No doubt about it, 2010 was not a good year for Mexico. After setting new records for cartel-related violence, it’s hard to imagine 2011 could be much worse. While reversing this trend will be extremely difficult, here are three things the Mexican and U.S. governments can do to help make this a better year for Mexico and, by extension, the United States.

De-politicize efforts to combat organized crime. Once every 20 years, presidential elections in both countries coincide, this time in 2012. 2011, then, becomes a pivotal political year as candidates seek to distinguish themselves in crowded primary fields. If history serves as prologue, candidates will undoubtedly question the binational partnership that emerged between Presidents Felipe Calderón and George W. Bush.

The leaders of major political parties in both countries need to view the serious threats posed by organized crime dispassionately and not as red meat to fire up their party base. Instead, Mexico’s political leaders should agree to a comprehensive national strategy for combating organized crime that can withstand the vicissitudes of the coming election cycle. Mexico needs to build on efforts to professionalize the federal police and expand these efforts to state and municipal forces. Additionally, it should step up efforts to reform the country’s judiciary. The U.S. should, likewise, continue bipartisan efforts to support these reforms.

Increase transparency and accountability. While most Mexicans continue to respect and support Calderón, polling suggests they have little faith in their public institutions. For example, national crime-victim surveys document severe underreporting of crime, as low as 22 percent in one national survey and only 14 percent in crime-ridden Ciudad Juárez.
Mexico urgently needs to transform its institutions so they are more transparent, accountable and trusted by the public. For example, Mexico has relied on purges of corrupt officials along with better vetting and training programs to professionalize police forces. These are important but insufficient tools if they are not accompanied by strong accountability mechanisms that can audit police and judicial behavior, independently examine allegations of torture and abuse, and hold officials accountable.

The U.S. must reduce consumption of illegal drugs and disrupt the flow of firearms to Mexico. Reducing teen smoking in the U.S. required a sustained public policy approach that bore results over time. By some estimates, a significant reduction in illegal drug consumption in the U.S. would take at least five years even if new users fell to zero in the next year, and the impact on violence in Mexico would be equally delayed. Nevertheless, it is vitally important to step up treatment and prevention efforts in the U.S. with full bipartisan support.

Likewise, disrupting firearms trafficking to Mexico requires courage by the United States. There are three important steps the U.S. can take that would provide federal and state authorities powerful tools to combat weapons traffickers: First, require gun store owners to report multiple long-gun sales to an individual in a month much as they are required to do with multiple handgun sales. Second, explicitly permit the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to share crime gun trace data with local law enforcement agencies and prosecutors. Third, create incentives for state and federal prosecutors to pursue trafficking conspiracy cases in addition to individual criminal sales.

While it would be unwise to suggest that these steps would guarantee a decrease in violence in 2011, together they can lead to important improvements by providing the public greater clarity about the way forward, offering certainty that whoever is in power will stay the course and encouraging the public to work with authorities to break the power of organized crime in both countries.

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