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In response to escalating violence along the Southwest border region and the rising influence of Mexico's drug cartels, the Obama administration, under the leadership of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, recently unveiled its Southwest Border Security Initiative. There is no question that a comprehensive and effective strategy to control our border with Mexico is urgently needed - but this plan falls short of that objective.

The threat presented by Mexico's drug cartels, a force that is estimated to consist of more than 100,000 individuals, is far too serious to ignore. Communities and law enforcement on both sides of the border are at constant risk as these drug networks increase their production and smuggling of illegal narcotics into the United States.

Over the past year, there have been more than 7,000 deaths attributed to border violence. More than 1,000 of these deaths occurred in January of this year alone. Comparatively, there have been roughly 600 reported deaths in both Iraq and Afghanistan in the first two months of 2009 due to ongoing insurgent activity - 63 of which were American military personnel.

These figures put into perspective the significant challenges we face along our southern land border and the immediate need for a comprehensive border security strategy. Border security cannot be limited to just personnel, nor can it be limited to just technology or infrastructure. Effectively securing the border will require a combination of these approaches, as well as better coordination between our federal agencies.

While Secretary Napolitano's plan rightly sends surveillance equipment and an additional 360 agents to the border, it is unclear whether the Department of Homeland Security intends to build upon the success of existing border infrastructure and security fencing. The plan unveiled by Napolitano avoids expanding this infrastructure despite the fact that it remains the most effective and readily available enforcement mechanism available.

Without adequate fencing and accompanying infrastructure, regardless of how many agents are patrolling the border or how much technology is deployed, our border with Mexico will not be fully secured. Fencing in San Diego and Yuma, Ariz., once considered two of the most prolific smuggling corridors in the country, has proven to be an effective deterrent to illegal foot and vehicle traffic. Unfortunately, this much-needed infrastructure does not appear to be part of the Obama administration's border control initiative.

It would be wise for Napolitano to consider building additional infrastructure wherever needed and complement it with the appropriate mix of surveillance technology and personnel. Equally important, the Obama administration must begin working to improve coordination between the departments of Justice and Homeland Security when it comes to border control.

According to reports, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and Explosives is refusing to authorize some of its agents to fully participate in several special task forces created by Homeland Security that target the movement of firearms and money from the United States to Mexico. Cooperation between these and other agencies is essential to our border control efforts, and any disputes obstructing coordination should be immediately resolved.

Another challenge facing Napolitano's border security initiative are outdated guidelines for joint investigations on firearms, money laundering and narcotics trafficking. Current guidelines, for example, limit drug investigations by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to about 1,500 across the country. That is because the Drug Enforcement Agency - not ICE - maintains primary jurisdiction over these investigations. This restriction among others must be adjusted to reflect the realities of today's border environment.

Achieving a secure and enforceable border will require more than just the technology and personnel outlined in the Southwest Border Security Initiative. It will require a comprehensive approach that balances these elements with the necessary amount of infrastructure, including underused assets such as unmanned aerial vehicles, and an emphasis on federal resource sharing and inter-agency cooperation.

Over the coming weeks and months, the Obama administration must make border security a priority and reevaluate the Southwest Border Security Initiative. We need a strategy that will have an immediate and lasting impact and serve to gain control of our border once and for all.

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