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With the national election now in the rearview, talk of immigration reform is back.

America's immigration system is outdated and extraordinarily inefficient, but before Congress even considers debating a reform proposal of any kind, full attention must be given to strengthening security along the nation's international borders.

Some within the Republican Party have interpreted November's election results and Hispanic voter turnout in favor of President Obama as a signal that a pro-amnesty approach on immigration is necessary to win support in the future. I couldn't disagree more.

A large number of Hispanics share traditional conservative values. They also desire to live in a country, as does anyone else, where the economy is strong, wages are good and health care is accessible. With much of the focus still on economic recovery and job creation, these are all points that Republicans would be wise to emphasize across all demographics.

Meanwhile, the need for stronger and more enforceable borders is greater than ever.

Without securing the U.S.-Mexico border, there is no end in sight to the recurring cross-border violence and drug and human smuggling that are rightly a major part of the national immigration debate.

During former Mexican President Felipe Calderón's time in office, a lot of praise was doled out by elected leaders and the American media for what's been misinterpreted as an effective counterdrug partnership between the U.S. and Mexico.

Some visible successes even helped shape that perception. For instance, dozens of Mexican

drug cartel leaders were captured or killed by government security forces under Calderón's tenure.

The grimmer reality is that things are spiraling out of control. Those who have been captured or killed have been replaced and where some cartels have lost their strongholds, other cartels have emerged, some even more dangerous and powerful.

For the last six years alone, one reliable Mexican newspaper group conservatively estimates that at least 49,000 people have been killed in cartel and drug-related violence – more than insurgent-related deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. There are also scores who are unaccounted for while the Mexican government has publicly withheld the actual count of dead and missing.

In instances where information has been made available, either by the media or undisclosed government sources, the revelations have been unsettling. Beheadings, public displays of violence, kidnappings and robberies have increased dramatically, according to analysts and reports.

All of this reaffirms that Mexico and our shared international border is a war zone. Many of those who support calls for amnesty also point to America's counter drug partnership with Mexico as evidence that funding, material support and information sharing is capable of settling the smuggling and violence that engulfs the Southwest border. They point to the Merida initiative and other sources of aid, supplying Mexico with more than \$1 billion of taxpayer money for items like Blackhawk Helicopters, communication equipment, night vision and computer software.

In trade, there's been evidence of extensive corruption among Mexico's civilian and military leadership. Illegal drugs, including methamphetamines and heroin, are no less available than they were a half-decade ago and there's been no satisfactory decrease in the quantity of drugs crossing the Southwest border into the U.S.

The funding and personnel that supply these resources would be better spent on improving our own security needs, building the right infrastructure and coordinating with state and local law enforcement on the U.S. side of the border.

The arguments for strengthening border security should not be shunned. They should be elevated and explained in the context of improving conditions for communities within the U.S. and especially across the Southwest border. On other things that matter to most Americans across the ideological spectrum, the conservative message is a good one, centered on individual responsibility, liberty and free markets.

Regardless of how the immigration debate might develop, it's absolutely necessary that border security and enforcement be the first order of business. It's the right position on an issue that really matters to millions of Americans, Hispanic or not.

There is no such thing as immigration reform if the border is not secured.