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The Role of Public and Cultural Diplomacy in Advancing Mexico's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Public and cultural diplomacy has emerged as one of the key soft power instruments in the foreign policy of developing countries. Mexico, as a regional power in Latin America, has increasingly sought to use public and cultural diplomacy to project a positive image internationally and to advance its foreign policy objectives. This paper adopts a descriptive-analytical approach to explore the position and functions of Mexico's public and cultural diplomacy within the broader framework of its foreign policy goals.

Due to its unique geopolitical location—bordering the United States and being a prominent actor in the Spanish-speaking world—Mexico has long sought to define an independent identity in the global arena. In this context, successive Mexican administrations have employed tools such as international media, cultural institutions (e.g., Instituto Mexicano de Cultura), educational and artistic exchange programs, film festivals, traditional music, and literature to not only promote Mexico's image abroad, but also to build sustainable cultural ties that serve the country's economic, political, and even security interests. A key pillar of Mexico's public diplomacy has been its focus on the Mexican diaspora, particularly in the United States. Through initiatives like "Mexicanos en el Exterior," the Mexican government has aimed to preserve the cultural identity and Spanish language among migrant communities, fostering a form of "transnational soft power" that could potentially be leveraged as a foreign policy asset. The active involvement of embassies and consulates in organizing cultural and artistic events further demonstrates the growing importance of cultural instruments in Mexico's official diplomacy.

At the regional level, Mexico has sought to establish a form of cultural hegemony by acting as a cultural mediator in Latin America. Programs to promote Spanish language education in Central America, support for joint film productions, and dissemination of Mexican music in the Caribbean reflect these efforts. Such activities not only boost Mexico's cultural credibility in the region but also pave the way for broader political and economic influence.

On the global stage, Mexico has actively participated in organizations such as UNESCO and other regional cultural forums in an effort to shape global cultural agendas and enhance its cultural brand. Hosting international events like the Guadalajara Film Festival, sending cultural delegations abroad, and holding Mexican art exhibitions in Europe and Asia are part of these strategies.

Nonetheless, Mexico's public and cultural diplomacy faces several challenges, including a negative international image associated with domestic violence and drug cartels, weak institutional coordination

between state and non-state actors, and limited funding for long-term cultural projects. These obstacles have at times reduced the effectiveness or coherence of Mexico's cultural policies.

In conclusion, while public and cultural diplomacy alone cannot fundamentally transform foreign policy, it can serve as a vital complement to traditional diplomacy. When integrated into a comprehensive strategic vision, it can enhance a country's symbolic capital and facilitate the realization of broader foreign policy objectives. Mexico's success in this realm will depend on sustained strategic planning, improved institutional coordination, and adaptive alignment of cultural programs with shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Keywords: *Public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, foreign policy, Mexico, soft power, international image*

Introduction

In the age of globalization and rapid advances in communication technologies, the concept of diplomacy has undergone profound transformations. Diplomacy is no longer confined to official interactions between states and traditional ministries of foreign affairs; rather, concepts such as public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy have emerged as complementary and increasingly influential dimensions of foreign policy (Nye, 2004). Within this framework, developing countries have sought to utilize soft power tools to enhance their international standing. One notable example is Mexico, which has attempted to project a positive image abroad and reinforce its foreign policy through cultural resources and engagement with foreign publics.

Public diplomacy can be defined as a deliberate effort to influence foreign public opinion and create a positive perception of the home country (Melissen, 2005). Unlike traditional diplomacy, which engages primarily with governments, public diplomacy reaches out directly to societies, civil institutions, media, universities, and non-state actors in target countries. A subset of this approach is cultural diplomacy, which relies on cultural tools—such as art, language, music, literature, education, and heritage—to enhance soft power and a nation's international reputation (Bound et al., 2007). These dimensions of diplomacy, particularly for countries with limited hard power resources, can serve as effective indirect means of influencing the international environment.

Mexico possesses a unique cultural richness rooted in ancient civilizations, ethnic and linguistic diversity, acclaimed literature and cinema, influential music traditions, and a vast diaspora—especially in the United States. In recent years, various Mexican administrations have invested in public and cultural diplomacy through institutions such as the Instituto Mexicano de Cultura and the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA). Initiatives have included international art exhibitions, academic exchanges, film festivals, traditional music performances, and the global promotion of the Spanish language. These efforts aim not only to shape a favorable image of Mexico abroad, but also to create lasting cultural ties that support Mexico's economic, political, and even security interests (Villanueva, 2007).

A key component of Mexico's public diplomacy is its large and dynamic Mexican diaspora, particularly in the United States. This population plays a crucial role in American society and economy, and has become an important focus of Mexico's external cultural engagement. Through programs like Mexicanos en el Exterior, the Mexican government seeks to maintain cultural connections with these communities and preserve their Spanish-language identity. This strategy serves not only as a means of cultural preservation, but also as a form of transnational soft power that can potentially influence U.S. policymaking in Mexico's favor (Del Arenal, 2011). The diaspora thus functions both as the audience and the agent of Mexico's public diplomacy.

At the regional level, Mexico aims to assert a leadership role in Latin America through cultural diplomacy. Shared language, historical ties, and regional proximity offer Mexico an opportunity to act as a cultural hegemon, particularly through cooperation in education, media, and the arts. Programs supporting Spanish language education in Central America, co-produced regional films, and the dissemination of Mexican music

across the Caribbean exemplify this strategy. These actions have enhanced Mexico's credibility as a cultural leader while also fostering stronger political and economic ties within the region (Rojas, 2012).

On the global stage, Mexico has actively engaged in multilateral cultural platforms such as UNESCO and various regional organizations to shape international cultural agendas. The country hosts major international events, including the Guadalajara International Film Festival, organizes traveling exhibitions, and dispatches cultural delegations abroad. These initiatives aim to solidify Mexico's cultural brand and increase its visibility and influence in global arenas.

However, Mexico's public and cultural diplomacy faces a number of significant challenges. First, the country's negative image stemming from domestic issues—such as violence, corruption, and drug cartel activity—can undermine its soft power efforts (González, 2015). Second, institutional fragmentation and lack of coordination among government ministries, cultural organizations, and NGOs often hinder the effectiveness of cultural programming. Finally, limited funding and dependency on state budgets restrict the sustainability and long-term impact of many cultural diplomacy initiatives.

Given these realities, it is both academically and practically essential to analyze Mexico's public and cultural diplomacy as a strategic instrument of its foreign policy. This article aims to examine the functions, tools, and goals of Mexico's soft power strategy across bilateral, regional, and global levels. Understanding the mechanisms and limitations of Mexico's approach may offer broader insights into the role of soft power in international relations, particularly for countries with rich cultural capital but constrained material resources.

Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical research method. The data have been primarily collected through library research, analysis of official Mexican government documents, reports from international organizations, and content analysis of Mexico's public and cultural diplomacy programs and institutions. The data are analyzed qualitatively, focusing on how public and cultural diplomacy tools are utilized in advancing Mexico's foreign policy objectives. The aim of this method is to describe the mechanisms of Mexico's soft diplomacy and to analyze their impact on the country's foreign policy at the bilateral, regional, and global levels.

Theoretical Framework

Foreign policy in the contemporary world is no longer confined to traditional interactions between states. It increasingly involves a diverse array of tools and actors capable of influencing transnational public opinion, non-state institutions, and the global media landscape. Among the most prominent emerging concepts in this context is soft power, first introduced by Joseph Nye. Complementing this notion are public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, which serve as practical instruments of soft power. To analyze the role of public and cultural diplomacy in Mexico's foreign policy, it is essential to explore these theoretical foundations in depth.

Soft Power and Its Place in Foreign Policy

Joseph Nye defines soft power as the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce or pay (Nye, 2004). In other words, a country with soft power can influence others to follow its goals without force. The primary sources of soft power include culture, political values, and foreign policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority (Nye, 2008). When a country's culture is admired abroad, its values are inspiring, and its policies are perceived as legitimate, it possesses substantial soft power.

Many nations have sought to turn their cultural assets into tools for enhancing their soft power. In Mexico's case, its historical legacy (Aztec and Mayan civilizations), rich literature, traditional music, distinctive cuisine,

and globally recognized cinema provide ample resources for soft power projection. Moreover, the large Mexican diaspora in the United States contributes to cultural diffusion and informal influence abroad.

Public Diplomacy: Connecting with Global Public Opinion

Public diplomacy refers to a government's communication and engagement with the public in other countries to gain support, reduce misunderstandings, and facilitate political and economic relationships (Melissen, 2005). It operates through media, educational institutions, social networks, and cultural exchange programs to convey the country's message effectively.

This form of diplomacy emerged in response to the limitations of traditional diplomacy in an increasingly interconnected world, where transnational communication, non-state actors, and global public opinion have become decisive (Cull, 2009). According to this approach, the power to shape international narratives and public perceptions can significantly advance a country's foreign policy objectives.

In Mexico's case, public diplomacy aims to improve the country's global image, counteract negative media portrayals (e.g., violence or illegal migration), and promote its cultural identity. Key tools include academic cooperation, scholarship programs, engagement with the diaspora, and cultural tourism promotion.

Cultural Diplomacy: Culture as a Language of Foreign Policy

Cultural diplomacy, as a subset of public diplomacy, emphasizes the role of culture in international relations. Its goal is to foster mutual understanding, promote a positive image of the country, and build trust among nations through cultural exchanges (Bound et al., 2007). Elements such as language, literature, arts, education, and religion are key components of cultural diplomacy.

As Boris Bettker argues, cultural diplomacy serves as an indirect mechanism of influence, building emotional and symbolic connections that pave the way for political and economic cooperation (Bettker, 2005). Mexico has actively invested in culture through institutions such as CONACULTA and Instituto Cervantes, seeking to develop cultural networks, train cultural ambassadors, and expand its soft influence globally.

Theoretical Link between Culture, International Image, and Foreign Policy

From a constructivist perspective, a country's national identity and international image are pivotal in shaping its foreign policy goals (Wendt, 1999). The identity a state attributes to itself is influenced by how others perceive it. Therefore, cultural diplomacy, as a tool for image management, indirectly affects the formulation of national interests.

In this context, symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) becomes relevant. Culture and art are not merely aesthetic tools, but sources of power in international relations. Countries that have achieved global cultural hegemony—such as the U.S. through Hollywood—also enjoy increased political and economic clout. While Mexico may not command such global cultural dominance, it leverages assets like the Spanish language, national cinema, traditional cuisine, and music to enhance its symbolic capital regionally and globally.

Cull's Five-Dimensional Framework of Public Diplomacy

Nicholas Cull identifies five key components of public diplomacy: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting (Cull, 2009). He emphasizes that the most effective public diplomacy involves two-way engagement, rather than unilateral information dissemination. Successful cultural policies, then, are those that foster mutual participation between the sending and receiving societies.

Mexico has achieved some success in areas such as cultural exchange and international festivals (e.g., the Guadalajara International Film Festival), which promote intercultural dialogue. However, challenges remain in areas such as official advocacy and cultural aid, where Mexico faces issues of limited resources, a weak national brand, and competition from stronger regional powers.

Findings:

In the age of globalization, where information flows rapidly across borders, states are increasingly relying on soft power strategies, such as public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, to project influence and achieve foreign policy objectives. Mexico, with its rich cultural heritage and active diplomatic engagement, has been keen to enhance its global standing using these tools. This section presents the findings from the analysis of Mexico's use of public and cultural diplomacy as mechanisms to advance its foreign policy. Through case studies, institutional analysis, and content evaluation, this research explores the effectiveness and challenges of Mexico's diplomatic strategies.

Mexico's Diplomatic Objectives and Use of Soft Power

Mexico's foreign policy has traditionally been centered around the principles of sovereignty, non-intervention, and multilateralism (Villanueva, 2007). However, the country has increasingly incorporated public and cultural diplomacy as tools to project its influence on a global scale, especially as a response to shifting geopolitical dynamics, particularly in relation to the United States and its position within Latin America.

Mexico's soft power is rooted in its cultural diplomacy efforts, leveraging its cultural assets, such as language, music, cuisine, art, and cinema, to enhance its image and influence abroad. The country's historical identity and international cultural appeal have made these tools central to its diplomatic strategy. In recent years, the government has strategically utilized cultural exchange programs, the promotion of Mexican cinema, and efforts to increase the international presence of Mexican cuisine (Rojas, 2012).

Cultural Diplomacy: Building Mexico's Global Cultural Footprint

One of the key findings from this study is that cultural diplomacy plays a pivotal role in enhancing Mexico's international profile. Cultural diplomacy in Mexico is not just about showcasing traditional cultural elements, but it is about strategic engagement with other countries and regions to strengthen bilateral relations and achieve broader foreign policy goals. Through institutions like CONACULTA (National Council for Culture and the Arts) and initiatives such as the Mexican Cultural Institute, Mexico has been able to create a multifaceted cultural exchange with countries worldwide.

Cultural events such as the International Guadalajara Film Festival, Cervantino International Festival, and Mexican food festivals have served as platforms for cultural diplomacy. These events not only promote Mexican culture but also function as diplomatic tools to build closer relationships with other countries and attract international attention. The Guadalajara Film Festival, for instance, plays a key role in promoting Latin American cinema globally, and it has been instrumental in enhancing Mexico's image as a center for cultural innovation (Villanueva, 2007).

The Mexican government has also invested heavily in promoting the Spanish language through the Instituto Cervantes, which offers Spanish language courses and organizes cultural events abroad. This initiative has proven to be particularly effective in increasing Mexico's presence in global cultural diplomacy by creating spaces for intercultural dialogue and establishing cultural alliances (Bound et al., 2007).

Public Diplomacy: Enhancing Mexico's Global Image

Public diplomacy has been another major tool used by Mexico to improve its international image, particularly in countries where it seeks to strengthen its relationships and counter negative stereotypes. The country's public diplomacy efforts have largely focused on addressing misconceptions about Mexico and presenting a more nuanced image to the world.

One of the significant findings of this research is the effective use of media and digital platforms by Mexico to engage international audiences. The country has embraced social media, digital content creation, and broadcasting to reach global audiences, promoting not only its cultural assets but also its policy positions. Social media campaigns, documentary films, and digital publications have been instrumental in showcasing Mexico's culture, its contributions to the global economy, and its political stance on issues like climate change, migration, and human rights.

The Mexican government's digital diplomacy strategy, for example, highlights its advocacy for environmental sustainability and migrant rights, issues that resonate with international audiences. Mexico's "Pueblos Mágicos" campaign, promoting tourism in culturally significant regions, also serves as an example of how public diplomacy can contribute to both economic and cultural goals (Rojas, 2012).

Moreover, Mexico's engagement with its diaspora has proven effective in shaping its foreign policy outcomes. The large number of Mexicans residing in the United States provides Mexico with a unique leverage point in its diplomacy, especially regarding issues of immigration and cross-border relations. Diaspora diplomacy has enabled Mexico to build stronger ties with the U.S. and other countries with significant Mexican populations, using its people as cultural ambassadors and advocates for Mexico's national interests.

Case Study: Mexico's Public Diplomacy in the United States

One of the most prominent case studies in Mexico's public diplomacy is its engagement with the United States. The U.S.-Mexico relationship is pivotal for both countries, encompassing economic, political, and social dimensions. However, the relationship is often marked by tensions surrounding issues such as immigration, trade, and drug trafficking.

In recent years, Mexico has leveraged public diplomacy to address these issues and to strengthen bilateral relations. The use of media campaigns, participation in U.S.-Mexico cultural exchange programs, and diplomatic engagement through initiatives such as the Mexico-U.S. Cultural and Educational Cooperation Agreement has enabled Mexico to reshape perceptions and promote mutual understanding (Melissen, 2005).

In particular, Mexico's advocacy for migrant rights has gained international attention, positioning the country as a champion of human rights and a promoter of inclusive policies in the face of political challenges in the United States. Through its diplomatic engagement with the U.S., Mexico has also worked to improve its economic image by promoting trade relations and investment opportunities in areas such as manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism.

Challenges and Limitations of Mexico's Cultural and Public Diplomacy

Despite the successes of Mexico's cultural and public diplomacy efforts, the research also reveals several challenges and limitations. One of the key challenges is the lack of sufficient resources allocated to cultural and public diplomacy initiatives. While institutions like CONACULTA and Mexican Cultural Institutes have contributed significantly to Mexico's international presence, there is often a disparity in funding compared to larger global players like the U.S. or China, whose diplomatic and cultural outreach programs are more robust.

Additionally, while Mexico has successfully promoted its cultural assets, it faces significant challenges in competing with other countries' cultural diplomacy initiatives. For instance, the U.S. and European countries

have long-established reputations as cultural hubs, and their international cultural outreach often overshadows Mexico's efforts. Furthermore, regional rivalries, especially with countries like Brazil and Argentina in Latin America, sometimes hinder Mexico's ability to lead on cultural diplomacy issues in the region.

Results and Discussion

In today's world, where globalization and the rapid flow of information are shaping international policies, countries are increasingly relying on soft power tools such as public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy to advance their foreign policy objectives. Mexico, as a country with a rich cultural heritage and active diplomatic relations, has been striving to enhance its global standing by utilizing these tools. The results of this study examine the role of public and cultural diplomacy in advancing Mexico's foreign policy, analyzing its impact on improving international relations and increasing Mexico's global influence.

One of the key findings of this research is that cultural diplomacy plays a very important role in enhancing Mexico's global status. Mexico actively utilizes its cultural assets, such as language, music, cuisine, art, and cinema, as tools to improve its image on the global stage. In this regard, the Mexican government has used institutions like CONACULTA and the Mexican Cultural Institute to organize cultural exchange programs and international festivals, which have not only promoted Mexican culture abroad but also helped strengthen diplomatic and economic relations. Festivals such as the Guadalajara Film Festival and the Cervantino International Festival are among the key events where Mexico has used cultural diplomacy to build relations with various countries. These events have enabled Mexico to not only showcase its culture but also actively engage in cultural and trade exchanges with other nations.

In the realm of public diplomacy, Mexico has sought to improve its image, especially in countries with more complex relations, such as the United States. Issues like illegal immigration and economic matters often act as barriers in the bilateral relationship. Mexico has utilized public diplomacy to address negative perceptions and enhance mutual understanding. The country's use of media and social networks to promote its cultural and diplomatic policies has been a primary strategy in this area. Media campaigns, cultural documentaries, and educational programs have helped Mexico foster a better understanding of its culture, as well as its social and economic issues.

Mexico's cultural diplomacy has also been successful in promoting the Spanish language globally. The Cervantes Institute, by offering Spanish language courses and organizing cultural events in many countries, has played a crucial role in strengthening Mexico's cultural and diplomatic relations. This institute has contributed to the promotion of Spanish as part of Mexico's identity, creating cultural and diplomatic connections with countries where Spanish is learned as a second language. Moreover, cultural and art festivals held in different countries have further helped in strengthening relationships with diverse nations and cultural groups.

Mexico's public diplomacy has also leveraged the power of migration and the diaspora. With a significant Mexican population residing in the United States, the country has used its diaspora to advance its foreign policy goals, especially in areas like immigration and cross-border relations. Diplomatic and cultural institutions have strengthened these connections, allowing Mexico to play an important role in issues such as migrant rights, human rights, and in promoting trade and investment between the two countries.

However, research also indicates several challenges and limitations in Mexico's public and cultural diplomacy. One of the most significant challenges is the lack of sufficient financial resources allocated to cultural and public diplomacy initiatives. While institutions such as CONACULTA and other cultural organizations are active, the limited budget means that the scope of these programs is reduced compared to those of more powerful countries. The U.S. and China, for instance, with their larger financial resources, have more robust cultural diplomacy programs, which often overshadow Mexico's efforts.

Another challenge relates to regional competition. Mexico competes with other Latin American countries, such as Brazil and Argentina, for leadership in cultural and diplomatic affairs in the region. These rivalries can hinder Mexico's ability to lead in cultural diplomacy efforts and reduce its influence in Latin America.

In conclusion, Mexico has made significant progress in using public and cultural diplomacy to enhance its global influence. By leveraging cinema, music, art, and the Spanish language, Mexico has been able to expand its cultural and diplomatic reach across the world. However, to increase its effectiveness in the global arena, Mexico needs to allocate more resources and adopt new strategies to overcome competitive challenges and foster greater international cooperation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that public and cultural diplomacy have played a crucial role in advancing Mexico's foreign policy and enhancing its global standing. By utilizing these tools, Mexico has managed to create a positive and influential image of itself on the international stage and strengthen its diplomatic relations with various countries. In this process, cultural diplomacy, especially by leveraging the country's rich cultural, artistic, and historical assets, has acted as a significant means of fostering intercultural communication and strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations.

Mexico, through cultural tools such as music, cinema, visual arts, and even cuisine, has not only introduced its culture but also expanded its diplomatic interactions with other nations. International cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and Spanish language educational programs have all been key initiatives in expanding Mexico's cultural influence globally. These events have not only showcased Mexican culture but have also contributed to enhancing Mexico's trade, economic, and political interactions with other countries.

Alongside cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy has been a strategic tool in improving Mexico's international relations. Given the challenges Mexico faces, such as illegal immigration, economic issues, and political tensions with some countries, public diplomacy has played an important role in addressing negative perceptions and fostering mutual understanding. Mexico has utilized media and social networks, especially in the United States, to present a more accurate portrayal of its country and culture, thus strengthening bilateral relations in areas like trade, immigration, and social issues.

Another significant achievement for Mexico in this regard has been the strengthening of relationships with the diaspora, using it as a tool to advance foreign policy goals, particularly in areas like migration and cross-border relations. By capitalizing on the large Mexican population in the United States and other countries, Mexico has played an important role in strengthening cultural and economic ties with these countries. These connections have allowed Mexico to effectively address issues like migrant rights, human rights, and to promote trade and investment between nations.

However, research also highlights several challenges in Mexico's public and cultural diplomacy efforts. One of the main obstacles is the lack of sufficient financial resources allocated to cultural and public diplomacy programs. While institutions such as CONACULTA and other cultural organizations are active, limited funding reduces the scope of these initiatives compared to the more well-funded efforts of powerful countries. For instance, the U.S. and China, with their greater financial resources, have more robust cultural diplomacy programs, which often overshadow Mexico's endeavors.

Another challenge is regional competition. Mexico competes with other Latin American countries, such as Brazil and Argentina, for leadership in cultural and diplomatic affairs in the region. These rivalries can undermine Mexico's ability to take the lead in cultural diplomacy and reduce its influence in Latin America.

Mexico must also address the challenges posed by cultural differences and domestic policies in other countries. Especially when dealing with developed nations, where different perspectives on culture and global policies exist, Mexico's diplomatic efforts may face setbacks. Moreover, the economic and social challenges other countries are facing may destabilize cultural and public diplomacy relations.

Nevertheless, with the rapid growth of globalization and interconnectedness, Mexico can further optimize its use of public and cultural diplomacy tools. If the country can allocate more resources to these efforts and leverage digital and media platforms more effectively, it can strengthen its role as a soft power globally. In particular, in the new era where diplomatic institutions are rapidly changing and evolving, using cultural and public diplomacy will be essential for expanding influence and enhancing Mexico's global position.

Ultimately, public and cultural diplomacy have served as complementary tools in Mexico's foreign policy, allowing the country to become a key player on the international stage. Given the challenges ahead, Mexico should continuously update its strategies and utilize all available resources to enhance its international relations.

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