

A new ‘architecture of diplomacy’

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 diverse 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 External Relations by President Danilo Medina.

Everybody needs good neighbours: the Dominican Republic's Foreign Minister, Andrés Navarro with Former President of Haiti, Michel Joseph Martelly

It's a little over a year since you took office as Foreign Minister. What have been your main priorities to date, and how successful have you been in meeting them?

One of the main challenges this government has taken on is that of strengthening the institutions of the Dominican Republic, and in my case, that means a complete overhaul of the foreign ministry and our diplomatic corps.

Last year, 2015, we embarked upon a process of institutional reform aimed at creating a new ‘architecture of diplomacy’, and that has involved changing the whole structure of the ministry. But this has only been the first step, and the process of implementing a strategic plan to coordinate the ministry's activities will take five years.

This plan includes verification mechanisms to allow us to evaluate the efficiency of the ministry's different activities. For example, we have created a prize for diplomatic excellence and are now rewarding best practices by our staff. We have also reformed the way the ministry is financed. Just as importantly, we are in the process of improving the training our diplomats undergo. Among the things I most want to see is Dominican diplomats accredited abroad taking a more proactive role in disseminating information about the country, especially the government's human rights and social policies.

At the same time, the Export and Investment Centre of the Dominican Republic (CEI-RD) is preparing a list



of exportable products so that diplomats can look for opportunities in the countries where they are posted.

Another key task is to look after the interests of Dominicans living abroad, who number some two million, or 20 per cent of the population. With this in mind, we have launched the Dominicans Abroad Institute (INDEX), an academic, arts and research institution. This initiative is aimed at averting the Dominican diaspora's disconnect with the Dominican Republic and to assist the large Dominican communities living in cities like New York, Madrid, and Barcelona. These communities can play a big role in helping the towns and cities they come from back home. For example, in Madrid, most of the Dominican community comes from four or five towns in the same region. We need to be establishing stronger ties between them.

It's time we let the world know that the Dominican Republic is more than beach, bachata and baseball. In short, we are creating a competitive institution able to play an important role in regional affairs, and the reforms I have outlined are part of a new vision of diplomacy, one that is more inclusive, that involves society as a whole: business, civic organisations, NGOs. Our reinvigorated diplomacy should reflect the interests of the nation, not the just the government. This is a process that must involve the whole country.

How important is this year's Presidency Pro Tempore (PPT) of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) for the Dominican Republic, and what does it mean for the image of the country abroad, both regionally and globally?

It is true that traditionally we have not played a very big role in CELAC – or for that matter, the Organisation of American States (OAS). For us, CELAC is important because it is a space for political dialogue: it is different to the OAS because its agenda is more focused on our region. As I'm sure you know, over the last year there has been a concerted international campaign against our immigration policies toward Haiti and Haitians living in the Dominican Republic. Our aim now is for CELAC, and the OAS, to get to know the DR better and to understand why we have taken certain decisions.

Under the leadership of President Danilo Medina, the Government of the Dominican Republic's

overriding priority is to reduce poverty and inequality among CELAC's 33 members. This theme tops the five pillars of the "Agenda 2020", tabled by Costa Rica and Ecuador, which held the presidency in 2014 and 2015 respectively. The other pillars are education, technology and innovation; the environment and climate change; infrastructure and connectivity, and financing for development.

During our presidency of CELAC, the DR will also be pushing the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, which we believe should be the cornerstone of OAS policies. The problem our region faces is that it has become too isolated, and that is something we want to address during our presidency. In the case of the OAS, we want to see reform: the organisation needs to be stronger, it needs renewing, and it needs to be more cohesive. Overall, the main challenge we need to tackle is how to promote better dialogue among the members of both organisations, and in particular over human rights, democracy, and security.

I would also like to mention CARICOM, which has been particularly critical of the DR over our immigration problems with Haiti. The DR needs time to establish a relationship with CARICOM if we are to address the concerns of Haiti.

You have dedicated a lot of your time in office to resolving the difficult bilateral relations with the DR's closest neighbour. What outcomes do you feel you have achieved?

Haiti is our neighbour on the island of Hispaniola (originally known as Quisqueya to the native Taíno indians), and as such it is one of our most important relationships. But the situation there has been very unstable for many years, and has been made more difficult since the earthquake of 2010. Quite simply, the situation is still not stable enough to establish an agenda yet. We will have to wait until the country is able to hold its general elections, and then make a decision based on what happens afterwards. All of this has made it difficult to establish long-term relations and to map out policies for the future. Everything we did last year was necessary to help establish this relationship. As soon as a new government is installed we will continue talking.

The government and business leaders of the Dominican Republic will continue to work with our Haitian counterparts to overcome stumbling blocks, and we have already outlined areas for cooperation. These include improving trade and normalising freight transport between the two countries. We have both given our support of the Quisqueya Binational Economic Council (CEBQ) initiative, which gives a key role to the private sectors of our two countries. At the same time, our respective foreign ministries are

in constant contact to coordinate the repatriation of undocumented people.

The two countries' private sectors appear to have closer relations than their governments, as the CEBQ initiative shows. What can government learn from the approach and experience of the private sector in this regard?

We return to the idea that diplomacy is about more than just foreign affairs: business relationships are often more sustainable than their political counterparts, which is how the CEBQ will help promote human development in our border regions with Haiti. Improving relations with Haiti is not just about political dialogue, there is a whole range of other organisations and sectors involved in the process: sport, culture, business, education, and so on. As with the European Union, which doesn't function simply at the political level, neither can our diplomatic relations with our neighbours. We need to take a more inclusive, participative approach to diplomacy, and that means involving civil society and business.

At home, the foreign ministry's team is working closely with the leadership of the National Business Council (CONEP) to outline a strategy to boost exports and promote trade and investment in the Dominican Republic.

Our aim is to forge a partnership to collaborate and develop various topics of common interest with the private sector as part of an ongoing process of trade liberalisation, creating jobs and spurring the growth of exports in the process. The government is committed to bolstering ties with the export sector, which, as I say, can play a leading role in the efforts of our ambassadors abroad. Ours is a broad vision that will connect the foreign ministry with business, in the knowledge that this strategic alliance can lead to economic development.

Diplomacy is about more than just foreign affairs: business relationships are often more sustainable than their political counterparts

Dominican Foreign Minister Andrés Navarro in conversation with Alastair Harris, Editor of FIRST

