

New era for foreign policy

INTERVIEW WITH ANDRÉS NAVARRO GARCÍA

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ANDRÉS NAVARRO attended the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD) and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), before embarking upon a diversified career as an architect, writer, professor and politician. Between 1998 and 2014 he held a number of senior posts in the municipality of the National District (Santo Domingo), becoming Secretary General in 2012. He served as Cabinet Director to the Minister of Public Works from April to September 2014, when he was appointed Minister of Foreign Relations by President Danilo Medina.

You were appointed Minister of Foreign Relations in September last year. What have been your priorities since then, and what are the hallmarks of your remaining time in office going to be?

The first thing we have done is to formulate a new approach to foreign policy, because the Dominican Republic's national development agenda has changed, as has the international context, and we face new challenges.

Our strategy is built on a series of pillars. The first is about projecting a new image of our country internationally. For example, the government of the Dominican Republic is now focusing on greater regional integration: that is, economically, politically, and culturally. We want to reposition the role of the country within Central America. To achieve this we have been playing a very active role in meetings, conferences, summits, and particularly in preparing the agenda for CELAC, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. I should also say that the Dominican Republic will hold the pro tempore presidency of CELAC for 2016, which means that among our responsibilities will be the organisation of the Fifth Summit of CELAC Heads of State and Government, which takes place in January 2017.

A central part of our foreign policy is now to look for business opportunities within the region. At the summit of the Central American Integration System [SICA] earlier this year, which the Dominican Republic joined in 2013, business leaders accompanied the government delegation.

At the same time, we have been exploring ways to increase our trade further with the United States and Canada, along with Europe, as well as with the so-called emerging economies, notably Russia. I should say at this point that tourism has always played a key role in our foreign policy, and will continue to do so. Our experience is that tourism is a driver for investment, generating a sustained multiplier effect for all other sectors of the economy.

How has this worked in the past?

This happened with Canada, for example, a country that now plays a big role in our mining sector and in other industries. The same happened with Italy: our relationship began with large numbers of tourists coming here and that led to significant investment

in small- and medium-sized businesses. Overall, our new approach is about moving from reliance on tourism and cooperation to attracting investment. And to do that, we have to provide the right kind of business environment. Over the last 10 years, our legal system has improved tremendously. We now meet international standards of legal guarantees. Now the job is to let people know that this is a safe place for investment.

Tourism is very important to our economy, and we are known internationally as a tourism destination. But we can do more to develop the sector, to make it work for us. For example, our tourism is focused primarily on the 'sun and beach' segment. However, this country has much more to offer the world than beaches, and that is what we are going to promote through our foreign policy.

The island of Hispaniola [which the Dominican Republic shares with its neighbour, Haiti] is small, but there is more biodiversity here than in any other country of the Central America and the Caribbean. The interior is virtually unknown, yet it offers a wide variety of landscapes: we have deserts, mountains and forests within the largest network of protected national parks in the region, covering about a third of the national territory. This means we can offer adventure tourism and extreme sports.

We are also interested in developing historical and cultural tourism, urban tourism: we want people to come here and enjoy a wide range of experiences. We aim to project a more rounded, developed image of the Dominican Republic internationally.

The Dominican Republic has a significant Diaspora, with large communities in the United States and Spain, in particular. Do you have any specific policies to provide more support for them?

Absolutely. Another key pillar of our foreign policy will be to better protect the rights of the 1.8 million Dominicans living abroad. The vast majority of them, some 1.5 million, live in the United States, and the rest in Europe and some Central American countries. Our new foreign policy is to make Dominicans living abroad feel that they are part of the DR. We are in the process of setting up an organisation to represent Dominicans living abroad [the Institute for Dominicans Abroad]. I have been in New York to attend meetings with

Dominican community leaders to discuss these projects and what they can offer our people. I will also be travelling to Madrid. We aim to have set this up by September, and it will be an important part of what the Foreign Ministry does.

In general, we aim to strengthen the institutions of the Dominican Republic abroad, notably our embassies and consulates. This is all part of a process of restructuring the ministry, as well as repositioning our image. At the same time, our foreign service needs to undergo a process of 'professionalisation' if we are going to be more effective. That means better-trained people. So, we are providing more resources to foreign policy training. We have university courses and staff abroad can also train online.

At the same time, we are starting to work directly with the municipal governments of cities so that they can engage in Urban Diplomacy, by linking each other with sister cities abroad facing common problems of a global nature.

The relationship with Haiti has been a difficult one for many years. What are you doing to improve relations with your closest neighbour?

We are keen to let the world know that we have made great strides in improving relations with Haiti. Over the last seven months we have created a new agenda with Haiti, doing more in a few months than we did in the previous decade.

We have set up a team of specialists to put a bilateral agenda into action. Obviously, this is not going to be easy: there are many challenges, but as you say, Haiti is our closest neighbour, and it is a major market for

the Dominican Republic. We should remember that with Haiti, we not only have a political and trade agenda, but cultural, historical, and social ties. We are in touch not just with the business sector there, but also with civil society organisations, so the dialogue is not just political, but also commercial and social. We believe this new strategy will provide greater sustainability to our relationship, so that we can set up mechanisms and institutions that will function regardless of the government of the day. We want to create a virtuous circle.

As part of this process, the Foreign Ministry has decided to take over the running of border crossings. We have five provinces that border with Haiti, and we are going to provide more support to immigration and customs, as well as working on bilateral issues.

Your planned visit to the United Kingdom in June is the first by a Dominican Foreign Minister in three years. What are your objectives, hopes, and priorities, and what is the message you want to give to the government and business community in Britain?

In short, we want better bilateral relations. One way to do this is to use our diplomatic mission in London, which is already very proactive: In June we will hold the fourth Dominican Week in the UK, which promotes Dominican products, celebrates our culture, and reaches out to investors. We are working to improve relations at all levels: political, commercial, and cultural. The week will be packed with visits and meetings, and I intend to talk to representatives from different sectors and, in particular, to visit City Hall for

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Dominican President Danilo Medina [fourth from right] joins his fellow leaders at the VII Summit of the Americas in Panama

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a dialogue with the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson.

We have historic ties with a series of countries that we want to develop further, from business, politics and cooperation to more solid trade and investment ties. And the UK is precisely one of these countries – and one with which the trade balance could be improved. We have to let people know what we have been doing to improve the legal and business climate in the Dominican Republic. This is how we create trust and confidence in the country and attract investors.

At the same time, we want to explore the possibilities for cooperation, particularly in areas such as strengthening our institutions. We understand that countries like ours have a lot of resources, not just natural, but also financial. The difficulties we face are at the institutional level. This means that resources are not distributed or invested properly, or not invested in the right priority areas. We need stronger legal guarantees, we need to learn from countries that have developed a tradition of strong institutions, like the United Kingdom, and we need to boost our investment and use our natural resources more effectively.

The highlight of your visit to Europe will be the EU-CELAC Summit in Brussels. What do you want out of this meeting, and what will be on the agenda for your presidency of CELAC in 2016?

In March this year, we joined CELAC's 'leadership quartet'. Our intention is to provide continuity; we want stability. Other priorities include financing cooperation development: we hope for more regional cooperation with Europe to come out of the summit. Technology and education: the two are related, and they are about adding value to the lives of our people and to what we produce. There are other areas, such as climate change. The problem in the past is that these types of summits tend to be limited to good intentions, and rarely go further in terms of results and action, because what is agreed on often cannot be measured. So what the quartet has said it will do is that, from now on, CELAC meetings will produce a two-part document: one part will include general statements, and there will be another, with an agenda to deal with specific issues that can be measured over the course of the year, or for a couple of years, and that may cross over into the presidencies of other members. As I've said, the goal is continuity, even though things will inevitably happen that can change the scenario.

One thing that might bring about change over the course of this year is the rapprochement between the United States and Cuba. How do you see this affecting the Dominican Republic?

The DR could benefit or lose out as a result of improved relations between Cuba and the US, which we imagine

will lead to the lifting of the embargo. It depends how we respond now, on the political and trade levels. Our President, Danilo Medina has supported the reopening of relations between the two countries and made it clear that we are here to do whatever is needed to strengthen this process of rapprochement.

We have traditionally had strong ties with Cuba, and we have a long, shared, common history. At the same time, this could be a threat to us if we don't prepare ourselves adequately by promoting the right measures internally and externally.

We could have a strong trade alliance with Cuba through tourism, sugar production, and other areas where we can add value. The Cuban population is very well educated, which makes it much easier to establish relations. We have a lot of experience in generating capital, as well as in marketing and trade, that we could share with Cuba. There are many areas where we could establish trade ties.

We have sent a mission to Cuba to start working on stronger diplomatic ties, and see the opening up of Cuba as offering huge opportunities for both countries.

The Dominican Republic has come under fire from Caricom, the regional trade bloc, for alleged mistreatment of Haitian migrants. What have been the repercussions of this, and how are you handling the situation?

We have a lot of undocumented migrants in the country, and most of these are Haitians. We began a process in 2013 allowing them to regularise their situation. This finishes in June this year. We have provided free services to help with this, with offices throughout the country. They do not even need to have a passport: a birth certificate or a document from their country of origin is enough.

But the big problem here has been that most of the migrants from Haiti do not have any documents at all. This is the minimum requirement of any government: show me who you are, something with your name on it. This has made the process of regularising people even more complicated. The Haitian government has tried, but has not succeeded in opening a single office in the DR to help deal with this situation.

We have managed to register 200,000 people, most of them from Haiti. What we will do after this is to apply our migration laws, meaning that anybody without the proper papers will have to return to their country of origin, as allowed for by international protocols.

Our policies have been questioned by some Caricom countries, but we think these criticisms are unfair because they are not based on any knowledge of the situation on the ground. We hope to improve our relations with Caricom when the opportunity presents itself, and believe that these issues can be overcome. **F**