

Mexico-United States Cross-Border Diplomacy: A Paradigm of Twenty-First Century Cultural Cooperation

*La diplomacia transfronteriza
México-Estados Unidos: un paradigma
de cooperación cultural para el siglo XX*

Marcela Celorio

Consul General of Mexico in Los Angeles

mcelorio@sre.gob.mx



Abstract:

This essay analyzes the concept of *cross-border diplomacy*, a term that encompasses aspects as diverse and complex as social interactions, the economy, migration, national security, the management of natural resources and environmental conservation. The role of culture, the arts and education in cross-border diplomacy are the focus of the article, which ends with a brief reflection on the importance of MONDIACULT 2022 to the border between Mexico and the United States.



Resumen:

En este ensayo se presenta el concepto *diplomacia transfronteriza*, un término que abarca aspectos diversos y complejos como las interacciones sociales, la economía, la migración, la seguridad nacional, la gestión de los recursos naturales y la salvaguarda del medio ambiente; en particular, se hace énfasis en el papel que desempeñan la cultura, el arte y la educación en la diplomacia transfronteriza, y se cierra con una breve reflexión sobre la importancia de Mondiacult 2022 para la frontera México-Estados Unidos.



Key Words:

Consular function, cross-border diplomacy, cultural cooperation, paradiplomacy, CaliBaja, cultural diplomacy.



Palabras clave:

Función consular, diplomacia transfronteriza, cooperación cultural, paradiplomacia, CaliBaja, diplomacia cultural.

Mexico-United States Cross-Border Diplomacy: A Paradigm of Twenty-First Century Cultural Cooperation

Marcela Celorio

The only way to understand the dynamics of the border between Mexico and the United States is to experience it at first hand. Stretching for over 3000 kilometers, this strip of land is home to a cross-border community that numbered 15 million just ten years ago and that today exceeds 100 million—a figure equivalent to one third of the population of the United States and almost 80 percent of Mexico's entire population. Here, 38 municipalities belonging to the Mexican states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León and Tamaulipas border with 23 counties in California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas in a relationship based primarily on economic interests, but that also involves political, social and cultural aspects, the latter being especially relevant because they impact every other sphere of life. It was at the behest of the Tijuana Cultural Center (CECUT), which kindly invited me to participate in the Third Cultural Diplomacy Summit organized by the North American Cultural Diplomacy Initiative (NACDI), that I came to reflect on the contribution of cross-border diplomacy to the “new cultural diplomacy” at this glocal crossroads.

In this essay, I will elaborate on the concept of *cross-border diplomacy*, which is a term I coined based on my experience as consul general of Mexico in San Diego, California. The term is a broad one that encompasses aspects as diverse and complex as social interactions, the economy, migration, national security, the management of natural resources and environmental conservation. On this occasion, however, I will be making only passing

reference to some of these aspects because my main focus is the role of culture, the arts and education in cross-border diplomacy, with a brief final reflection on the importance of MONDIACULT 2022 to our northern border.

Consular functions in traditional diplomacy

Traditionally, *diplomacy* is conceived of as a set of tools and actions a State uses to implement its foreign policy. It is governed by the framework of international law and its variants include bilateral diplomacy, multilateral diplomacy and consular functions. In the case of Mexico, I am convinced the latter is one of the more strategic, albeit complex pillars of the country's foreign policy, precisely because of the social issue of migrants, although it also has an undeniable cultural dimension in light of the multitude of languages, values and world views that are constantly at play.

Consular activities normally involve assisting with paperwork and protecting vulnerable citizens, promoting community relations, trade and culture, and relations with local authorities. Due to the sheer size and needs of the Mexican community in the United States, Mexico has an extensive consular network whose increasingly modern and efficient diplomacy practices have established consulates as key actors in international relations, especially in local and regional spheres. Thus, Mexico's consulates have gone from merely rendering services for citizens to actively and innovatively contributing to the development, empowerment and integration of Mexican communities in their place of residence. Consulates are also places that reaffirm Mexican identity by keeping the country's traditions, fiestas and celebrations alive, while helping create networks of contacts that strengthen local communities. Furthermore, given the importance of local politics and the influence of the Mexican community on the national political scene in the United States, the work of consulates impacts bilateral relations and demands the deployment of an effective brand of diplomacy that transcends traditional confines and establishes these as diplomatic representations of Mexico in their constituencies.

In the case of border consulates, the practice of diplomacy is even more complex, requiring as it does the ability to evolve and adapt to the realities

of this particular region. It is here that cooperation takes on importance on every level, cultural activities included.

Cross-border diplomacy

Although an international line divides communities on either side of the border, there are many things that unite these populations and make them interdependent. As a starting point for cross-border diplomacy, we have paradiplomacy, which I will be referring to later on, and cross-border consular diplomacy, which is a response to:

- The existence of a *binational community* that crosses from one country to the other on a daily basis, regardless of the fact that this is an international border. Hundreds of thousands of people cross the border every day in both directions.
- The need to *jointly address the challenges and opportunities* posed by the Mexico-United States border zone, such as social issues and those related to migration, education, the arts, culture, trade, infrastructure, economic development, contingency management, public health, the use and management of natural resources, environmental protection, power, national security, public safety and the procuring of justice, among others.
- Ever-stronger *economic and labor interdependence*, on which the well-being of the local population hinges and that has major repercussions for the economies of both countries and global supply chains.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, the complex dynamics of life on the border between Mexico and the United States can only be truly appreciated when experienced in the flesh. I remember before the Mexican Senate confirmed my appointment as consul general of Mexico in San Diego, I spent a great deal of time studying the characteristics of the binational population I would be serving so as to determine the best way to meet its needs. During the course of my research, I discovered that there is a large region known as *CaliBaja* on this part of the border, which takes in the counties of San Diego and Imperial, and the five

municipalities of Baja California: Ensenada, Mexicali, Playas de Rosarito, Tecate and Tijuana, while there are plans afoot to incorporate San Felipe and San Quintín in 2024. This subregion is a cultural microcosmos where people think, talk, dress, eat and do business differently to other cross-border regions.

Faced with a very different reality to what I had experienced previously during my diplomatic career, as a border consul I knew I had to be creative and innovative, because I also realized that, despite the ongoing efforts of governments, the private sector, academia, civil society, the media and other actors, the needs and interests of this binational community had not been fully understood and addressed, due in part to their enormous complexity. I saw a chance to support this community and suggest different ways of doing things.

Having confirmed that the classic approach was not sufficient to meet the needs of a binational community that required new foreign policy ideas to solve its problems, I adapted the principles of paradiplomacy—which refers to international relations between State governments and local actors—to the complex and dynamic reality of the CaliBaja region.

The cross-border diplomacy model contributes to Mexico's foreign policy and facilitates understanding and collaboration in border areas precisely because it is based on binational cooperation within bi-regional limits. Its strength lies in the creation of an identity capable of addressing binational challenges and the idiosyncrasies of a region where effective solutions can only be reached jointly. As such, I define *cross-border diplomacy* as the ties of cooperation between actors—both state and non-state—on both sides of the border between Mexico and the United States, and the actions targeting the capitals of their countries and the rest of the world these actors take to promote and manage the deeply intertwined interests of a binational community that has a shared, flexible cultural identity forged from mutual, binational needs.

Just to shed more light on the concept of cross-border diplomacy, during my term as consul I discovered that there are opportunities hiding in the crevices of the myths and realities surrounding the U.S.-Mexico border. I was able to see for myself the success CaliBaja had achieved in terms of social and economic integration, and that can be credited with the warm welcome the cross-border diplomacy model received in the region. The key

is to take a pragmatic approach to cooperation that focuses on common interests and community work, combined with assertive, well-planned communication.

This new model put the consulate in a position to assume a more active role in its capacity as networker and facilitator, proposing innovative ideas and implementing joint initiatives to deal with sensitive issues like migration and security effectively and creatively. The consulate's role was a twofold one: on the one hand, it represented the Mexican government in the United States and on the other, it was an external sounding board for local affairs and the CaliBaja region. In addition to serving the Mexican community in the counties of San Diego and Imperial, and acting as a liaison between the Mexican government and local authorities, it also heard the concerns, needs and initiatives of the local community and authorities on the Mexican side, which do not strictly fall within the scope of action of the Mexican consulate in San Diego, but that *do* have a tangible impact on the constituency.

By practicing cross-border diplomacy, the consulate served as a liaison and facilitator between the federal authorities of both countries, helping shore up the unique cooperation synergy that already existed and that has led to the development of a border zone that reflects the dynamics of the region, as opposed to those of a centralized national policy. Cooperation can be seen in social, political, economic and legal spheres and, naturally, in the area that touches on all these, which is culture.

Of particular note were coordinated efforts between authorities on both sides of the border to address the problem of transboundary flows of wastewater in the Tijuana River Watershed. As a result, the International Boundary and Water Commission agreed to adopt a binational notification protocol in the event of wastewater flows with potential transboundary repercussions, while follow-up meetings were held between civil society and the Mexican and U.S. governments.

Another example of this cross-border dynamic is the handling of emergencies and natural disasters, which know no borders and have no respect for walls or barriers. Agencies on both sides of the border are fully coordinated and act out of a shared need to protect their civilian populations. In the event of a fire, for instance, local emergency services on both sides of the border are alerted and respond immediately to prevent it from spreading to neighboring territories.

There are countless cases like these where Mexico and the United States have common interests and the examples continue to multiply with each passing day in areas as diverse as health, security, the environment and, of course, the arts, science, film, videogames, gastronomy, native languages, etcetera, where cooperation, dialogue and work with cross-border communities is essential.

Education, the arts, culture and sports: the social fabric of cross-border diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy, understood as a course of action that uses national identity to promote better understanding between nations, is, in my opinion, one of the most valuable and effective foreign policy tools any country can have. It is said to be invaluable because it has the capacity to bring people together and transcend language barriers through the universal language of culture and the arts.

For example, on a regional level, the Mexican consulate helped implement the Binational Program of Migrant Education (PROBEM) and collaborated with educational organizations in San Diego, like the California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE). The educational aspect is extremely important because it not only allows us to promote the official languages of our two nations—English and Spanish—, but affords a better understanding of the multilingual complexities associated with the influx of migrants from other countries. Languages like French, Mandarin, German, Russian, Portuguese and many others are habitually spoken, along with the languages of native communities on both sides of the border, where it is not unusual to hear Nahuatl, Yaqui, Mixtec, Triqui, Ipai (also known as Northern Diegueño), and less widely spoken languages like Kiliwa and Cucapá, to name just a few.

As part of its cultural cooperation strategy, the consulate promoted a cross-border educational partnership between the San Diego Unified School District and the Baja California Ministry of Education to support the integration of binational and bilingual students into the different educational systems of Mexico and the United States. Through the consulate, the Mexican government was able to provide greater assistance for Mexican

families living in San Diego, and young people who lead binational lifestyles. The hope is that initiatives like these will become good practice in other school districts in the near future.

Another area in which cross-border diplomacy has proven its potential is the cultural sensitization of U.S. border control agents. This has been achieved through leadership courses given by Mexican diplomats, who share our history, art, culture and customs with U.S. Department of Homeland Security officers, fostering dialogue with these authorities that contributes to a better understanding of cultural differences and helps establish common ground. This dynamic is also reflected in the excellent communication and coordination between the various security and justice authorities that participate in all kinds of initiatives to foster collaboration and settle cross-border issues locally.

We could also cite academic experiences like “XBC Cross-Border Conversations,” a cycle of cross-border conferences between Tijuana and San Diego, at which acclaimed speakers discuss current affairs relevant to Mexico and the United States, with a view to promoting critical thinking and academic exchanges that foster better understanding among residents of the CaliBaja region.

Perhaps one of the most genuine expressions of this vibrant cross-border community is its artwork. A prime example is the mural *San Ysidro, A Place Where Soles Meet*, whose title is a play on words that alludes to the border as a transit point, a place where the paths of soles—and souls—cross. Located on one of the main streets of San Ysidro, close to the border with Tijuana, this street art initiative involved institutions and members of the community on both sides of the divide, and is a reminder that solutions to the common problems of this cross-border society can only be found by walking the same road together, arm-in-arm.

Likewise, the binational installation *Tu huella es el camino, tu bandera es de paz* (Your footprint is the path, your flag is one of peace) by the Mexican artist Betsabeé Romero consisted of 100 white flags—50 in San Diego and 50 in Tijuana—with each flagpole bearing a foot carved out of wood. The piece represents migrants walking peacefully to their destination, the pinnacle of their journey being precisely the border crossing.

Then there are initiatives like Mission Fed ArtWalk, which has been celebrating the visual and performing arts in San Diego for 39 years, out of the conviction

that art has the power to connect communities, cultivate new artistic talent and create a better quality of life for all through cultural enrichment.

One place where politics, ideologies and nationalisms would appear to melt like warm butter is at the dining table. As Virginia Wolf once said, “One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.” In this regard, Mexican cuisine is a valuable tool in our soft power kit, one Mexican embassies and consulates frequently employ in initiatives like “La Baja” and “Borderless,” whereby the Consulate General of Mexico in San Diego commissions students and graduates of the Culinary Art School in Tijuana to prepare a wide selection of Mexican dishes for all the events it organizes. This project had a three-fold purpose: to promote Mexican cuisine, support new talent and create ties between guests and our gastronomy, while building community, a binational community.

Human relationships are the fabric of any society and the “Consuls and Leaders in Baja California” (CLinBC) initiative aims to foster social cohesion through better mutual understanding between the leaders of different sectors of society. As part of this program, diplomats accompany foreign visitors on trips to the CaliBaja region to promote trade, investment, academic exchanges, the arts, culture, gastronomy and tourism.

Sport is another node in the social network and in 2017 the region held its first cross-border swim, from Imperial Beach to Playas de Tijuana. Organized by the Pan-American Colibri Swimmers, a group of 12 open water marathon swimmers from five countries (the United States, Mexico, Israel, South Africa and New Zealand), the event was intended to raise awareness and funds for the Colibri Centre for Human Rights, which works to end migrant death and alleviate the related suffering of families along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Final considerations

H.P. Lovecraft once said, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” It is always easier to blame “others,” “outsiders” for our problems than to acknowledge that we need to work together to find solutions. Now more than ever, cultural diplomacy is needed to counter the extreme

nationalism, economic isolation, unilateralism and insidious xenophobic rhetoric that are creeping into our daily lives.

Contrary to what some might think, cultural differences between Mexico and the United States are an advantage in the border area because they spark curiosity and encourage people to learn more about their respective cultures, to grow and benefit from the sharing of experiences, traditions and artistic expressions.

I firmly believe our nations can look forward to a positive future if we can only learn to capitalize on our geographic location, demographic composition and cultural strengths, and find innovative ways of complementing each other. This is not some pie-in-the-sky goal reserved for a distant future, but one we are gradually progressing toward. For example, the United States, Mexico and Canada will be jointly hosting the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

As we approach the bicentenary of relations between Mexico and the United States, it is clear that, despite their differences, our nations have learned to coexist, but I am hopeful that, in a not-too-distant future, we will do more than coexist. I am hopeful we will acknowledge that our cultural, linguistic and social differences are not what separate us, but what make us complementary and shore up our image as a region in the eyes of the world—the region of North America. It is time we recognized that the progress of our nations depends on our willingness to walk that path together as neighbors.

Also on the horizon is MONDIACULT 2022, a prestigious event that Mexico will be hosting and a stage for constructive cultural debate. I am thrilled that CECUT will be playing a leading role at the conference and bringing some innovative cultural cooperation proposals to the table. For the reasons I have already outlined, MONDIACULT 2022 needs to focus on transnational diplomacy in the field of culture, not just in Mexico, but in other parts of the world where borders represent bridges and opportunities, dialogue and cooperation, progress and peace. I am thinking of regions like the Amazons, where several nations share borders and the responsibility of protecting invaluable natural heritage, the Strasburg Eurométropole, the Øresund region of Scania between Copenhagen and Malmo, and the southern region of Mexico between Chetumal and Belize, which also deserves a mention.

A tool for promoting integration and facilitating coexistence, cross-border diplomacy is practiced in a context of close cooperation between authorities

on both sides of the border. State and local governments, and the people of CaliBaja have responded to the initiatives, executive orders and policies to emanate from their respective capitals in ways that protect regional interests and those of their border community.

Furthermore, in response to the restrictive migration policy introduced during the Trump administration, which erected walls and called into question the benefits of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—now USMCA—, social, economic and political actors in CaliBaja took constructive action to prevent measures like these from negatively impacting the binational community, thereby contributing to better border administration. This illustrates that the cross-border dynamic transcends changes of government administration and has the capacity to address the challenges and exploit the opportunities these imply. The task of diplomats is to correctly interpret the political and social environment, not just of the country at large, but of the region they have been appointed to, so they can take effective action in keeping with national interests.

Adopting cross-border diplomacy helps build more prosperous, safer and more competitive regions. This is a brand of diplomacy that adds instead of subtracting; that helps tear down walls and build bridges; that acknowledges the irrefutable fact that Mexico and the United States are increasing interdependent and more integrated than ever by reason of geography, family ties, social, trade and other interests.

It should be acknowledged that the success of CaliBaja is attributable to the vision of its inhabitants, business community and leaders, who have come to perceive of themselves and act as a megaregion that, by fates of geography and history, is divided by an international border, but that nonetheless constitutes a cross-border zone of enormous global importance. In this context, cross-border diplomacy plays an increasingly important role in addressing binational issues on a local level, while contributing to the good governance of the border between Mexico and the United States.