

# Interview with Arturo Sarukhán, Mexican Ambassador To the United States

Leonardo Curzio\*

**Leonardo Curzio (LC):** Mr. Ambassador, May 20 must have been a very special day for you, when President Felipe Calderón was applauded 27 times in the United States Congress.

**Arturo Sarukhán (AS):** Certainly, and I think that the applause was particularly welcomed by the president as he entered the hall and was introduced by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. For the first time in many years, the U.S. Congress recognizes what is being done in Mexico, the efforts of a first executive who has decided to confront organized crime. The recognition of how important bilateral relationships are for anti-narcotics cooperation against organized crime began during a Republican administration, under George W. Bush, but it has been under this Democratic administration that the legislators themselves have become the big champions of cooperation with Mexico against organized crime, and I think that was clear last May 20.

**LC:** You could count 13 minutes of applause, and another noteworthy thing was the way the president was treated. Mr. Am-



Mexico's ambassador in the United States.

bassador—I don't know if you talk in these terms in international relations—but the reception of Mexico's president seemed affectionate.

**AS:** Well, in this area one runs the risk of falling into using hackneyed phrases, but, as you say, the way the Obamas welcomed the president was really remarkable. It was clear at the state dinner and the reception later, in that pavilion decorated with monarch butterflies in honor of President Calderón's Michoacán roots, that there was a touch that not all heads of state do for a visiting first executive.

**LC:** Apart from this great recognition of President Calderón, could we say that greater sensitivity was fostered among po-

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litical circles and, more broadly, among the public, about the need to assume joint responsibility not only for security issues, but also for migration?

**AS:** Yes. As a matter of fact, on Friday, May 21, a *Washington Post* editorial commented on Felipe Calderón’s speech, firmly supporting his proposal of stopping the flow of weapons to Mexico. And, it’s true: the other issues are starting to permeate the thinking of both political circles and the public in the United States. That doesn’t mean that everything has been resolved or that there won’t be any more problems and tensions to deal with—even Gordian knots that will have to be cut—but I think that the joint communiqué by both presidents after the meeting in the Oval Office, a seven-page document, is very substantive.<sup>1</sup> It’s divided into four or five issues fundamental to bilateral relations, and it shows that while security is at the core, bilateral relations go far beyond that and involve issues as important as economic development; competitiveness; the social welfare of our two countries; prob-

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lems of global scope, like how to deal with the challenges of climate change; and, obviously other commitments like security and the need for immigration reform.

**LC:** What can you tell us about competitiveness in the region?

**AS:** We could say that it has advanced, not only within North America, but also in how we continue to strengthen North America’s ability to compete with Asia and the European Union, in the standardization of procedures, the elimination of customs forms in each of our three countries. It seems to me that the communiqué I mentioned shows the wide array of issues and an unprecedented determination to continue moving ahead and resolving questions of mutual interest.

For several years, Mexican administrations had been trying to put the need for a comprehensive approach to border issues on the table; not just security and migration, but

also facilitating border and customs operations, the construction of new infrastructure, the mitigation of environmental impacts, and the need to have non-intrusive technology to facilitate imports and exports.

This concept of a “twenty-first century border” implies a comprehensive focus that previous U.S. administrations simply had not accepted. For the first time, we are seeing this kind of focus in handling border issues, which seems very important to me.

**LC:** At home, President Calderón’s speech was very well received. The president of Mexico’s Senate, Carlos Navarrete, of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), dubbed it a speech that reflected a large part of our national aspirations. Now, I have read criticisms saying that Felipe Calderón had crossed certain lines and meddled in U.S. politics, like in the case of Arizona, for example. What is your point of view about this?

**AS:** A speech like this one has to walk a very fine line, and I think that objective was achieved, even though perhaps we did wade into “American waters,” so to speak, to a certain extent. But I don’t think there’s any other way of establishing a firm, clear, forceful position about the potential impacts that that law could have.

I think that it was important for President Calderón to set out his position and, in effect, the reaction in the House of Representatives was partisan, as I suppose that anyone watching on television would have noticed: the entire Democratic caucus and guests in the gallery were on their feet applauding Felipe Calderón.

**LC:** What significance did his visit to Arlington have?

**AS:** I think it sent two very powerful messages: first, that we are a country looking forward, not back, interested in all aspects of relations with the United States. Prime ministers and heads of state or government of countries defeated militarily by the United States, like, for example, Japan and Germany, have put wreaths on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I think it was important for Mexico to make this kind of gesture in recognition of the fallen, because, also, we mustn’t forget that that tomb also includes soldiers from World Wars I and II.

**LC:** We were their allies in World War II...

**AS:** That's right. The second reason is—and I think this is what really motivated the president to make the decision—the outstanding role that Mexican Americans and Hispanics in general are playing in the United States armed forces. Many of them serve in the U.S. military as a means to get their U.S. citizenship. A lot of relatives of Mexican-American and Hispanic veterans and fallen accompanied the president and they were truly moved; some had tears in their eyes when they thanked him for making that gesture to recognize the community's contributions to that nation's security.

**LC:** It was interesting that the president opened his speech evoking the words of Octavio Paz, saying that the United States is a country that looks to the future and that in many ways, ours is one that looks to the past. The president began by saying that Mexico is also a country that looks to the future and has to work out a new way of looking at relations with its neighbor.

**AS:** At one point, Octavio Paz also wrote that the relationship between Mexico and the United States was complicated, to say the least, because we Mexicans didn't know how to talk and the Americans didn't know how to listen.

For the first time, Mexico is talking—and loudly—and for the first time, the Americans are listening. I think this has created once again the possibility of changing the direction the relationship takes, of giving it a strategic horizon. That doesn't mean that we should set off fireworks in the belief that everything has been solved in bilateral relations. The problems will continue. There will be issues that we'll have to resolve; we'll continue to have different perspectives on a series of bilateral, regional, and global questions.

It seems to me that this relationship, despite how complicated the context is because of the events in Arizona, the lack of immigration reform, and the violence we are witnessing along the border, has a promising future if we know how to capitalize on it. **MM**

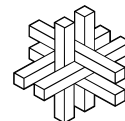
#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/declaracion-conjunta-de-los-presidentes-barack-obama-y-felipe-calderon> and <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/declaraciones-del-presidente-obama-y-el-presidente-calderon-de-mexico-en-declaracion>.

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