

Promotion as a Tool for Positioning Mexico in South America

La promoción como herramienta para posicionar a México en América del Sur

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■ Abstract:

Promotion is a diplomatic activity essential to positioning Mexico as an economic hub, an attractive tourist destination and cultural benchmark. However, consolidating the image of the country as one of talent, with an efficient and competitive economy requires passion, institutional commitment and technical capacity. Our embassies and consulates face the challenge of deploying their diplomatic skills so as to establish Mexico as a point of reference abroad. South America is a region of opportunity where promotion can help diversify our trade exchanges, attract capital and tourists, and cultivate a taste for all things Mexican.

■ Resumen:

La promoción es una actividad diplomática indispensable para posicionar a México como eje económico, polo turístico y referente cultural a través de la consolidación de una imagen como país de talento y con una economía eficiente y competitiva. Para ello se requiere pasión, compromiso institucional y capacidad técnica. Las representaciones en el exterior tienen ante sí el desafío de desplegar las habilidades diplomáticas para hacer de México y de lo mexicano referentes de atracción desde el exterior. América del Sur es un espacio de oportunidad para desplegar una promoción amplia que ayude a la diversificación de nuestros intercambios comerciales, la atracción de capitales, la captación de turistas y la consolidación del gusto por lo mexicano.

■ Key Words:

South America, promotion of trade, culture and tourism, identity.

■ Palabras clave:

América del Sur, promoción comercial, promoción turística, promoción cultural, identidad.

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We have a great nation, so promoting Mexico, positioning the *Mexico* brand abroad should not be a complicated task, yet it is one that demands unwavering commitment.

The international community is already familiar with Mexico and we have successfully differentiated ourselves from other countries. The next phase—promotion—is a bit more complex and requires technical skill and perseverance: persuading countries to embrace Mexico and all things Mexican, and creating a need for them, be it goods, services, image or the country's physical presence. Likewise, the following step—making sure the world remembers Mexico and all things Mexican exist and that it equates them with quality, warmth, efficiency and wellbeing—demands a high level of commitment and promotional skills.

South America is an area of opportunity for Mexico. Historically and culturally, it is a region that identifies closely with Mexico, and that has respect and admiration for all things Mexican. It is also a region where promotion, as a diplomatic activity, can help position and consolidate Mexico as a key actor on the international arena.

From an identity perspective, Mexico is a Latin American nation and, as such, is naturally inclined to form cultural ties with the south of the continent. However, the promotion of Mexico's interests in Latin America has not done this vocation justice. Simply being aware of this fact, but above all, knowing how to use its privileged geographical location to its advantage, will allow Mexico to capitalize on its development possibilities with an ap-

appropriate geopolitical balance. The South American option is an opportunity that needs to be seized and promotion is the way forward.

One of the priorities of the foreign policy agenda of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration is to "look southward more", which sets us on a clear course. Now that this back-to-our-roots policy line has been defined, we need to ask ourselves how we can use diplomacy to strengthen Mexico's relationship with the South, specifically the ten nations that make up South America.¹ Based on this mandate, it is up to the operating arms of Mexican diplomacy, via our embassies and consulates in South America, to take promotional actions that will further the nation's development and wellbeing² in the areas of trade, investment, culture, tourism and image.

The aim of this essay is to outline the foreign policy that should be implemented in South America, the relevance of this sub-region to Mexico's development, specifically, the advantages of forging closer ties with the region, and, more importantly, recommendations as to the type of promotional action that needs to be taken.

Looking South: A Necessary Foreign Policy Strategy

Consolidating Mexico's presence and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean is a tenet of Mexican foreign policy that should never have been disregarded. Geopolitically speaking, South America offers Mexico better positioning as a regional power and key actor on the world stage. As such, the sub-region is extremely valuable to Mexico's international endeavors, including promotional actions.

Mexico's relations with South America have gone through several phases, sometimes marked by distance, but mostly characterized by cooperation.

¹ Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. For purposes of Mexican diplomacy, Guyana and Surinam are grouped with the Caribbean nations.

² Mexico has 24 embassies and five consulates in Latin America and the Caribbean. Of these, ten embassies are located in South America, while Río de Janeiro and São Paulo in Brazil each have a consulate.

The decision of President López Obrador's administration to ratify Mexico's historic and cultural ties to Latin America³ and step up promotional activities in the region via a policy of rapprochement and increased economic, cultural, scientific and technological exchanges bodes well for the consolidation of Mexico's presence and influence in South America. President López Obrador has stated that to achieve a more harmonious relationship with the countries of North America, we need to turn our gaze south of the continent, a strategy that Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard underscored when he said that "just as we have to look to the north, so, too, do we have to look to the south".⁴

To fulfill this mandate, the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs (SRE) has implemented a strategy of rapprochement with the countries of South America, which places emphasis on political understanding, the strengthening of cooperation for development and economic diversification.

It is therefore significant that the SRE has assumed an even more active role when it comes to promotional activities, especially after the decision to close ProMéxico's overseas offices⁵ and disband the Mexican Tourism Board (CPTM). As a result of the agreements entered into with the ministries of the Economy (SE), Tourism (Sectur) and Culture, the SRE has stepped up its habitual promotional efforts and taken on broader responsibilities, which clearly need to be reassessed and resized. Consequently, our embassies and consulates in South America are now faced with an invaluable opportunity on the one hand and the extraordinary challenge on the other of effectively promoting Mexico and all things Mexican with commitment, skill and, above all, in a way that produces results.

³ The 2019-2024 National Development Plan acknowledges Latin America and the Caribbean as a priority region in Mexico's foreign policy and ratifies the country's historic and cultural ties to the region. Presidency of the Republic, "Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019-2024", *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, July 12, 2019, morning edition, at https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5565599&fecha=12/07/2019 (consulted on July 12, 2019).

⁴ "En la mira de AMLO, Centro y Sudamérica", *Ovaciones*, August 27, 2018, at <https://ovaciones.com/en-la-mira-de-amlo-centro-y-sudamerica/> (consulted on: July 31, 2019).

⁵ ProMéxico had offices in Buenos Aires, Bogota, Lima, Santiago and São Paulo.

Economic Promotion: A Path to Diversification

This type of promotion demands clarity as regards the final goal. More than a question of locating favorable winds, it is about taking actions that set the wheels in motion—actions like the cooperation agreement the heads of the SRE and the SE entered into on January 7, 2019, and whose primary goal is to employ embassies to help promote Mexican exports and attract foreign direct investment. Although it is up to Mexican embassies and consulates to apply this mandate, when designing the strategies to be implemented, we would do well to put together a comprehensive promotional agenda that takes into account the specific context of each country and regional factors. Furthermore, we need to determine where Mexico currently stands in terms of bilateral trade, what the interests and priorities of its counterparts are and how we can optimize promotional activities in this area with planned, concrete actions that maximize available financial and human resources.

Mexico's extensive network of trade and regional integration agreements means its goods and services can enter several South American countries⁶ under preferential conditions. Yet pragmatic, proactive action is required to encourage economic actors from these nations and small and mid-size Mexican companies with export potential to familiarize themselves with the contents and advantages of these agreements, and to use them to position and diversify their goods and services on markets that offer customs facilities. In the case of Mexico, lack of familiarity with the contents of trade agreements is one of the main obstacles to the expansion of trade. Only by reverting this can we properly plan the strategy we are to implement and pinpoint South American markets where Mexican companies have the potential to expand and diversify, and that can serve us as alternative supply markets—an absolute necessity that has not been afforded the importance it deserves, not just in terms of bilateral and regional trade, but for Mexico's political relations and geopolitical positioning.

⁶ Ministry of the Economy, "Comercio exterior/Países con tratados y acuerdos firmados con México," May 10, 2015, at <https://www.gob.mx/se/acciones-y-programas/comercio-exterior-paises-con-tratados-y-acuerdos-firmados-con-mexico?state=published> (consulted on: August 2, 2019).

Mexico has four free trade agreements in South America: three with the member states of the Pacific Alliance and another with Uruguay. It also has economic complementation agreements with Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil, and partial scope agreements with Ecuador and Paraguay,⁷ not forgetting the advantages of the Pacific Alliance trade protocol, an integration mechanism that affords Mexico a window to South America and whose goal is the free circulation of goods and services among member countries.

By the same token, coordination between the SRE, the public and private sectors and state and local governments is more important than ever to ensure our representations have quick and easy access to updated information.

The fact that Mexico is a member of the Pacific Alliance (along with Chile, Colombia and Peru) and the impact this mechanism has had regionally and globally is reason enough to continue promoting economic integration with South America, particularly in light of its possible expansion to include Ecuador. As regards the Southern Common Market (Mercosur),⁸ Mexico has acknowledged that our ties need to stretch beyond the cultural and historic ones that bind us to South America to encompass political and economic integration, and that cooperation between Pacific Alliance and Mercosur members is essential to creating new business opportunities. Both blocs seek to facilitate trade, investment and the sharing of academic mobility experiences, eliminate non-customs barriers, promote regulatory cooperation, small and mid-size companies, the digital agenda and trade, including trade in services, tourism, culture and the mobility of people, goals that, in themselves, provide basic guidelines for promotional work in the region.

⁷ On September 27, 2002, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay signed Economic Complementation Agreement No. 55 (ACE 55) between Mexico and Mercosur. The agreement came into force between Mexico and Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay on January 2003 and is intended to lay the foundations for the establishment of free trade in the automotive sector, in addition to promoting the integration and complementation of production processes in the automotive industries of the signatories.

⁸ Mexico participated as a guest country in the 54th Ordinary Meeting of Mercosur, held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on July 16, 2019.

In the case of economic promotion, its main purpose should be market diversification, namely of suppliers, but it should also create better business opportunities for Mexican companies in the apparently distant but promising South American market. To this end, we have put together the following suggestions:

- Identify, in coordination with the SRE and the SE, short-, medium- and long-term trade priorities for each of the ten South American countries, with a view to devising a comprehensive economic promotion strategy.
- Promote trade negotiations pending with South American nations and foster close dialogue with authorities and the business community in Mexico in coordination with our embassies in these countries.
- Confer upon the SRE's Office for Economic Promotion the status of a technical body empowered to take over the main tasks carried out by ProMéxico and with the necessary authority to issue guidelines that can be enforced by our representations in South America.
- Launch an aggressive campaign targeting small and mid-size Mexican companies with export potential to inform them of the ins and outs of our trade agreements with South American nations and regional integration agreements (LAIA, Pacific Alliance), so that they have all the information they need to position their goods and services.
- Keep an updated database that can be consulted for economic promotion (trade and investment) and decision-making purposes, and that can be used by both the aforementioned foreign representations and existing or prospective economic agents.
- Foster public-private partnerships so Mexican companies have a margin of guarantee in their investments and can participate in development projects. Another priority is to instruct representations to identify and promote the participation of suitable partners for development projects in Mexico.
- Provide staff at Mexico's ten embassies and two consulates in South America with continuous training in all the relevant aspects of trade promotion, and confer upon them the necessary decision-making capacities to identify and orientate projects that favor Mexican companies.

Said staff should also be trained in technical aspects so they can provide assistance for Mexican companies that run into difficulties.

- Turn our ten embassies and two consulates in South America into the long arms of the country's economic promotion strategy and ensure they apply it effectively to the relevant sectors, the key local actors we need to work with and the goods and services that need to be promoted.

Attracting More Tourists from the South

Tourism is now one of the main drivers of economic growth and job creation in Mexico. According to Sectur, this dynamism can only be sustained if we “forge ahead with efforts to improve connectivity, streamline migratory procedures, make our tourist destinations safer, and promote and finance the sector, and provided we continue to diversify the origin of tourists who come to Mexico”.⁹ Within the framework of the Cooperation Agreement for the Promotion of Tourism entered into by the SRE and Sectur, both ministries have agreed to promote Mexico's tourist attractions and contribute to the country's social and economic development. In addition to the setting up of an office for the promotion of tourism at the SRE, a Tourism Diplomacy Board (CDT) was created to pool efforts to shore up Mexico's image on the international arena, as indicated by Chancellor Ebrard.¹⁰ One line of action gives priority to the strategy of promoting Mexico on its most important tourism markets,¹¹ namely

⁹ Enrique de la Madrid Cordero, “Prólogo”, in Coordinación de Asesores del Secretario de Turismo, *Nuestro turismo, el gran motor de la economía nacional*, Mexico, Ministry of Tourism, 2018, 12, available at <http://sectur.michoacan.gob.mx/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Turismo2040.pdf> (consulted on August 2, 2019).

¹⁰ Aldo Munguía, “Sectur y Relaciones Exteriores crean Consejo de Diplomacia Turística”, *El Financiero*, July 11, 2019, at <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/empresas/sectur-y-relaciones-exteriores-crean-consejo-de-diplomacia-turistica> (consulted on July 30, 2019).

¹¹ Alejandra Espinoza, “El Consejo de Diplomacia Turística, al rescate ante la desaparición del CPTM”, in *Expansión*, June 20, 2019, at <https://expansion.mx/empresas/2019/06/20/el-consejo-de-diplomacia-turistica-al-rescate-ante-la-desaparicion-del-cptm> (consulted on July 31, 2019).

the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Colombia, Argentina and Brazil. It should be noted that of the six countries identified, three are South American.

It is vital that Mexico's diplomatic and consular representations help disseminate a positive image of Mexico and, more specifically, good knowledge of its tourist destinations, whether traditional or rarely frequented by foreigners, but that have the potential to become options for new segments of tourists. While this holds true for the promotion of tourism in general, it also applies in the case of South America, whose specificities need to be taken into account in any strategy or action undertaken. One of these is strong cultural identification with Mexico. Visitors from this sub-region assume they will be in a country that speaks their language, which will facilitate communication, and that our shared Latin American idiosyncrasies will make them feel at home. There is also the fact that the seasons in the northern hemisphere are opposite to those in the southern one, which makes Mexico an attractive alternative weather-wise compared to their country of origin.

For all these reasons and more, South America is fertile ground for promoting Mexico as a tourist destination. There are any number of activities the South American tourist might find appealing, from Mexico's warm beaches when it is winter down south to checking out business opportunities arising from our extensive network of trade agreements and economic ties to extra-regional markets. South American visitors might be interested in broadening their knowledge of Mexican history or experiencing at first-hand Mexican culture, which they no doubt see themselves reflected in and that may well inspire them to embark on creative ventures of their own. Then there is Mexican cuisine, at once unique and clearly differentiated, but nonetheless familiar to and appreciated by South Americans, and being able to practice their religion in a country that offers spiritual references they can identify with, not to mention eco, adventure, medical and sports tourism. Some South Americans even come to Mexico to see musicals!

Also, if we are to attract more South American tourists, certain embassies in South America will have to push for direct flights to Mexico that are not available as yet, like flights from Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay. Connectivity with large South American metropolis that are not necessarily capital cities, but that account for a substantial percentage of the South

American tourists visiting Mexico (like Río de Janeiro, Mendoza, Santa Cruz and Guayaquil) will also have to be improved, and we will have to diversify the points where tourists can enter the country to include destinations such as Puerto Vallarta and Monterrey, to name just two options. These measures will not just favor tourism, but trade and investment too.

The decision to exempt all South American countries from visa requirements has led to exponential growth in the number of South Americans visiting Mexico. In addition to an increasing number of flights to Pacific Alliance countries, we are seeing more leisure travelers from countries like Bolivia and Ecuador, to which the visa exemption was recently extended.

The following are some recommendations that could come in useful when drawing up a tourism promotion strategy targeting South America:

- Confer upon the SRE's Office for the Promotion of Tourism the status of a technical body empowered to take the executive actions previously carried out by the CPTM and imbue it with the necessary authority to issue guidelines for the promotion of tourism that can be enforced by our representations in South America.
- Draw up a comprehensive tourism promotion strategy targeting South America, based on the agreement entered into by the SRE and Sectur and focusing on the three countries singled out as priorities (Argentina, Brazil and Colombia). The other countries in South American should be targeted based on their current dynamism (Peru) and high short-term potential (Ecuador).
- Design and implement an aggressive promotional campaign in key tourist destinations in Mexico and tailor our products and services to the South American tourist, taking into account their differentiated needs and seasonal factors.
- Maintain an updated database that can be consulted for tourism promotion and decision-making purposes, and that can be used by both the aforementioned foreign representations and interested tour operators.
- Train migration officers to treat South American tourists with respect and refrain from violating their human rights, given how critical a tourist's first point of contact with their destination is to forming an opinion. Procedures for retaining and turning migrants away need to be overhauled.

- Harness the power of Mexican communities in South American countries to promote Mexico as a tourism destination.
- Provide staff at Mexico's representations in South America with continuous training in all relevant aspects of tourism promotion: knowledge of the country's different destinations, their features, the services available, advantages compared to other countries, and use social media to position Mexico's tourism products and services.
- Turn our ten embassies and two consulates in South America into the long arms of the country's tourism promotion strategy and ensure they apply it effectively to the destinations and services that need promoting. Likewise, embassies and consulates should participate in tourism fairs in a professional capacity and maintain close contact with key tour operators and travel agencies.

Cultural Diplomacy and Identity

Mexico is cultural powerhouse with a clear-cut identity, which the country is proud to showcase to the world. Cultural diplomacy, when used as a promotional tool, can substantially improve a country's image and its relations with other nations. As such, disseminating its culture and creating a positive country image go hand in hand for Mexico. The SRE itself proposes taking a series of effective, high impact actions "capable of connecting the Mexico of deep millenary roots with the Mexico we are today".¹² The Mexican Foreign Service and our diplomatic and consular representations have proven effective vehicles for showcasing the inspiring talent, creativity and excellence of the men and woman who have made Mexico a global reference point.

Aside from the many acclaimed intellectuals, creators and artists Mexico boasts, the culture of the Mexican people is shaped on a daily basis in every corner of the country and even beyond our borders, wherever there

¹² Enrique Márquez, *La diplomacia cultural de México 2018-2024. 7 propuestas para su fortalecimiento e innovación*, Mexico, SRE, 2019, 1, available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ULsCTk1-AWLKVC7_C2IhemNqLSlSraE8/view (consulted on July 15, 2019).

is a Mexican with artistic sensitivity and talent. This culture is just as Mexican and, as such, should also be given exposure, reason why any cultural promotion strategy should take an inclusive, resolute tone.

Mexican culture is familiar to and appreciated by every country in South America. It has been a benchmark and a driver of cultural development in many nations, simultaneously reflecting the creativity of the Mexican people and serving as a catalyst for innovation in many South American societies.

Cultural promotion, understood as a series of measures to position Mexican creativity abroad and from abroad, is central to the duties of our representations south of the continent. Mexican culture should not just create a better image of the country overseas, but enrich our heritage; it should not merely focus on established talent, but clear the way for new creators; it should not simply be a source of national pride, but should contribute to the country's development. In short, culture can be promoted, but more than anything, it is an agent of change, of transformation and union.

To ensure cultural promotion is a differentiating, motivating and useful component of diplomacy, we propose the following:

- A joint and coordinated work between the SRE's Executive Office of Cultural Diplomacy and the Ministry of Culture, which has defined short-, medium- and long-term priorities and a comprehensive cultural promotion strategy in place.
- Make the seven proposals for the strengthening and innovation of cultural promotion established by the Executive Office of Cultural Diplomacy fully operational by representations abroad.
- Give our diplomatic and consular representations in South America room to express their opinions and make suggestions within the framework of a general cultural diplomacy policy. These representations are more familiar with the needs, tastes and scope of cultural proposals in their districts and affording them this freedom would help maximize resources and foster partnerships with private companies and local institutions.
- Create itinerant regional programs to showcase the work of Mexican painters, sculptors, musicians, filmmakers, writers, dancers and other creators in circuits throughout the region, in such a way that the use

of resources and talent is maximized, with full coordination of interests and abilities in the ascriptions in South America.

- Encourage public-private partnerships that make it possible to pool shared interests and financial resources, with a view to offering audiences more options. Knowledge of these various cultural alternatives also needs to be more widely disseminated.
- In coordination with the Institute for Mexicans Abroad, urge Mexican communities in South America to promote, either directly or indirectly, their native culture and represent the country in a positive fashion, becoming, as mentioned previously, cultural promoters of sorts.
- Turn the cultural forums at the disposal of Mexico's representations in South America into cultural hubs and foster partnerships with the offices of the Fondo de Cultura Económica publishing group in the region.
- Encourage states to participate in events that showcase their native art forms, from literature, music, dance and film to gastronomy and even tourism. Promoting one state every year at large-scale events would draw more media coverage than several small-scale ones.
- Provide continuous training for staff at our representations in South America in specific aspects of cultural promotion, such as the technical side (for example, how to scout for cultural venues, complete customs procedures, mount exhibitions) and, more importantly, in the various cultural alternatives on offer and the latest trends in the sector.
- Turn Mexico's ten embassies and two consulates in South America into proactive, innovative executors of the country's cultural promotion strategy, based on in-depth knowledge of its cultural policy.

Conclusions

Promotion demands commitment, knowledge and a lot of work, but mainly it requires a deep-seated passion for Mexico. And if this task is undertaken "looking southwards", history, traditions, common development needs and shared art forms also come into play. South America needs to be a foreign policy priority if we are to diversify our relations, join forces in the interests of development, achieve a level of economic

integration that secures the wellbeing of our peoples and merge our common culture, art and thought in a single Latin American identity. All this can be achieved with committed and effective promotional actions defined by the efficient management of resources.

The administration of President López Obrador has called on the SRE, specifically Mexico's representations abroad, to actively promote the Mexican economy, tourism and culture. To sum up, a positive image of Mexico and all things Mexican, and the acceptance of our goods, services, products and artistic and cultural expressions, hinge on good diplomatic promotional work.

In South America, such efforts should not be strictly focused on bilateral relations. Completely necessary as these may be, they not enough if they do not mesh with, for example, the intensification of Pacific Alliance mechanisms as a means of promoting and better positioning Mexico in South America.