A Conversation with Carlos Pascual, United States Ambassador to Mexico

President Obama nominated Carlos Pascual as the next United States Ambassador to Mexico in June 2009. The United States Senate confirmed the nomination on August 7 and Ambassador Pascual presented his credentials to the Mexican government on August 9, 2009.

Ambassador Pascual has had a 23 year career in the United States Department of State, National Security Council (NSC), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

He served as coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization at the U.S. Department of State, where he led and organized U.S. government planning to help stabilize and reconstruct societies in transition from conflict or civil strife.

Ambassador Pascual was Coordinator for U.S. Assistance to Europe and Eurasia (2003), where he oversaw regional and country assistance strategies to promote market-oriented and democratic states. From October 2000 until August 2003, Ambassador Pascual served as U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine. From July 1998 to January 2000, Ambassador Pascual served as Special Assistant to the President and NSC Senior Director for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, and from 1995 to 1998 as Director for the same region. From 1983 to 1985, Ambassador Pascual worked for USAID in Sudan, South Africa, and Mozambique and as Deputy Assistant Administrator for Europe and Eurasia.

Most recently, Ambassador Pascual was Vice President and Director of the Foreign Policy Studies Program at the Brookings Institution. Ambassador Pascual received his M.P.P. from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in 1982 and his B.A. from Stanford University in 1980. He has served on the board of directors for the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, and the Internews Network. He has also served on the Advisory Group for the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund.

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In an ideal world what would the Mexican government want the US to do to assist with the security situation in Mexico?

I think the Mexican government would want the US to do two things. The first thing would be for the US to more aggressively reduce drug demand. Demand for drugs is seen as a driver of violence throughout the hemisphere. It is not just affecting Mexico but affects points of transit all throughout Central America, the Caribbean, and South America as well. It is destructive for our own society. So reducing drug demand would certainly be a win-win situation for the both the US and Mexico and the rest of the hemisphere. Under the Obama administration, we have taken a more aggressive stance on demand reduction. We have increased the budget for prevention and treatment and we have taken a more aggressive stance on working with communities and seeking employment programs for former addicts. But still, the level of resources, $5.6 billion, devoted to this is miniscule relative to the problem. Much more needs to be done.

The second thing would be for the US to more aggressively control the flow of arms into Mexico. There have been about 29,000 homicides in Mexico since December of 2006. The vast majority of those have been committed with arms that have been sourced in the US. It is true that we have global arms markets but the easiest access for arms right now is right here on the US side of the border. Many of those weapons are either semi-automatic weapons or weapons that are easily adjusted to become semi-automatic weapons. It has made violence and the recourse to violence so much easier. Stopping illegal arms exports is not the only solution to the violence in Mexico. One has to realize that the violence is fueled by phenomenal and brutal competition among transnational criminal groups that are seeking to traffic illegal drugs. But the more easily they can acquire arms to increase their firepower, the more menacing it is to Mexican society, and the harder it is for Mexican authorities to be able to stabilize the situation inside the country.

Just to clarify, the arms are bought legally in the United States?

The purchases in the US are generally legal but the export to Mexico is illegal. The export particularly for drug trafficking organizations is illegal. The United States and Mexico introduced a mechanism to try and combat this that allows arms to be traced back to the last legal point of sale. That information is then used to examine patterns of sales in the US and to use that to build up cases in order to prosecute the individuals, not just the straw purchasers who are the individual buyers, but the ones who are organizing these rings, which is critical. One of the key objectives we have to have is to demonstrate to those who are trafficking in arms is that they cannot do this with impunity, that there will be a cost. That is why significant and serious prison sentences for arms trafficking are so important.

[Mexican] President Calderon has criticized Proposition 19 in California, saying that it will boost demand for marijuana and will fuel the violence in Mexico. What is your opinion of this?

President Calderon has opposed Proposition 19. The Obama administration has opposed it as well. Attorney General Eric Holder, the US Drug Enforcement Agency, and others have said that they oppose the legalization of marijuana and see it as a gateway drug that could create a culture that will facilitate the use of not only marijuana but other drugs as well. It is the specific issue of marijuana as a gateway drug and the creation of a culture of acceptability of the use of drugs that President Calderon is concerned about. He

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has expressed on a number of occasions that if there is a cultural environment where people are willing and interested in consuming more drugs, and if that is seen as socially acceptable, that it will further fuel demand. As you further fuel demand, you further expand the market that is available to transnational criminal groups which are at the center of violence. That is the foundation of his concern. There are a lot of unknowns with Proposition 19, including exactly what actions might be taken on the part of the Obama administration and Attorney General Holder. President Obama and Attorney General Holder have indicated that everything is on the table, suggesting that a legal challenge is possible. How that would proceed would remain to be seen but first we have to see what comes out in the vote.

**In your lecture [as part of the Stanford FSI Payne Distinguished Lecture series] yesterday [October 20, 2010], you said that the most important thing that Mexico can do is instill rule of law in the country. Why do you think rule of law is more important than other development factors such as education?**

Mexico has phenomenal resources and a very talented society. It has the capacity to have a strong educational system but one thing which is a facilitator throughout any society is the ability to believe and have faith that the law is your friend and that the law is going to help you that there is predictability in that society. It is critical from a business and economic perspective to be able to negotiate contracts and sustain an environment where companies have the confidence and willingness to invest. It is critical from a social environment so that people feel that they are going to be protected and that criminals are going to be investigated, arrested, and prosecuted and put in jail. That is fundamental to both deterring illegal activity and giving people the confidence that they can proceed and lead a normal life. I truly believe that if you can have a stronger sense of rule of law in Mexico and if citizens perceive that, it will free them and allow them to unleash their potential in so many other areas. That does not deny the importance of education or business activity or fighting poverty but I see this as a fundamental tool, which makes everything else so much easier and more effective.

**What are your thoughts on the heated rhetoric surrounding immigration in the US, especially concerning the passage of Arizona's Senate Bill 1070 (Arizona SB 1070). How does the SB 1070 affect our interest in Mexico? What is the view in Mexico of this debate?**

The issue of immigration is intensely interlinked between Mexico and the US. Both Mexicans and Americans have a phenomenal interest in this. Arizona SB 1070 had a phenomenally negative effect in Mexico. The legislation that was passed in Arizona was seen as discriminatory on an ethnic basis and seen as a statement against Mexico and Mexicans as a class. The Obama administration has opposed it and has brought a suit against the state of Arizona on the basis that it is usurping responsibilities that pertain to the federal government. It creates the foundation for a patchwork of immigration laws that are unsustainable. A critical point is that we need a consistent immigration system that applies to the entire country and is not defined on a state-by-state basis. Beyond that, there is a concern that identifying a class of people is a violation of civil rights as well.

President Obama has clearly advocated for comprehensive immigration reform that allows us to have a legal framework that regulates the way that people move from Mexico to the United States in a way that serves the interest of both countries. We have to recognize that the reason that there are 11 million undocumented workers in the US is not just because these are individuals coming to the US to obtain jobs, but that there is a demand for their service, for their labor. If this demand for their labor exists, we obviously must have interest for that as well.

President Obama has proposed a three-tiered system for immigration reform. The first part would provide a legal foundation for how people move across the border and the conditions in which they are able to move back and forth. The second creates a framework for businesses to legally hire workers but also creates penalties for violation of those rules. The third would provide a mechanism for undocumented workers, who are in the United States, to find a path to legality, which would include paying a fine, paying taxes, and learning
English as part of that process.

A serious concern is that if we do not have a mechanism that gives legal certainty, clarity, and transparency in the movement of workers between Mexico and the US, it can potentially evoke fear and nationalist backlash in both countries. The more transparent that we can make the process for migration and movement of temporary or permanent labor between the two countries, the more easily it would be understood by workers in the U.S. so that they don’t feel that their jobs are being taken away, and the easier it would be for us to monitor and control immigration so that the potential risks of illegality associated with that migration can also be controlled.

*How did your experience as a Stanford undergraduate influence you?*

The four years that I spent here were probably the four most formative years of my professional development. There was no other place in my life that challenged me, in such a personal way, to think creatively, analyze problems, develop solutions, and accept responsibility for the way that I approached issues in a range of different areas. Whether I was working on my academic studies and the challenges that my courses presented, collaborating with other students, serving as a Resident Advisor in Toyon to the new students who were coming in and thinking about how to structure programs for them that would help them take maximum advantage of the programs at Stanford University, participating in Stanford in Government and thinking about how we could make it easier for students to have experiences in public service, or being a teaching assistant in the Department of Political Science and trying to both understand the concepts that were being put forth by Stanford professors and how to communicate them to students, it was important to ask what it was that was going to make a difference in the way that people approach and understand an issue. In all of those experiences at Stanford, one of the things that was key was not to be hemmed into traditional boxes of thinking but to try to be creative and try to let that drive the way that I approach problems. That was a phenomenally important lesson that has served me well throughout my career.

One thing I would just say from a personal and a professional perspective is the importance of being willing to take risks and be open to new possibilities. At one point in my career, I was asked to go to South Africa and start some programs supporting anti-apartheid organizations promoting peaceful change. It was at a time when I was working on economic development issues and it was seen as an untraditional thing to do. In fact, some of my colleagues advised me against it because they said it would take me away from the traditional aspects of economic development. But a question I asked myself was: If 10 years from now, somebody asked me if I had an opportunity to do something in supporting, even in some small way, the end of South Africa’s Apartheid and I said no, how would I feel? That became my ten-year rule to force myself to look ahead and ask how would I feel if I had given up or missed a particular opportunity. I think it is important to sometimes let that guide us because otherwise we can miss monumental opportunities that may be untraditional but are particularly important both for what they allow us to do in terms of contributing to others and also for allowing those opportunities to shape our lives and the way that we think about them. §