



To be or not to be: Has Mexico got what it takes to be an Emerging Power?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mexico has the economic resources to be considered an emerging power, but it has shown little capacity or initiative to exercise its potential as a regional leader – either economically or politically. It has little involvement in the UN, has been reluctant to participate in peacekeeping missions and its foreign policy has been marred by inconsistency. This lack of regional leadership and foreign-policy vision may be explained by Mexico's crisis of identity, straddling, as it does, North and Central America, but perceived as nevertheless unable to play an effective bridging role between the two.

MEXICO: PUNCHING BELOW ITS WEIGHT

There is little doubt that Mexico has the economic resources to be considered an emerging power. It is the 11th-largest economy in the world, as measured by purchasing power parity, the 14th-largest country by land mass and the 12th most populous. Mexico's gross domestic product (GDP) (\$920 billion) is lower than that of Brazil (\$1.1 trillion), but higher when calculated as per capita GDP (\$8,312, as opposed to Brazil's figure of \$5,609).¹

Nevertheless, Mexico has shown little capacity to project a sense of leadership, either at the international or regional level. In particular, Mexico has difficulty

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meeting four criteria that are usually indicative of emerging powers:

- a capacity to influence the international order, either regionally or globally, based on their possession of material resources;
- a strong international identity, which is based on a clear view of world order and an understanding of the country's potential position within this order;
- a revisionism that derives from their dissatisfaction with the existing world order; and
- a capacity to exercise regional leadership, as emerging powers also tend to be regional powers.

INSIGNIFICANT INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCE

Although it is one of the 15 largest contributors to the UN system,² Mexico has been reluctant to engage in international security issues and has had little participation in the UN Security Council. By contrast, Brazil has persistently sought a permanent seat in the Security Council since 1946 and participated with a rotary seat nine times – more than any other non-permanent member state, with the exception of Japan. Mexico has occupied such a position only during four periods.

Within the UN Secretariat and the UN system as a whole, Mexico also lacks a strong staff member presence. Furthermore, Mexico's level of international military engagement is below its potential. Unlike other emerging powers, such as China, India and Brazil, Mexico has rarely used its military might to serve international purposes. Until recently, Mexico has been reluctant to participate in a military capacity in peacekeeping missions.

Although Mexico has provided international development co-operation (IDC) for quite some time, it does not give this a high priority. Helping improve the standard of living in less-developed countries ranked 13th on a list of 16 foreign-policy goals perceived to be very important by Mexican leaders. Specialists on Mexican IDC argue that the country lacks a strategic vision on IDC as an instrument of foreign policy. Only in a small number of cases has the country used IDC to advance its foreign-policy goals.

This lack of a strategic diplomatic vision and a long-term state foreign policy is a good reason why Mexico has been unable to exercise its potential role as an emerging power. Historical comparative analysis has shown that, unlike Brazil, which has displayed continuity in its foreign-policy goals, Mexico's foreign policy has been characterised by major changes in approach.³

PROBLEMATIC INTERNATIONAL IDENTITY

Mexico's foreign policy is highly conditioned by its geography. It is influenced by its proximity to the US, the world's major power, with which it shares a long border. But, straddling North America and Central America, Mexico is also a

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source of ambiguity for its leaders, who are not comfortable with its regional identity. Is Mexico a North American country or a Latin American country? Or is it a bridge between the global North and South?

It seems that Mexico cannot be conveniently situated within one region alone and is often presented by its leaders and scholars as a 'hinge', a 'bridge country', a 'nation of double regional membership' or even of 'multiple belongings'.⁴ Either way, Mexico's dual identity has not been assimilated into its foreign-policy approach in a coherent fashion and it is problematic in practice. Mexico's self-image as a bridge country appears to be 'merely aspirational' because 'the country has not been perceived as such by Latin America or any other developing nation'.⁵ Outside of Central America, Mexico has failed to be perceived as capable of playing the role of a bridge country.

A STATUS QUO MAINTAINER

Generally, emerging powers assume positions in the international economic system that are clearly distinct from those of the industrialised nations. This is not the case with Mexico, however, which has not used its power or material resources to promote any significant reform in world affairs. Despite its increasing integration into the global economy, the country has not shown the type of international activism associated with the paradigmatic model of emerging powers. Unlike the countries of the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), which have promoted alternative international structures, Mexico has behaved like a status quo middle power. Mexico does not promote a radical reform of the international order or engage in changing the rules of the game. Indeed, from the 1990s, successive Mexican administrations have taken pride in having a financial bureaucracy that is well respected and has largely adhered to macroeconomic orthodoxy.

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LACK OF REGIONAL POWER

Mexico has historically lacked consistency in its foreign-policy approach towards Latin America, oscillating from periods in which it has promoted its strong diplomatic ties in the region to others in which it has been indifferent. Rather than regarding Latin America as a region in which Mexico could exercise influence, its dominant foreign-policy ethos has been to perceive its relationship with the region as part of a strategy to balance its relationship with the US. This was especially the case during the Cold War years, when Mexican diplomats leveraged this relationship as a counterweight against US hegemony. It wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s that Mexico adopted a strategy of regional leadership, mainly in Central America and the Caribbean. But even during this period, Mexican authorities explicitly denied any regional-leadership objective.

Mexico's relationship with Latin America has always been stronger in terms of rhetoric than in reality. And its relationship with the region is even less

significant if one looks at its trading partners. Mexican exports to the region were around 2% of its total export trade, compared with the enormous proportion of its exports made up of trade with the US. Mexico's foreign-policy objectives in the region have not pursued a projection of power, either economic or political, nor have they sought to promote, with the exception of specific periods, any influence in the region.

Mexico's relationship with the US has affected the country's concentration of diplomatic resources there, and this explains its lack of influence in the UN, particularly the Security Council. This position has shaped Mexico's profile as a status quo maintainer in international institutions (particularly on economic issues) and largely explains why it fails to have more active participation in multilateral institutions, such as the World Trade Organization. The country's relationship with Latin America has been historically affected by its relationship with the US. However, Mexico's leaders also bear some of the responsibility for the position. On the one hand, they have failed to reduce Mexico's dependence on the US, and diversify trade and expand diplomatic relations with other countries, most notably the BRICS nations. On the other hand, they have also been unable to promote a more coherent state foreign policy and promote strong diplomatic relations with other countries.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Figures taken from the Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov>, accessed 21 November 2014.
- 2 UN, 2012 *Status of Contributions to the Regular Budget, International Tribunals, Peacekeeping Operations and Capital Master Plan*, https://www.globalpolicy.org/images/pdfs/Regular_Budget_Payments_of_Largest_Payers2012.pdf.
- 3 Neto A & J Schiavon, 'Instituciones internas y política exterior de Brasil y México', in Ortiz Mena A & R Fernández de Castro (eds), *Brasil y México: Encuentros y Desencuentros*. Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores and Instituto Matías Romero, 2005, pp. 167–199; Fernández de Castro R & MR Soares de Lima, 'Las Aspiraciones de Brasil y México en Política Exterior', in Ortiz Mena A & R Fernández de Castro (eds), *Brasil y México: Encuentros y Desencuentros*. Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores and Instituto Matías Romero, 2005, pp. 201–257.
- 4 Pellicer O, 'Mexico – A Reluctant Middle Power?', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Briefing Paper, June 2006, p. 4.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

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