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by Francisco Suárez Dávila
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POLICY UPDATE

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Former Ambassador of Mexico
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As a former Mexican ambassador to Canada, I have become attached to your great country and committed to the long term strengthening of our bilateral relationship. We are now at an important crossroad and as such, I will make a few specific points with regards to current opportunities and risks.

There is a new vision, filled with enormous possibilities for the North American Region as a world economic powerhouse because of the clear comparative advantages in an otherwise bleak world. Mexico was recently mentioned by futurologist Lawrence Freedman as a new economic power soon to be a size equivalent to France, Italy or the United Kingdom.

We are fortunate that the new Trudeau government supports reconstructing the relationship with both the United States and Mexico and shares a new world vision, including a strategy against climate change. He expressed a clear political commitment to eliminate “immediately” the visa requirement to Mexicans, a clear irritant and stumbling block. Foreign Minister Dion recently echoed this view, when he said “Visas Kaput”. We are now preparing for an authentic “Three Amigos Summit” to be held in Canada this month, which could be the launching pad for this vision.

Some officials, overzealous in their bureaucratic responsibilities, may be short-sighted, miss the bigger picture and perhaps have an unbalanced or outdated view of the benefits, costs and risks. It should be understood, however, that once a high level political decision has been adopted the civil service must solve the problems needed to implement the decision, not create or defer them. In this vein, below are presented salient “facts and fallacies of the visa issue”.

Some people are still fighting old wars. Canada introduced visa requirements for Mexicans because it was thought that Canada’s very open system had admitted refugees that were ‘phony’. At the peak in 2008, Canada received 9,500 refugee claims from Mexican citizens; 11 per cent of those refugee claimants were accepted. Since then, regulation and procedures were tightened. Decisions were taken in three months, not three years. Regardless of the current legal debate, Mexico was one of the few countries to be given status by Canada as a “designated country of origin”, recognizing us as a democracy with basically no discrimination by race, gender, religion or politics.

Canadian migration authorities were over-impressed by “one” famous case of a Rumanian “people smuggling” ring that linked both the United States and Mexico. For example, a Canadian Immigration Minister once made remarks to me regarding his concern about Somalis. I told him Somalis do not carry Mexican passports, and that in the last five years, only 500 Somalis came to Mexico while several times more live in the United States and Canada.

We do have a porous border with Central America, with 100,000 crossings annually, but that is a problem more for ourselves and for the United States than for Canada. The trickiest points are of course violence, drugs, and organized crime. These are serious issues for Mexico, but are highly localized in the southwest pacific, Tamaulipas and border crossings.

On the other hand, dangers from Mexican organized crime and drug trafficking in Canada would not be any greater than the dangers from Italian or French mafias operating in the East, or Chinese’s triads in the West. We are cushioned by the “elephant” in between, plus several hours of flight distance.



Mexicans do not require visas to enter Europe and we eliminated visas to tourists from Peru, Colombia and Chile, all which have potential drug trafficking risks. With security cases handled in cooperation between security authorities, tourism has increased seven-fold.

The new “Three Amigos Summit” and the Bilateral Meetings should serve as an urgent priority to strengthen Mexico-Canada relations and to prepare a joint, mutual-interest preventive strategy towards unwelcome surprises derived from the United States political election. The “Trump effect” has displaced the political agenda in some anti-North American tendencies: threats to supply chains, free trade and trade agreements, and investment outsourcing. If things should stay “on track”, we would still have to work together to advance the TPP or TTIP, as we have already fruitfully cooperated to thwart protectionist measures against our meat exports in Cool and TIP threats to our North American automobile regional content.

In politics, timing is of the essence! It stands to reason that visa requirements should be eliminated by the time President Peña and his entourage flies to Canada in late June, perhaps in an initially restricted form to prior holders of American or Canadian visas. This group, as visa-free nationals, could then enter Canada’s Electronic Travel Authorization System (ETA), which would later be made available to all Mexicans.

These good intentions could be derailed if Mexican leaders travelling with the President need to obtain a Canadian visa, more cumbersome in process than that of the United States! It would be unpalatable to Mexican public opinion if fifty visa-free countries enter the ETA System but Mexico, Canada’s third trading partner, does not (until “later”). We have to be in the first group! As a matter of practical definition, elimination of visa requirements means, in practice, convergence and participation in the ETA System.

Canada needs to be lauded for its humanitarian acceptance of 25,000 Syrian refugees, however, it is again difficult to envisage that they are more “risk-free” than a few hundred Mexican asylum seekers, even if “phony”.

With recent experience, a plan of safeguards can be devised. ETA approval for a solicitant is said will take two weeks to process. Canadian preclearance, with Canadian migration officials in Mexican airports and much needed improved security information cooperation, could do the job. Penalties to fraudulent Mexican travelers or legal offices could be applied and better information made available to the public. The only registered terrorist activist between our two countries was two Canadian anarchists planning to place bombs in a Mexican Ministry!

On the positive side, rewards could be huge if this visa issue is solved. The number of Mexican tourists, who are known as big spenders, could rise to 500,000 and beyond. Mexican students at all levels could experience Canada’s top education system. And business investment could increase, following the path of Grupo Bimbo’s purchase of Canada Bread.

Removal of this time-consuming, pervasive irritant could allow governments to focus on a broader and deeper priority agenda: energy, infrastructure environment, value chains, technology and political challenges from our neighbor. A stronger North American region passes, now more clearly than ever, through closer Canada-Mexico relations.

► **About the Author**

Francisco Suárez Dávila was born in 1943, and held the notable positions of Deputy Minister of Finance (1982-1988), Ambassador OECD (1997-2000), and Mexican Ambassador Canada (June 2013-January 2016).



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