, environment, and energy issues. But at the heart of the U.S.–Mexico challenge is the fact that the drug war is being conducted in two different strategic dimensions at variable speeds.

The Mexican View: The Drug War as Apocalypse. For Calderon, Mexico's narco-war, begun in 2006, is a comprehensive war to save a modern, progressive, democratic Mexico from the anarchic forces of lawlessness. Swaths of Mexican territory are periodically subjected to drug terror. In fact,

since 2006, 35,000 homicides have occurred with shocking and terrible savagery. Included in this death toll are the over 2,000 Mexican police, military, and law enforcement officials who have been killed in the fight.

Calderon knows the political consequences of his anti-cartel campaign will loom large as the 2012 race for the Mexican presidency heats up. While President Calderon is barred from another term, he does not wish to see Mexico's executive handed over to either the left Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) or to the previously dominant Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI). Without improvements, Mexico's security situation will go far toward framing the electoral debate in a negative light and could overshadow other critical issues.

Calderon also faces a growing chorus of critics at home who question his decision to confront the cartels without adequate preparation and without a victory strategy. Analysts also attribute spreading violence to weak Mexican institutions and declining powers of the presidency. There are also plenty of voices ready to bang the traditional nationalist, anti-U.S. drum and blame Mexico's problems on its neighbor to the north.

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Calderon himself recently voiced public frustration with the Obama Administration for bureaucratic hurdles and slow delivery of promised assistance and for a lack of inter-agency cooperation. He lashed out at the U.S. for not reducing drug demand or stemming the flow of arms into Mexico, which he claimed had increased despite U.S. efforts.

The U.S. View: The Drug War as a Headache.

In the U.S., President Obama views Mexico as just one of several domestic and foreign policy headaches. His direct involvement in U.S.–Mexico relations and drug issues remains episodic. While the White House accepts co-responsibility for Mexico's current problems, it has also spoken of the "failed" war on drugs and expressed disagreement over the severity of the threat to Mexico's future stability. The President has yet to speak publicly about the harm illicit drug consumption causes in the U.S. or lend his voice to sustained demand-reduction efforts.

Further, key actors in the Obama Administration do not command the full confidence of the American people. Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano's claim that the border is more secure than ever often rings hollow in states that border Mexico. The President's drug czar, Gil Kerlikowske, also began his tenure by arguing that a war on drugs is a war on the American people and has redirected attention to the domestic side of America's drug woes: demand reduction, treatment, and harm reduction.

In responding to Mexico's drug crisis, U.S. opinion is divided. A vocal minority in the U.S. urge decriminalization and/or legalization as an appropriate response to violence. Critics of the Calderon administration rightfully point to endemic corruption, slow progress in law enforcement and judicial reform, and unchecked violence. However, they run the risk of engaging in self-fulfilling prophesy when they assert that Mexico is incapable of curbing drug violence and rampant criminality. As for Congress, it has put financial support for border security and anti-drug assistance to Mexico on the chopping block.

Mexico and U.S. Vital Interests. President Obama knows that a stable and prosperous Mexico is a critical national interest. During Calderon's visit,

President Obama will employ his diplomatic skills to offer encouragement and reassurance to Calderon to stay the course and look upon the U.S. as a steady and reliable strategic partner. President Obama may also offer to fine tune assistance currently given under the Merida Initiative. But will this be enough to calm a jittery Mexican president?

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan confronted what he considered a major threat emerging in the Americas as the forces of Communist subversion and social revolution swept over Central America. He responded with vigorous actions, going before a joint session of Congress to sound the alarm, launching a major bipartisan commission led by Henry Kissinger to forge consensus, broadening development and security assistance to Central America, and vowing to fight insurgency. In short he responded to a clear-cut threat with bold actions and direct presidential involvement.

While the Central American threat of the 1980s was linked to the dynamics of the Cold War, the stakes in Mexico and Central America in 2011 are similarly high. Perceptions of weak or inadequate responses and inattention in Washington will only contribute to future national security nightmares.

Leadership and Strategy Required. President Obama has occupied the White House for two years. During this time, an air of uncertainty and pessimism has hovered over U.S.–Mexican relations. The Obama Administration should do more than simply listen sympathetically while Mexico disintegrates. At least three changes in U.S. policy are urgently needed:

1. **Presidential leadership.** President Obama needs to elevate the importance of the nation's commitment to security along its southern frontier and to supporting a stable, secure, and democratic Mexico. This needs to be a daily concern, properly voiced on a regular basis and assigned the highest priority by the Oval Office.
2. **Integrated strategy.** The Administration's numerous programs from the Merida Initiative for counter-drug plans in Central America, the Caribbean, and Colombia need to be rolled into a single, integrated strategy for battling criminal enterprises.

3. *Adequate but targeted resources.* The current mood in Washington is to let America's budget woes define U.S. anti-drug and security strategies. Such an approach is both myopic and dangerous if security and stability in Mexico further deteriorate. The need for adequate but targeted resources remains critical.

So Close Yet So Far. The Calderon–Obama meeting will highlight a widening gap between

Mexico and the U.S. Bridging it will require the two nations and their leaders to move on similar tracks to address what is becoming one of the major security concerns facing the U.S. today.

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