

# Mexico: A leader in search of like-minded peers

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## Abstract

Over the last decade Mexico has chosen and has been forced to practice a sort of “stand alone” foreign policy, in part due to its marginalization in Latin America, in part due to the growing bilateralization of relations in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) context. The national narrative of acting as a bridge in economic terms for accessing the NAFTA market proved not very attractive to international partners. As a result, Mexico has become the classical “leader without followers.” Joining the MIKTA initiative, a grouping formed by Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia, is a highly welcomed option for regaining international presence without the Brazilian shadow, so strong in the region, and for defining a specific intermediary role. Mexico clearly embraced a “Southern” identity only in very limited moments of its foreign policy history and always tried to maintain a middle way, as an agreeable voice and a helpful fixer for international conferences and meetings. The old/new formula that seems to feed Mexico’s new international MIKTA presence is that of “multiple memberships” following a rationale of “like-mindedness,” a rationale that allows for promoting its presence in a great variety of institutions and regional integration schemes, but without compromising too much of its national economic development priorities. This article analyzes these half-way/soft doctrinal foundations of Mexican foreign policy with respect to Mexico’s identification with and outreach to the MIKTA group, both in terms of collective action and of bilateral efforts to establish viable relations with its members.

## Keywords

Mexico, MIKTA, NAFTA, bridge, foreign policy, like-minded

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In November 2012 the *Economist* published its weekly issue under the title “The rise of Mexico,” calling for the United States (US) to take a look at its increasingly important neighbour, accompanied by an op-ed of then newly elected Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto entitled “Mexico’s moment.” At the time, there seemed to be a new opening for a country that had a limited international presence due to a growing tide of violence, drug trafficking, and internal turmoil.<sup>1</sup> In February 2014, a *Time* magazine cover followed up with a photo of the Mexican president and the title “Saving Mexico,” in praise of his sound reform record. The “Mexican Moment” was essentially based on the “Pact for Mexico,” a multi-party accord designed to craft structural reforms in key economic sectors such as energy, telecommunications, and education through constitutional changes<sup>2</sup> in an attempt to de-securitize the internal as well as the foreign policy agendas. This was especially true for relations in the case of the US, which had been reduced to the bilateral security concerns of drug and arms trafficking, border security, and migration control. There was as well a heated debate on the “criminal insurgency” in Mexico,<sup>3</sup> an evaluation forwarded by US government officials that prompted immediate reaction from the Mexican government, which had consistently rejected even the mere concept of allowing American troops on its soil.

Mexico’s new government needed a new foreign policy narrative, not only due to the monothematic format of the relationship with its northern neighbour, but also in view of the growing influence of regional and international protagonist Brazil, its traditional rival. The present text focuses on the soft doctrinal adaptations the government of President Peña Nieto introduced in order to generate larger foreign policy leverage for his country. An essential part of this effort is the implementation of multiregional coalitions as an innovative expression of Mexico’s traditional interest in multilateral activism as a means to diversify the (inter)dependence with the US. As the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) cooperation had reached its full implementation in terms of foreign policy, the cooperation in the MIKTA format with Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia (MIKTA), for Mexico, offered a new opportunity to relaunch the country internationally in this culturally heterogeneous group. MIKTA opened up a new front of incursion for Mexico’s up-to-now very limited interaction among its members, enabling the country to enhance mutual confidence and political coordination with new potentially attractive counterparts.

1. Ana Covarrubias, “Mexico’s foreign policy under the Partido de Acción Nacional: Promoting democracy, human rights, and interests,” in Gian Luca Gardini and Peter Lampert, eds., *Latin American Foreign Policies: Between Ideology and Pragmatism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 213–233.
2. Shannon O’Neil, “Six markets to watch: Viva Las Reformas,” *Foreign Affairs*, January–February 2014. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/mexico/2013-12-06/six-markets-watch-mexico> (accessed 27 December 2016)
3. John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, *Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency* (Bloomington: Small Wars Journal Foundation, 2012).

## Mexico's foreign policy dilemmas in the early twenty-first century

Mexico seemed to be locked into its bi-regional identity—anchored economically in North America, especially in the US, and culturally in Latin America.<sup>4</sup> Due to its internal security problems and the absence of cross-party consensus, the country's international presence was limited, and even negative. Its Latin American protagonist in the international realm was a booming and expanding Brazil, which, under the leadership of President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, occupied political spaces where Mexico had traditionally participated: at the United Nations (UN) level, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and other international organizations. Mexico seemed to have been displaced as a regional voice and its foreign policy eclipsed due to the growing global recognition of Brazil as the real shaker and mover of Latin American interests. This is reflected as well in the limited resources Mexico was and is dedicating in terms of its global diplomatic presence in contrast to Brazil. The global layout shows an unequivocal focus on its bilateral relations with the US, and hardly anywhere else. The proof is a constant number of barely 1.200 members in the diplomatic service of the Ministry of Foreign Relations since 1975, for a country of over 120 million people today.<sup>5</sup>

	Brazil	Mexico
Embassies	130	76
Consulates	36	69 (51 in the US)
Diplomats	3.122	1.114

The traditional Brazil–Mexico rivalry<sup>6</sup> shaped Mexico's foreign policy during the presidencies of Vicente Fox (2000–2006) and Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), both from the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) party and both without major experience in external affairs. Mexico was at an impasse, losing political clout and forced to implement decisions that distorted its long-held foreign policy and international projection. Furthermore, the country's Latin American footprint

4. Olga Pellicer, “México como potencia media en la política multilateral, 2006–2012,” *Foro Internacional* 53, no. 3–4 (July–December 2013): 873–896.
5. Jorge A. Schiavon, Intervención en el panel “La política exterior desde la academia,” en el marco del foro “México en el Mundo: Diagnóstico y Perspectivas de las Relaciones Internacionales” (Versión estenográfica), México, D.F. 2015, <http://comunicacion.senado.gob.mx/index.php/informacion/versiones/18706-version-estenografica-del-panel-qla-politica-exterior-desde-la-academiaq-en-el-marco-del-foro-qmexico-en-el-mundo-diagnostico-y-perspectivas-de-las-relaciones-internacionalesq.html> (accessed 28 November 2016).
6. Rafael Fernández de Castro, “El hermano distante: la percepción mexicana de la política exterior de Lula,” in Wilhelm Hofmeister, Francisco Rojas, and Luis Guillermo Solís, eds., *La percepción de Brasil en el contexto internacional: perspectivas y desafíos* (Mexico: FLACSO–Secretaría General/Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2007), 39–46.

became blurred due to an ongoing confrontation with Fidel Castro's Cuba and a contentious relationship with the Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. Since the negotiation of the NAFTA in the early 1990s, Brazil and other Latin American countries seemed to have concluded that Mexico had "changed sides" and was opting for the North at the expense of the South, a perception reinforced by the fact that Mexico became a full member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1994. But it was in the first decade of the 2000s that successive Mexican governments experienced a clear sense of marginalization as Brazil tried to consolidate South America as its sphere of influence by founding the South American Community (2004) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR, 2008). Mexico's waning international importance and influence vis-à-vis Brazil was not just a bilateral issue; it formed part of a generalized dissociation of Mexico from Latin America, partly due to ideological differences with Venezuela, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) countries (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America), and their concept of regional cooperation. Mexico's efforts to contain the expansion of Brazil<sup>7</sup> left it in a state of regional marginalization by the end of 2010, restricted to the role of a regional outsider. Only with the founding of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) did Mexico recover a platform to demonstrate its identity as part of Latin America in a new common forum. The country has, on the other hand, cultivated a visible presence in the international community by successfully conducting the COP (16th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) in November 2010 and hosting the G20 summit in Los Cabos in 2012.

In terms of its foreign policy model, Mexico had deficits in the maturing of its doctrinal foundations, which lacked congruence with changes in the international context<sup>8</sup> and focused more on principles than on greater practical influence. After the end of the Central American crises, in which Mexico had taken a generally accepted broker role for the peace processes in the 1970s and 1980s, the lack of convincing results in the follow up to the Plan Puebla-Panamá and the Mesoamerican Initiative weakened the appeal of Mexican efforts for its southern neighbours.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, there are doubts about whether Mexico's foreign policy can be understood as typical of a "middle power" due to the country's limited regional influence, the lack of diversification of its international alliances, and the fragmentation of its governmental structures, which impedes the consistent articulation of the country in these terms.<sup>10</sup> Caution and an apparent distaste for a

7. Anna Covarrubias, "Containing Brazil: Mexico's response to the rise of Brazil," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 35, no. 1 (2016): 49–63.

8. Olga Pellicer, "Mexico: A reluctant middle power," Briefing Paper (México: Frederich Ebert Stiftung, 2006), 10.

9. Mónica Touissaint Ribot, "México en Centroamérica: del activismo de los años ochenta a la nueva agenda del siglo XXI," *Cuadernos Intercambio sobre Centroamérica y el Caribe* 11, no. 1 (January–June, 2014): 73–203.

10. Pellicer, "México como potencia media en la política multilateral, 2006–2012," 874.

protagonist role in international relations have been adduced to explain a certain reluctance to assume major international responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, suggestions that Mexico be considered a natural “bridge” between North and South, with a special preference and capacity for forging alliances within multilateral forums and creating strategic alliances with peer countries, have flourished. The image of a “bridge nation” was widely promoted during the presidency of Vicente Fox (2000–2006),<sup>12</sup> but without the expected resonance at the international level. Nevertheless, the country has insisted on this role, constructing the identity of a “two-way bridge nation” in the area of development cooperation, where Mexico offers and receives cooperation at the same time and mediates between the traditional, industrialized donor countries and the emerging powers of the developing world.<sup>13</sup> However, the image of “bridge” or “bridge builder” is not necessarily consistent with the country’s national foreign policy goals. Although it may be convenient in order to have an impact on the international agenda, so as to reduce the risks of collision with the major power in the neighbourhood, the US, it generates political costs in terms of precarious networks with other groupings and contributes to some isolation and a lack of followers, when it comes to promoting the nation’s own foreign policy goals.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the opportunities to generate clear foreign policy narratives may be limited and the capacity to reach out for partners may be restricted to multiregional coalitions with a potentially precarious level of compromise.

Brazil’s insistence on the role of a “bridge nation” to foster its own international image and reputation has intensified Mexico’s loneliness in foreign policy terms. In fact, the implementation of Brazil’s “bridging” has been quite different from Mexico’s. Given its positioning as the “voice of the South,” Brazil was able to create “new ‘rules of the road’ for global governance” and to exact “a ‘toll’ for traffic in each direction,”<sup>15</sup> assuming the function of a gatekeeper for the participation of other parties. At the same time, this expansion restricted the recognition of Mexico’s definition of “bridge,” and pushed it to the sidelines not only in Latin America but also on the international level at large.

11. Pellicer, “Mexico: A reluctant middle power,” 10.

12. Speech of President Vicente Fox during the General Debate of the 56th General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, NY, 10 November 2001, <http://www.un.org/webcast/ga/56/statements/011110mexicoS.htm> (accessed 26 November 2016).

13. Guadalupe G. González, Olga Pellicer, and Natalia Saltalamacchia, “Rasgos y contribuciones de la política multilateral de México en el Siglo XXI,” in Guadalupe G. González, Olga Pellicer, Natalia Saltalamacchia, eds., *México y el multilateralismo del siglo XXI. Reflexiones a los 70 años de la ONU* (Mexico, D.F.: Siglo XXI, 2015), 42.

14. *Ibid.*, 25.

15. Sean W. Burges, “Brazil as a bridge between old and new powers?” *International Affairs* 89, no. 3 (2013): 578f.

## New foreign policy options in Mexico's external relations

Even before his inauguration as president (1 December 2012), Enrique Peña Nieto had confirmed his interest in initiating a “return to Latin America” as one of his main foreign policy objectives through intense travel diplomacy. He referred to the image of an “active foreign policy,” a term which has been invoked time and again in the national debate on foreign affairs.<sup>16</sup> The central concepts of Peña Nieto's foreign policy design revolve around two terms: the conversion of Mexico into an “emerging economic power” and an “actor with global responsibility” in the international community.<sup>17</sup> Mexico can play this new role with a central advantage: while emerging powers enact considerable economic resources to generate an international identity, Mexico is already recognized as a cultural power.<sup>18</sup> This line of reasoning is not exempt from certain voluntarism, connected to similar past initiatives, and is in urgent need of being substantiated by concrete strategic design and instrumentation. The question is whether Mexico is caught in traditional formats of a “wannabe leading power”<sup>19</sup> or whether it will be able to liberate its foreign policy potential in a way that ensures a new positioning in the international relations.

The new government began with a clear diagnosis of the limits the traditional, principle-based foreign policy implied for the proposed restart: for decades, Mexico had developed a principled, legalistic foreign policy based on self-determination, non-intervention, the inviolability of sovereignty, the peaceful resolution of disputes, respect for human rights, and support for development. The principles of non-intervention in internal affairs and the defence of sovereignty have constitutional rank and have guided normatively Mexico's external relations for decades.<sup>20</sup> In the eyes of the political elite these principles could never be openly challenged, even after the end of the Cold War. Foreign policy has been used as a domestic political tool ever since the economic and political legitimacy of the post-revolutionary regime began to fade in the late 1960s and 1970s. Interrupted by certain moments of activism, Mexican foreign policy followed a largely defensive posture.<sup>21</sup>

Under the Peña Nieto administration, Mexico was beginning to work on a grown-up foreign policy trying to capture the value of a country with “multiple

16. Ana Covarrubias, “La política exterior ‘activa’... una vez más,” in Humberto Garza Elizondo, ed., Jorge A. Schiavon, and Rafael Velázquez Flores, coords., *Paradigmas y paradojas de la política exterior de México: 2000–2006* (México: El Colegio de México–CIDE, 2010), 25–46.

17. Enrique Peña Nieto, “Discurso a la Nación,” *Excelsior*, 1 December 2012, [www.excelsior.com.mx/2012/12/01/nacional/872692](http://www.excelsior.com.mx/2012/12/01/nacional/872692), fecha de consulta: 29/6/2013 (accessed 27 November 2016).

18. <http://www.gob.mx/presidencia/prensa/12862> (accessed 27 December 2016).

19. Günther Maihold, “Mexico–EU: How to deal with a wannabe leading power,” in Jörg Husar and Günther Maihold, eds., *Europe and the New Leading Powers: Towards Partnership in Strategic Policy Areas* (Nomos: Baden-Baden, 2010), 103–115.

20. Ana Covarrubias, “Los principios y la política exterior,” in Jorge A. Schiavon, Daniela Spenser, and María Vázquez Olivera, eds., *En busca de una nación soberana. Relaciones internacionales de México, siglos XIX y XX* (Mexico, D.F.: CIDE-SRE, 2006), 387–422.

21. Sergio González Gálvez, “La política exterior de principios en tiempos de la globalización,” in Jorge Eduardo Navarrete, ed., *La reconstrucción de la política exterior de México: Principios, ámbitos, acciones* (México, D.F.: UNAM, 2006), 99–138.

belongings”<sup>22</sup> and to access a variety of international arenas in order to overcome “the absence of a proper room for political dialogue.”<sup>23</sup> The administration proposed four key foreign policy goals:

- consolidate Mexico’s presence on the world stage;
- strengthen development-oriented cooperation;
- promote Mexico through a worldwide campaign; and
- promote the interests of the country and its citizens abroad.<sup>24</sup>

As a visible step in the direction of global responsibility, the new government declared in 2014 that Mexico would resume, in a gradual and conditional way, participation in UN peacekeeping operations. This step marked a significant foreign policy shift for the country, which historically had been opposed to foreign military interventions of any kind and rejected an active role for its armed forces at the international level.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Mexico has continued to play on its traditional role as host and venue for international multilateral meetings, such as the first high-level meeting of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (2014), the second conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons (2014), and the First Party Conference of the Treaty on Arms Trafficking (2015). But again, these events followed the traditional modality of ad-hoc partnerships and did not help to give the country a new standing in terms of enduring alliances with new partners.

To solve this problem, the Mexican government has opted to rely on the concept of “like-mindedness” in order to deepen relationships to a level of significant compromise. On the basis of this approach, the government privileges the community of shared practices between states in order to construct a network in such a way that, as “in the system of arranged marriage, the relationship among partners deepens with time.”<sup>26</sup> This logic of entanglement relies on mutual engagement

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22. Foreign Minister José Antonio Meade Kuribreña, “México es un país de múltiples pertenencias, a la vez latino, centro y norteamericano; un país multiétnico y pluricultural de profundas raíces indígenas y europeas, heredero de valiosos legados de África y Medio Oriente; un país con vínculos crecientes con Asia y el Pacífico,” [Mexico is a country of multiple belonging, simultaneously latin-, middle-, and north American; a multiethnic country and pluricultural with profound indigenous and European roots, inheritor of valuable legacies of Africa and the Middle East; a country with growing links to Asia and the Pacific]. <http://comunicacion.senado.gob.mx/index.php/informacion/versiones/9219-mensaje-del-secretario-de-relaciones-exteriores-jose-antonio-meade-kuribrena-en-su-comparecencia-ante-el-pleno-del-senado.html> (accessed 27 December 2016).
23. Versión estenográfica del discurso del secretario de Relaciones Exteriores, José Antonio Meade Kuribreña, en la ceremonia de inauguración de la XXV Reunión de Embajadores y Cónsules de México am 6. Januar 2014 in Mexiko-Stadt, <http://www.gob.mx/sre/prensa/discurso-del-secretario-jose-antonio-meade-kuribrena-en-la-ceremonia-de-inauguracion-de-la-xxv-reunion-de-embajadores-y-consules-de-mexico> (accessed 28 November 2016).
24. Gobierno de la República, Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2013–2018 (México, D.F., 2013), 89.
25. Jorge Alberto Lozoya and Amaury Fierro, “México y las operaciones del mantenimiento de las paz,” in González, Pellicer, and Saltalamacchia, *México y el multilateralismo del siglo XXI*, 76–95.
26. Jörg Husar, *Framing Foreign Policy in India, Brazil and South Africa: On the Like-Mindedness of the IBSA States* (New York: Springer, 2016), 237.

and joint enterprise on the one hand, but leaves sufficient space for national peculiarities and priorities on the other. As “communities of practice,”<sup>27</sup> configurations of like-minded countries offer sufficient opportunity for diplomatic flexibility and manoeuvre,<sup>28</sup> inducing constructive and responsive attitudes in international relations—an objective which is constitutive for Mexican foreign policy. Unlike traditional points of view that consider that like-minded states should act as norm entrepreneurs as a quintessential element of middle power internationalism,<sup>29</sup> current efforts insist less on common normative commitments and institutionalized consensus as the point of departure in their cooperation. Instead, they try to construct trust and complementarity over time in order to develop like-mindedness as their objective. Accordingly, Mexico’s MIKTA discourse departs from the formal similarity of its members, in order to “strengthen our relation with countries that show common characteristics with Mexico, middle powers, democracies with higher population levels, members of relevant international groupings which have demonstrated a potential for significant economic growth, like South Korea and Turkey.”<sup>30</sup> Mexico understands MIKTA as “an informal space of dialogue and cooperation in order to contribute to a better global governance based on the political will of its members.”<sup>31</sup> The insistence on “political will” is of major importance, as it strengthens the notion that this concertation process adopts the modality of a dialogue between peers, without constraints based on hierarchies or the desire to confront major powers. The members emphasize instead the virtues of informal consultation and the agility it provides in terms of agenda-setting in order to promote their status and reputation. Like many emerging countries, Mexico in its foreign policy orientations is striving to gain more status in international relations<sup>32</sup> and to expand its foreign policy “reach” with a “value-creating” rationale.<sup>33</sup> MIKTA is considered a complementary grouping in the list of multiple belongings of the country, which offers Mexico benefits in terms of international manoeuvre and influence. Following Granovetter’s seminal words on “the strength of weak ties,” MIKTA, for Mexico, is an instrument that supports the multiple presence of the country in different scenarios and groupings and helps in linking them together. This compensatory element is decisive in a moment when geopolitical rationales and zones of influence defined by major powers are seen to

27. Emanuel Adler, *Communitarian International Relations: The Epistemic Foundations of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2005), 19.
28. Andrew Fenton Cooper, “Like-minded nations and contrasting diplomatic styles: Australian and Canadian approaches to agricultural trade,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* 25, no. 2 (June 1992): 349–379.
29. Simeon McKay, “The limits of likemindedness,” *International Journal* 61, no. 4 (2006): 875–894.
30. José Antonio Meade Kuribreña, <http://comunicacion.senado.gob.mx/index.php/informacion/versiones/9219-mensaje-del-secretario-de-relaciones-exteriores-jose-antonio-meade-kuribreña-en-su-comparecencia-ante-el-pleno-del-senado.html> (accessed 27 December 2016).
31. Presidencia de la República 2016, 682.
32. Andrew F. Cooper and Daniel Fleses, “Foreign policy strategies of emerging powers in a multipolar world: An introductory review,” *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 6 (2013): 943–962.
33. Amrita Narlikar, “Negotiating the rise of new powers,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 3 (2013): 561–576.

resurface in international relations<sup>34</sup> putting pressure on established forms of global governance and multilateral coordination. It is evident from the official declarations that Mexico feels more comfortable with the emerging power narrative than with the traditional middle power discourse. Mexico's leadership in the different global governance areas and forums corresponds to its interest in joining forces with emerging powers as peers and developing a sort of discursive alignment together with them which is able to contrast with the more "value-claiming" attitude of the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS)<sup>35</sup> and pave the way to a like-minded joint international presence.

This new foreign policy activism tries to overcome the existing coalitions-weakness of Mexico in the Latin American and global arenas but is encountering the pitfalls of the country's internal development. The disappearance of 43 college students at the hands of police in the Ayotzinapa case has seriously damaged Mexico's image at the international level and displaced the foreign policy agenda to human rights issues. It has pushed its government to an open confrontation with UN authorities in the person of the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions.<sup>36</sup> These events have toppled the foreign policy activism of the Peña Nieto administration and induced a new round of debates on the doctrinal foundations of Mexican foreign policy. Facing traditional sovereignty-oriented positions, Mexico's new foreign minister, Claudia Ruiz Massieu, who assumed office in August 2015, has insisted on the fact that "the interpretation of our foreign policy principles cannot be separated from the new realities of the world" and Mexico can no longer rely on the traditional role as an "orthodox defender of the principle of non-intervention."<sup>37</sup> But the additional resources of diplomatic apparatus required to implement the new roles of international presence proposed by the Peña Nieto government were not assigned. Although the country is developing innovative concepts, such as joint diplomatic representations of the member states of the Pacific Alliance in Ghana and other places, this does not resolve the deficits in the global outlay of Mexico's international presence. The new government's foreign policy activism is confronting material, ideational, and reputational shortcomings that might limit the achievement of the desired objectives.

34. Patrick Stewart and Isabella Bennett, "Geopolitics is back—and global governance is out," *The National Interest*, 12 May 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/geopolitics-back%E2%80%9494-global-governance-out-12868> (accessed 27 November 2016).

35. Fabiano Mielniczuk, "BRICS in the contemporary world: Changing identities, converging interests," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 6 (2013): 1075–1090.

36. Senado de la República Analizan senadores política exterior de México (Comunicado 306), México, D.F., 2014, <http://comunicacion.senado.gob.mx/index.php/informacion/boletines/16002-analizan-senadores-politica-exterior-de-mexico.html> (accessed 28 November 2016).

37. Palabras de la Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores de México, Claudia Ruiz Massieu, en la inauguración del Seminario «México Global: Intereses y Principios de Política Exterior», 2 May 2016, Ministry of Foreign Relations, Mexico-City, mimeo.

## Mexico in a multiplex world

In his “multiplex world” proposal, Amitav Acharya emphasizes a change in the logic of operation: “Overall, the agency in building world order is more dispersed, and lies more with the audience than with the producers (great powers).”<sup>38</sup> This displacement of traditional powers has changed as well the narratives in international politics:<sup>39</sup> we can observe that leadership positions are no longer legitimized through the European narrative of democracy and rule of law that prevailed internationally. The recent “autocratic turn” in international relations<sup>40</sup> has further undermined the opportunities for success of the Western narrative and affects the basic principles of the established global governance discourse. Rather, through the emerging powers, especially the BRICS, a different vision of negotiating emerging countries’ roles appeared—namely, through changes in the mechanisms of global politics in terms of justice and an appropriate distribution of power and wealth. Nevertheless, such an approach implies a competition for leadership, although these rising powers are acting with dissimilar negotiating strategies.<sup>41</sup> Mexico’s intention to project its new “global responsibility” narrative through Latin America’s willingness to base its relationships on the presence of more (and new) actors, with quite differentiated interests, may mean that this region is gaining influence in the international arena. Some competitors like Brazil certainly were gaining influence, but others in the region were losing it. Mexico’s efforts under President Peña Nieto were clearly focused on preventing Mexico from being relegated to the role of an “outsider,” given the leadership of Brazil and Venezuela in the regional context. But Mexico’s aspiration to influence does not compare to Brazil’s leadership appeals: opinion polls have shown that 44 percent of Mexicans consider it most appropriate for the country to participate in the region with other countries without the pretension to become a leader.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Mexico’s foreign policy seeks autonomy and does not necessarily intend for the country to be considered as a leader; however, the country is following a concept of inclusive leadership arrangements and is therefore in need of followers in order to perform a substantial emerging power role.<sup>43</sup>

The plurality of spaces for participation characterizes the multiplex world; there are disposable spaces in all relevant areas and in all platforms in which different

38. Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 9.

39. Laurence Whitehead, “Navigating in a fog: Metanarrative in the Americas today,” in Andrew F. Cooper and Jorge Heine, eds., *Which Way Latin America? Hemispheric Politics Meets Globalization* (Tokyo/New York/Paris: United Nations University Press, 2009), 27–49.

40. Larry Diamond, Marc A. Plattner, and Christopher Walker, eds., *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

41. Amrita Narlikar, “Making room for rising powers,” *Current History* 113, no. 759 (2010): 33–35.

42. CIDE, *México, Las Américas y el mundo 2012–2013. Política exterior: opinión pública y lideres* (México, D.F. 2013).

43. Stefan Schirm, “Leaders in need of followers: Emerging powers in global governance,” *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 2 (2011): 197–221. See also Andrés Malamud, “A leader without followers? The growing divergence between the regional and global performance of Brazilian foreign policy,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 53, no. 3 (2011): 1–24.

countries can interact, within the regional, national, or international contexts. All this occurs in an environment marked by the hegemonic role of the United States in the region, which is being redefined, although with varying intensities in the Caribbean and South America. These processes of regionalization must consider the needs of each country and region to achieve their respective insertion into the multiplex world, within the logic of the development that such regionalization aims to produce. This is a lofty goal, in the absence of strategic thinking in the Mexican case and the difficulty of sharing leadership arrangements in the region.

### **Mexico and the MIKTA option**

When the foreign ministers of Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2013 and announced a new international grouping called MIKTA, corresponding to the initials of their countries, nobody—perhaps not even the founding members—was clear about the final objective of these emerging economies, all members of the G20, joining forces. Most surprising was the inclusion of Australia, a country in 12th place in gross domestic product (GDP) worldwide and 5th in terms of GDP per capita, which gave this grouping of intermediate emerging powers a special weight. But this new association, which identifies itself as an informal grouping, has a clear relationship to the G20, which facilitated its inception, and—voluntarily or not—to its “big brother,” the BRICS. However, some analysts from BRICS countries did not seem very happy with the rise of a new club that could match the BRICS.<sup>44</sup> In some way, MIKTA seems to challenge the prevalent academic position that emerging powers emphasize self-perceptions of belonging to the “South,”<sup>45</sup> while the MIKTA members point out their interest in presenting an intermediate position, bridging the traditional divides between North and South. This new grouping bets on its great potential in acting as a transregional governance group that takes as its starting point the concept of democratic governance that characterizes all of its members. Thus, MIKTA contrasts starkly with the BRICS model, consisting of new powerful states asking for more participation in the reframing of the international order.

From the Mexican point of view, MIKTA offers the opportunity to develop innovative partnerships with other emerging powers and to access world regions where Mexico traditionally has underperformed. As a flexible and informal platform it does not force the country to establish a high level of binding commitments and comes very close to the national understanding of multilateralism as part of the national foreign policy goal of “multiple belongings”, to allow the country the opportunity to continue playing its preferred role as “bridge” and “honest broker” between the industrial North and the “Global South.” MIKTA in this view is the optimal instrument for the sought-after high-level club of narrow

44. Georgy Toloraya, *MIKTA—Is It a New Element of the Global Governance Structure?* (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, 2013).

45. Andrew Hurrell and Sandeep Sengupta, “Emerging powers, North–South relations and global climate politics,” *International Affairs* 88, no. 3 (2012), 463–484.

interests that can accomplish the desired approval and recognition the country is looking for in order to counterbalance its troubled relationship with the “colossus of the north,” although it might have become more fragmented due to the inter-mestic agenda of trade, migration, and drug trafficking.<sup>46</sup>

In MIKTA’s incipient discourse, this initiative’s double common basis is obvious: the first is that these countries’ economic base has a global economic potential; the second is that they are identified as middle powers—a concept that Mexico has never fully embraced—that wish to contribute their views and capacities to a world in need of greater coordination and confluence of willingness in the face of a multilateralism with weak institutions.<sup>47</sup> But MIKTA members’ identification as middle powers has some variation: while Australia debates its profile beyond the attributes of a middle power, Indonesia and Turkey are attempting to consolidate their profile beyond the regional level to the global. Mexico and South Korea have already assumed a global commitment, with a presence more articulated by global than by regional initiatives. However, all the members have at least one feature of a middle power, since they share a common interest and have the capacity to influence important areas of international policy in terms of a mediating role, a position in favour of multilateralism, an orientation toward liberal internationalism (seeking peaceful solutions and encouraging international institutions), and an ethical record regarding their domestic and foreign policy.<sup>48</sup>

In the first years of its existence, MIKTA members have been trying to arrive at a clearer definition of the grouping. At its fifth meeting held in Seoul, South Korea on 22 May 2015, MIKTA foreign ministers adopted a MIKTA Vision Statement that used as its starting point a self-evaluation as countries “like-minded on many of the global challenges of our time and [that] are active contributors in major international forums.” They go on to acknowledge that “MIKTA can play a constructive role in the international agenda and exert greater influence” in four different ways:

- “serving as a cross-regional consultative platform
- playing a bridging role between developed and developing countries
- acting as a catalyst or facilitator in launching initiatives and implementing global governance reform
- helping each other to better communicate with regional bodies and increase the connectivity of regional networks.”<sup>49</sup>

46. Tom Long, “Coloso fragmentado: la agenda ‘interméstica’ y la política exterior latinoamericana,” *Foro Internacional* 57 (227) ISSN 0185-013X (in press, 2017).

47. It’s worth remembering that Mexico assumed the first pro-tempore presidency of MIKTA in 2014, followed by South Korea in 2015, Australia in 2016, and Turkey in 2017. More detail can be found in the Mo, Parlar Dal and Kurşun, and Harris Rimmer articles.

48. Günther Maihold, “Ambivalencias de una potencia media: la nueva política exterior de México a inicios del nuevo siglo,” in Günther Maihold, ed., *Las modernidades de México. Espacios, procesos, trayectorias* (México, D.F.: Porrúa, 2004), 595–635.

49. MIKTA, “Mikta Vision Statement,” <http://www.mikta.org/document/others.php?pn=1&sn=&st=&sc=&sd=&sdte=&edate=&sfld=&sort=&at=view&idx=122> (accessed 27 November 2016).

In sum, MIKTA conceives itself as a bridgehead or a facilitator of different forms of cooperation aimed at fostering global governance grounded on its self-ascribed capacities to broker solutions between different groupings in the UN, G20, and other forums. The identity of MIKTA as an informal grouping will continue for the time being as the core modality of operation in order to facilitate economic cooperation between its members, confidence building, and mutual understanding. In order to increase its visibility at the international level, the MIKTA foreign ministers have issued nine joint statements, mostly concerning disasters, terrorist attacks in the member states, etc., but also on climate change and prevention of violent crime, as well as the dangerous situation in the Korean peninsula.<sup>50</sup> MIKTA's immediate agenda focuses on issues like the promotion of cooperation on cybersecurity, including the creation of a network of cybersecurity experts, and joint positions on the post-2015 development agenda and financing for development processes. The issue of migration, which affects MIKTA members substantially, might shape the discursive convergence in the coming years, not only because border management will become a major contentious issue in the US–Mexican bilateral relationship during the Trump administration but also with regards to the global agenda in the context of the G20. Due to its paramount importance for the Mexican government, the possible MIKTA initiatives on the migration topic will be an indicator of the assertiveness of the Peña Nieto government to play an active role even beyond the bilateral agenda.

In the record of external actions of each member, we can see features that provide the MIKTA members with a certain uniformity and a reference to their role in international politics, quite contrary to the divergent histories that can be found among the BRICS. Thanks to this common basis, MIKTA has earned a certain international authority and recognition for its role of conciliator between nation states. This has given birth to the concept of “hinge countries,” used to refer to their ability to link and relate multiple scenarios.<sup>51</sup> This “hinging function” has been operating in the intermediation between North and South in international conferences with the objective of facilitating consensus and moderating debates so they might advance understanding at the international level. Due to the institutional and operational weakness of current multilateralism, such functions are lacking in international politics. This systemic need for countries that can base themselves on their reputation for encouraging negotiations in international relations, facilitating agreements, and fostering the search for consensus may lead the MIKTA countries to play a prominent role in the international community due to their diplomatic profiles and their “soft power.”

Whether as a simple platform for dialogue or as a serious, multilateral cooperation mechanism, MIKTA involves specific challenges for countries with multiple

50. MIKTA, “Joint Statements,” <http://www.mikta.org/document/state.php> (accessed 28 November 2016).

51. Günther Maihold, “BRICS, MIST, MIKTA: México entre poderes emergentes, potencias medias y responsabilidad global,” *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior*, no. 100 (January–April 2014): 75–76.

affiliations like Mexico. It will be crucial whether MIKTA will operate as a loose platform for dialogue between middle powers or develop to a formal and efficient multilateral mechanism for cooperation. There are serious doubts about whether it would be convenient and/or viable for Mexico to assume a key role in such a more formal space. Such a rigorous development of MIKTA would obviously affect the main components of the cooperation agenda among its members, setting deeper bilateral relations between them, reaching agreements on joint interventions in the multilateral agenda, on which the group could focus with a certain level of success, finding common ground among their respective priorities, and defining the forums in which the collaboration would be most effective, both within it and beyond. Until now Mexico's preferences have been for looser formats and terms, avoiding binding commitments that could endanger possible obligations in other partnerships.

### **MIKTA and challenges for global governance**

When discussing new actors in international relations, similarities—as proposed by the Mexican government as justification for its MIKTA membership—are not necessarily a sufficient basis for cooperation; we should look for complementarities as well. Therefore, it is important that, when conceptualizing MIKTA, similarities should not be overemphasized. The members are also aspiring to develop a more prominent place in economic relations worldwide, trying to play a whole range of different role models as “middle powers, regional and constructive powers.”<sup>52</sup> This generalized behaviour of switching roles which may fit best in the respective national foreign policy priorities of member countries, however, does not help to develop a clear vision of MIKTA's potential as a group.

Not only are there “new powers in the Club”<sup>53</sup> now, but there is also a new need to factor in a power transition in the different arenas of global governance. Consequently, informal arrangements and alliances have sprung up—a system of club governance in which sectoral and club arrangements give roles to other players. The trouble is that small groupings do not muster sufficient consensus to uphold solutions, and responsibility is diffused. At the same time, due to the extension of globalization to the different realms of an interdependent world, the very notion of the nation state has come under question; although there were those who saw a growing firewall in the principle of non-intervention, this was countered by supporters of the responsibility to protect.

So what role could MIKTA play in global governance, especially in its original arena, the G20? The answer to this question depends on its own role-perception. This remains a big unknown, since its members are still immersed in an onerous process of discourse convergence, trying to figure out among themselves what they

52. Jorge A. Schiavon and Diego Domínguez, “El grupo MIKTA y la gobernanza global,” *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica* (January/March 2016): 104–109.

53. Narlikar, “Making room for rising powers.”

want to be together. Recent events, such as the authoritarian turn in Turkey's political development, are undermining one of the central components of the MIKTA identity: democracy. From the Mexican side, the reservations about too close a relationship with members whose democratic standing is being questioned are growing.

From an academic point of view as well, we need to know what MIKTA is, where its potential lies, and how effective its internal cooperation arrangements will be for the different members. Conceptually, we can identify elements that are relevant for Mexico's agenda. Although Mexican foreign policy is devoid of a grand design and relies more on a pragmatic style, we can identify certain features that complement its aspirations: Mexico sees great advantage in a MIKTA that, as an alliance of like-minded countries, can serve as a catalyst for regional and global policy options. This function would be in line with the articles published by the foreign ministers, claiming it to be "a force for good,"<sup>54</sup> a norm entrepreneur in international relations with membership based around liberal economics and democratic governance. The role model is to act as a constructive bridge builder between blocks, offering to the group the opportunity to be regarded internationally as respected global players. This status rests on the willingness of the MIKTA members to share burdens of increased responsibility in global issues, not confronting traditional powers but developing, what Mexico has called, a "global responsibility."

The Mexican government, therefore, has opted for MIKTA to act on a limited agenda. The major interest is to keep formal flexibility but work on the growing convergence of the thematic agenda which, according to the consensus reached among the members, should be focused on seven issues: energy, trade and economic cooperation, security and terrorism control, sustainable development, good governance and democracy, gender equality, and peace operations. This agenda design is very close to that of the G20, which has continued to be the major stage for the MIKTA presence. As emerging donors, MIKTA countries could assume leadership with respect to the new development agenda as expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in the discussion of the agenda Beyond Aid and Aid Efficiency that will be dominant in the upcoming years. As Mexico has been engaged in the consolidation of its national agency for development cooperation, Agencia Mexicana de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AMEXCID), MIKTA countries could assume a leading voice in the implementation and monitoring process of the SDG's normative framework.<sup>55</sup>

These instrumental and substantial dimensions can be summed up, according to the Mexican perspective, in the clear objective of not overstretching the agenda of

54. Foreign Ministers of the MIKTA countries, "MIKTA as a force for good," *Huffington Post*, 15 April 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jose-antonio-meade/post\\_7360\\_b\\_5152411.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jose-antonio-meade/post_7360_b_5152411.html) (accessed 27 November 2016).

55. Juan Manuel Valle Pereña, "México como actor con responsabilidad global: una renovada política mexicana de cooperación internacional," *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior*, no. 102 (September–December 2014): 15–28.

MIKTA, especially on issues already dealt with in other forums. But at the same time, there is a lingering temptation to provide instrumental roles that don't involve the commitment of national resources and permit the country to assume the traditional bridge role. But if Mexico aspires to the more challenging reputation as a "hinge," this would imply a serious effort in agenda setting, an objective unachievable without the commitment of substantial resources.

In addition, since MIKTA is currently conceived as an informal space of dialogue, the question repeatedly arises between its members about the need for further institutionalization in the form of a permanent secretariat or similar modality. Mexico is one of the members that prefers the informal character of meetings at different levels, for example, those held with senior officials (SOMs), or between the G20 sherpas, and is not pushing for a higher level of formal institutional performance. A central aspect of MIKTA cooperation is the deepening of the social foundations of the members, operating at the moment on very precarious bilateral levels. Following the design of the BRICS, MIKTA has inaugurated an academic network, a meeting between journalists and young leaders of the member states, as well as a think tank dialogue. This networking in various compositions has been seen as an effort to promote mutual understanding and to develop closer relationships in certain thematic approaches. For Mexico, this kind of cooperation implies a chance to deepen the new design of its foreign policy making. Up to now, in Mexico the foreign policy process has followed a rather state-centric design, assuming that this is an area reserved to governments. Opening up to non-governmental actors, academia, etc. is an overdue reform in order to implement innovations in national governance and global governance arrangements. Sadly, the confrontation between the government and human rights' non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is not conducive to overcoming this traditional shortfall of Mexican foreign policy.

### **MIKTA and its potential to transform Mexican foreign policy dimensions**

Conciliating the emerging powers' economic agenda and the middle powers' political agenda within MIKTA's incipient policy coordination has been a special challenge for Mexico, as the country was in charge of the platform's *pro tempore* presidency in 2014. This period gave the country an opportunity to rethink its diplomatic strategy because it paved the way for the consolidation of its presence at the global level. The country took advantage of this opportunity and was present in selected strategic areas and with new strategic counterparts. However, Mexico made little progress in the difficult task of defining priorities due to the increasing complexity facing its external policy (especially in human rights issues). MIKTA countries' common goal of expanding trade liberalization is an important starting point, which might become a characteristic that sets the group apart from other actors that prefer the protection of their internal markets.

The potential advantages of being a MIKTA member, for Mexico and the other countries, are there for all to see: due to the internal homogeneity of this like-minded group of middle powers, if they become seriously involved in this new platform, it could become an important forum. Compared to the BRICS, MIKTA is a more uniform “club,” although the recent political developments in Turkey and Indonesia have increased doubts concerning its democratic appeal. These changes can negatively affect MIKTA’s international reputation as well as the political will of the members to cooperate. Fortunately, the expectations created by the creation of this bloc were not exaggerated. So it is now in the foreign ministries’ hands to define which commitments will emerge. We must certainly not overload this new forum with expectations of the results that it might produce in the short, medium, and long term. Neither ought we to underestimate the complications that might occur due to the necessity of conciliating their MIKTA membership with the diverse regional integration processes in which Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia are all involved. Creating added value from belonging to another group like MIKTA requires a serious evaluation process of whether this platform can be a useful tool for the achievement of Mexico’s goals. If so, this country’s foreign ministry can then craft the messages to address to its counterparts in order to develop this project. MIKTA has great potential, but it also involves a significant political and administrative effort in order to instigate internally the “iterative policy drills”<sup>56</sup> indispensable to generating the political momentum for breakthroughs in new foreign policy circuits. On the other hand, MIKTA’s dynamic is limited due to the internal vicissitudes of its members, as in the case of Indonesia since the arrival of President Joko Widodo’s government in October 2014, which has not shown an inclination to build consensus in the region. After South Korea’s solid *pro-tempore* presidency in 2015 and Australia’s cautious presidency in 2016, MIKTA will enter difficult times when in 2017 it will be Turkey’s turn, with President Erdogan to coordinate the grouping’s work, generating a very difficult disequilibrium in a MIKTA that once promoted itself on the basis of the democratic nature of the members’ political systems.

From a Mexican point of view, MIKTA offers an opportunity for a new international profile. If the government insists on the idea of Mexico as a country of “multiple belongings,” which in the past only showed that the country was lacking long-term allies,<sup>57</sup> then these prospects will be missed. Therefore, the grouping has to develop its own political agenda and international proposals in order to reach a substantial global standing. To this end, it must advance beyond the rather instrumental reach of its role as it was defined in the MIKTA vision statement in order to gain the support of the Mexican political elites. Without a sound political identity, MIKTA will not be able to advance beyond the perception of it being a new “club” on the international stage, where it runs the risk of losing one of its unique selling

56. Andrew Carey and Brendan Baker, “Flexible ‘G Groups’ and network governance in an era of uncertainty and experimentation,” in Anthony Payne and Nicola Phillips, eds., *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Governance* (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2014), 94.

57. Pellicer, “México como potencia media en la política multilateral, 2006–2012,” 894.

points at the moment: the democratic quality of its members. This could be a crucial moment for Mexico and MIKTA—trying to establish some sort of peer review process on the democratic governance of its members to show to the international community MIKTA's disposition to insist on common positions among its members.

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