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Beyond Geography: A Constructivist Analysis of Mexico's Engagement with the Asia-Pacific

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Abstract

This essay undertakes a comprehensive analysis of Mexico's evolving foreign policy toward the Asia-Pacific region, situating its examination within the broader context of global economic reconfiguration and Mexico's strategic ambition to diversify beyond its traditional North American orientation. From a constructivist perspective, it argues that Mexico's foreign policy identity has been historically shaped by its geographic proximity and institutional ties to the United States and Canada, a dynamic that has systematically marginalized Asia-Pacific within its diplomatic agenda. Despite this marginalization, the Asia-Pacific's accelerated economic growth, expanding middle class, and technological leadership present considerable opportunities for Mexico's economic diplomacy in areas such as trade, investment, and scientific collaboration. The paper evaluates institutional mechanisms, including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Pacific Alliance, as potential platforms for deeper engagement, while acknowledging persistent structural and ideational challenges—such as geographic distance, cultural asymmetries, and the absence of robust epistemic communities. By employing a constructivist framework, this research addresses a notable gap in the literature, which has traditionally prioritized Mexico's relations with North and Latin America, leaving its Asia-Pacific engagement underexplored and often treated as peripheral. The paper ultimately calls for a strategic reconfiguration of Mexico's foreign policy narrative, positioning Asia-Pacific not merely as a commercial market but as a region of enduring strategic significance. This requires sustained normative engagement, diplomatic innovation, and strengthened institutional capacity. Such a reorientation would enhance Mexico's global agency, reduce its structural dependence on the North American market, and position the country to more effectively participate in the evolving economic and geopolitical dynamics of the twenty-first century.

Key words: constructivism, Asia-Pacific, Mexican foreign policy, diversification

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Resumen

Este ensayo analiza la evolución de la política exterior de México hacia la región de Asia-Pacífico, en el contexto de la reconfiguración económica global y del discurso del gobierno mexicano por diversificar sus vínculos más allá de su tradicional orientación hacia América del Norte. Desde una perspectiva constructivista, el autor argumenta que la identidad de la política exterior mexicana ha estado históricamente moldeada por su proximidad geográfica y sus vínculos institucionales con Estados Unidos y Canadá, una dinámica que ha marginado sistemáticamente a Asia-Pacífico dentro de su agenda diplomática. A pesar de esta situación, el acelerado crecimiento económico, la expansión de la clase media y el liderazgo tecnológico de Asia-Pacífico presentan oportunidades significativas para la diplomacia económica de México, particularmente en áreas como comercio, inversión y cooperación científica. El trabajo evalúa mecanismos institucionales, como el Tratado Integral y Progresista de Asociación Transpacífico y la Alianza del Pacífico, como posibles plataformas para un compromiso más profundo, al tiempo que reconoce desafíos estructurales e ideacionales persistentes —como la distancia geográfica, las asimetrías culturales y la ausencia de comunidades epistémicas sólidas—. Mediante un enfoque constructivista, esta investigación atiende una notable laguna en la literatura, que tradicionalmente ha priorizado las relaciones de México con América del Norte y América Latina, dejando su vinculación con Asia-Pacífico escasamente explorada y a menudo tratada como periférica. El texto concluye con un llamado a reconfigurar estratégicamente la narrativa de política exterior de México, posicionando a Asia-Pacífico no solo como un mercado comercial, sino como una región de importancia estratégica. Tal reorientación permitiría incrementar la proyección global de México, reducir su dependencia estructural del mercado norteamericano y situar al país en mejores condiciones para participar eficazmente en la dinámica económica y geopolítica cambiante del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: constructivismo, Asia-Pacífico, política exterior de México, diversificación

Introduction

Foreign policy represents a fundamental tool for promoting Mexico's interests, values, and identity in the international system. In general terms, Mexico's foreign policy has been characterized by the defense of sovereignty, non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries, the promotion of democracy, and respect for human rights. Moreover, the Mexican government has used its foreign policy to consolidate an active and constructive position in multilateral forums. As part of its diplomatic efforts, Mexico currently maintains a broad network of embassies and consulates worldwide. According to the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, the number of embassies stands at 80. In this regard, there is substantial representation across the American continent, but Mexican diplomatic presence is very limited elsewhere, particularly in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Statistically, Mexican diplomatic missions cover just over 40% of the United Nations member states.

Furthermore, Mexican diplomacy is also present through missions to various international organizations, such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO); the Organization of American States (OAS); the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear

Weapons in Latin America (OPANAL); the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); the United Nations (UN); and various UN agencies based in Rome. Mexican foreign policy has also aimed to establish constructive and cooperative dialogue with the United States (U.S.), its main trading partner and northern neighbor, where it has established an extensive network of around 50 consulates, along with another 20 consular representations elsewhere in the world.

In this context, the Asia-Pacific region has become attractive as a space to diversify Mexico's economic relations, due to its economic dynamism and growth recorded in recent decades. The idea of reducing economic dependence on the U.S. market is not a recent issue on the Mexican agenda, as it has been a priority for various administrations. In fact, the National Development Plan 2007-2012 openly expressed the idea of "reducing the vulnerability of the Mexican economy to fluctuations in the U.S. economy" as part of strategies aimed at achieving greater profitability through the diversification of Mexico's economic growth sources. The document suggested that the Mexican government should strengthen policies that contribute to the growth of domestic demand, with particular emphasis on the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises. Additionally, President Felipe Calderón's administration (2006-2012) deemed it pertinent to enhance Mexico's participation in the global economy, supporting the development of a more robust multilateral trade system and boosting Mexico's presence in international organizations such as the WTO, OECD, and APEC.

Building on the preceding context, this essay identifies a significant gap in the literature on Mexican foreign policy. While scholarly attention to Mexico's relations with North America and Latin America is extensive, academic research on its engagement with the Asia-Pacific remains scarce, fragmented, and frequently treated as a peripheral topic. Existing studies largely concentrate on trade statistics or isolated diplomatic actions, lacking a comprehensive and theoretically robust framework for understanding Mexico's approach to the region. There has been insufficient analysis of the role that identity, normative structures, and institutional constraints play in shaping policy decisions toward Asia-Pacific. This omission is noteworthy given the region's accelerating economic growth, strategic importance in global governance, and its potential to contribute to Mexico's diversification objectives. By adopting a constructivist perspective, this essay seeks to address this gap, offering a systematic examination of the ideational and structural factors that have limited Mexico's ability to develop and implement a coherent, long-term strategy for meaningful engagement with Asia-Pacific.

Regarding the structure of this essay, the initial section outlines the core principles of constructivist theory within the discipline of International Relations and applies them to the study of Mexican diplomacy. Subsequently, the article identifies the dominant identity

constructs that shape Mexico's international conduct, as these serve to clarify the country's foreign policy priorities. The discussion then shifts to assess the strategic and economic significance of the Asia-Pacific region, emphasizing Mexico's degree of involvement through diplomatic channels, trade relations, and investment flows. Particular attention is paid to the scope and consistency of Mexico's institutional and bilateral presence in the region, highlighting the opportunities and constraints that such engagement entails. The article concludes by presenting a set of policy-oriented recommendations aimed at deepening Mexico's ties with the Asia-Pacific, especially considering the region's growing influence within the global economy and its potential as a pivotal partner for Mexico's diversification strategy in international affairs.

Constructivism as a Theoretical Tool for the Analysis of Foreign Policy

Constructivism provides a valuable analytical framework for the study of international relations, particularly in a global context marked by increasing complexity, dynamism, and heterogeneity among actors. Unlike traditional paradigms such as realism and liberalism, constructivism foregrounds the centrality of ideas, norms, and collective beliefs in shaping international behavior. This theoretical perspective proves especially relevant to the discipline of International Relations, as it illuminates how ideational factors influence foreign policy decisions and the configuration of international coalitions. By focusing on the social construction of reality, constructivism underscores that the identity of global actors—whether states, institutions, or individuals—emerges from their interactions and the discursive practices in which they engage. These identities remain contingent and fluid, subject to transformation in response to evolving contexts and intersubjective meanings. As such, constructivism challenges deterministic or static assumptions about the international system, offering a more nuanced understanding of how actors perceive their roles, define their interests, and pursue strategic objectives in a constantly shifting global environment (Sánchez, 2012).

Constructivism, unlike realism, prioritizes ideational power and normative legitimacy over material capabilities. It highlights how states, such as the U.S. and China, employ soft power—through culture, education, and values—to shape agendas and global discourses. This perspective underscores the role of norms, identities, and intersubjective understandings in driving systemic change. By focusing on evolving social practices rather than solely material conditions, constructivism offers a nuanced framework to explain transformations in the international system beyond coercion or economic strength (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). Constructivism emphasizes the role of non-state actors—NGOs, corporations, and social movements—in shaping the international system through norm diffusion and global agenda setting. Movements such as environmentalism and feminism have influenced key agreements like the Paris Accord and ILO Convention

No. 190. In addressing transnational challenges—climate change, pandemics, terrorism—constructivism provides a framework highlighting cooperation based on shared ideas and evolving norms, moving beyond state-centric perspectives to explain the intersubjective processes underpinning global governance in the twenty-first century. (Zehfuss, 2015).

Constructivists provide a valuable framework for foreign policy analysis, emphasizing that state behavior derives from shared values, identities, and norms alongside material interests. Ideas and beliefs shape external conduct, as seen in Mexico's commitment to non-intervention and self-determination, rooted in its pacifist identity. Through interaction and discourse, states form dynamic interests and identities. Similarly, the United States aligns alliances with its liberal and market-oriented values. Constructivism thus links normative structures to strategic behavior, enriching foreign policy understanding beyond material determinants (Polanco Guevara, 2013). Constructivism views international norms as dynamic, evolving through interaction as actors reinterpret values and interests. Foreign policy adapts not only to material shifts but also to changing normative frameworks, making it a socially constructed process shaped by diverse actors. Non-state entities—NGOs, corporations, and social movements—promote emerging norms influencing states. Organizations like Greenpeace and WWF exemplify this impact, shaping environmental policies and contributing to agreements such as the Stockholm and Minamata Conventions, underscoring their role in global governance (Álvarez Fuentes, 2015).

Furthermore, this theoretical framework highlights the role of ideas and narratives in shaping foreign policy, as political discourses influence perceptions and state behavior. Identity and security are intertwined, with states aiming to protect both territory and collective legitimacy. Foreign policy thus reflects values, history, and self-perception, as seen in Israel's efforts to preserve national identity in a hostile regional context. By integrating symbolic and identity-based motivations, constructivism expands foreign policy analysis beyond purely material or rationalist explanations (Behraves, 2011). In constructivism, foreign policy results from discursive and sociocultural processes tied to state identity formation. Identities, shaped by historical interpretations and international recognition, guide alignment with actors sharing similar values, reinforcing legitimacy. Material objectives remain relevant, but interests derive from evolving identities, making them contingent and dynamic. Thus, foreign policy reflects the interplay of identity, shared meanings, and international context, shaping how states define priorities and pursue strategic goals within the global system (Checkel, 2008).

Alexander Wendt, a leading constructivist, argues in *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999) that the international system is shaped not only by material capabilities but by norms, ideas, and identities. He challenges neorealism's deterministic view of anarchy, asserting that its meaning is socially constructed and varies according to state interactions

and shared understandings. Anarchy can be competitive or cooperative, depending on prevailing norms. Identities precede interests, and both evolve through historical and discursive processes. States, therefore, possess agency to transform global structures by reshaping their identities and promoting cooperative norms. This perspective highlights the potential for reconfiguring the international system toward peaceful engagement based on mutual recognition and trust. Wendt's insights form a cornerstone of constructivist foreign policy analysis, offering a framework that explains international change as a product of social interaction rather than fixed material constraints. His approach opens analytical space to envision alternative, less conflictual global orders rooted in shared values and evolving identities (Copeland, 2006; Zehfuss, 2007).

Nicholas Onuf, a pioneer of constructivism, introduced the term in *World of Our Making* (1989), framing international politics as socially constructed through interaction and discourse. He classified rules into constitutive (defining actors and practices), regulative (guiding appropriate behavior), and procedural (structuring decision-making), offering key insights into institutional evolution. Onuf elevated constructivism to a social ontology, emphasizing that actors—states, individuals, and organizations—actively shape, rather than adapt to, their environment. Central to his approach is the performative role of language, which both reflects and constructs reality. Power thus extends beyond material capabilities, encompassing the capacity to define norms, shape interpretations, and legitimize frameworks within global governance. His work remains foundational for understanding how authority, identity, and meaning are constituted and transformed through human practices in the international system (Jung, 2019; Peltonen, 2017).

Martha Finnemore, another prominent voice in constructivist theory, advances the argument that state interests are not inherent or static, but are socially constructed through prevailing international norms and values. In her influential work *National Interests in International Society* (1996), she challenges the core assumptions of realism, particularly the notion that national interests are exclusively rooted in material concerns such as power and security. Through empirical case studies—ranging from humanitarian assistance to scientific cooperation and the regulation of military force—Finnemore illustrates how states define their interests in accordance with normative expectations embedded in the international system. Her analysis underscores the formative influence of international organizations, including the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund, in shaping these norms and guiding state behavior. These institutions, according to Finnemore, operate not merely as neutral platforms for cooperation, but as bureaucratic and cultural agents that actively promote specific standards of appropriate conduct. As such, her constructivist perspective situates international organizations as central actors in the socialization of states and the construction of global order (Wiener, 2020).

Mexican International Identities in the Contemporary Global Context

From a constructivist perspective, Mexico's foreign policy identity has been shaped by the narrative that geographic proximity and integration with North America are essential for national development. Reinforced by political elites, media, and business sectors, this view frames Mexico's strategic orientation toward the United States and Canada as a socially constructed sense of regional belonging. Shared geography, economic interdependence, migration dynamics, security cooperation, and cultural exchange strengthen this identity. The relationship with the United States, marked by structural interdependence and asymmetrical power, remains central to Mexico's economic and diplomatic priorities. Efforts to enhance global visibility often coincide with deepening regional ties, reflecting the enduring influence of North American integration. Geography, identity, and normative alignment thus play a decisive role in defining Mexico's interests and diplomatic actions. This configuration highlights how regional affiliations shape foreign policy priorities and position Mexico within the post-Cold War international order, where its North American orientation remains a cornerstone of its global engagement (Romero & Rivera, 2013; Velázquez Flores *et al.*, 2023).

The 3,000-kilometer border between Mexico and the United States fosters both formal cooperation and illicit dynamics, notably migration and narcotics trafficking, demanding constant negotiation in trade, security, and mobility. Institutions like the International Boundary and Water Commission exemplify this coordination. Although Mexico lacks a direct border with Canada, trilateral frameworks strengthen North American integration. Geography shapes Mexico's foreign policy, with its proximity to the U.S. driving efforts to manage asymmetry and protect sovereignty. Historical experiences, including the Mexican-American War, have reinforced a narrative of resistance and the pursuit of balanced relations. Despite diplomatic initiatives to foster cooperation, U.S. economic, political, and cultural dominance continues to limit Mexico's strategic flexibility. This geopolitical reality sustains the prioritization of the bilateral relationship as a cornerstone of Mexico's foreign policy, demonstrating how location and structural asymmetry shape its international actions within the broader North American context (González de León, 1981; Morgenfeld, 2021).

The national identities of Mexico and Canada have been shaped by their relationships with the United States, where geographic proximity and shared history drive strategies to balance interdependence with autonomy. While Canada's ties with Washington are less conflictive than Mexico's, they reflect efforts to assert independence within an asymmetric order. North America functions more as a geopolitical construct than a cohesive community. For Mexico, migration is central to national identity, with 12 million people of Mexican origin in the U.S. and remittances reaching \$40.6 billion in 2022. This transnational

connection reinforces economic and cultural ties. The Mexican state supports its diaspora through consular protection, legal aid, and documentation, coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its network of 53 consulates across the U.S. exemplifies sustained institutional engagement. These dynamics show how identity, migration, and regional asymmetries shape foreign policy and affirm the continued centrality of the U.S. relationship in Mexico's strategic priorities (López Vega *et al.*, 2020; Velázquez Flores *et al.*, 2023).

An analysis of Mexico's foreign trade patterns over recent decades reveals a pronounced and sustained dependence on the North American market, particularly the United States. In 1993, approximately 72% of Mexico's imports originated from the United States, while imports from the European Union accounted for just 12%, and the remaining 16% derived from other global markets. This asymmetry was even more evident in export data, as 83% of Mexico's exports were directed to the United States, rendering the participation of other regions in Mexican trade relatively marginal. By the year 2000, these trends persisted, with 73% of imports coming from the United States and 27% distributed among other trade partners. Although by 2008 imports from the United States declined to 49%—a result of Mexico's broader trade diversification strategy and the negotiation of commercial agreements with other regions—exports to the United States still comprised approximately 80% of Mexico's total, underscoring the enduring structural concentration of its trade relations (Pacheco Carrillo *et al.*, 2009).

Mexico's foreign trade patterns show sustained dependence on the North American market, especially the United States. In 1993, 72% of imports and 83% of exports were linked to the U.S., with minimal participation from other regions. Although imports from the U.S. declined to about 50% by recent years due to diversification, exports remain concentrated, with around 80% directed northward. The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) institutionalized in 1994 this integration, fostering trade liberalization and supply chain links with the U.S. and Canada. Its successor, the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), reaffirmed in 2020 the strategic relevance of North America in Mexico's economic policy. This framework sustains Mexico's trade orientation toward its northern partners, consolidating structural interdependence within an asymmetrical regional order. Despite diversification efforts, the U.S. remains Mexico's primary export market, underscoring the enduring centrality of geography, institutional agreements, and economic integration in shaping Mexico's foreign trade strategy. This persistent alignment reflects both opportunity and constraint in Mexico's external economic relations (Cárdenas-Cabello, 2024; Mendoza Sánchez, 2014).

The analysis presented thus far shows that Mexico's political agenda is significantly shaped by its bilateral relationship with the United States. Core issues such as migration management, trade dependence, border security, narcotics control, and economic

cooperation constitute the foundation of this asymmetric yet strategic interdependence. While relations with Canada also form part of this trilateral dynamic, the predominant influence of the United States has led Mexico to concentrate a substantial portion of its diplomatic and economic engagement within the North American region. In response to this structural orientation, recent Mexican administrations have articulated the goal of diversifying external economic relations. To this end, the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have promoted initiatives aimed at expanding Mexico's commercial and diplomatic ties beyond North America. Within this strategic context, the Asia-Pacific region emerges as a natural area of projection, given its growing weight in global trade, investment, and technological innovation. The broader goal of diversification transcends market considerations, seeking to advance national development by enhancing Mexico's integration into a more multipolar and dynamic international economic order (De Maria y Campos Castelló y Ramos Cardoso, 2016; Gómez Chiñas, 2014).

Both political discourse and academic scholarship in recent decades have converged on the assertion that the 21st century will be defined as the "Pacific century." This characterization is grounded in the expectation that the Asia-Pacific region will assume an increasingly prominent role not only in global economic dynamics but also within the broader framework of international political affairs. The rapid resurgence of China, coupled with the sustained economic influence of regional powers such as Japan, India, South Korea, Indonesia, Australia, Thailand, and Malaysia, reinforces the strategic significance of Asia-Pacific within the evolving global order. In this context, Mexico—given its longstanding historical linkages with the region and its role as a recipient of trade and investment flows from key Asia-Pacific economies—must recognize the growing importance of engaging with this geopolitical space. Nevertheless, a notable asymmetry persists while the economic presence of Asia-Pacific actors in Mexico has expanded substantially, Mexico's own insertion into the region remains comparatively limited. Addressing this imbalance constitutes a strategic challenge for Mexico's foreign policy in pursuit of greater diversification and international projection (León Manríquez y Tzili Apango, 2015).

The preceding analysis reveals that Mexico lacks a coherent strategy for engaging the Asia-Pacific, limiting its influence and visibility in the region. This gap reflects a disconnect between its foreign policy and the region's transformations. The key challenge for Mexican diplomacy is to develop a strategic vision enabling active, consistent participation in Asia-Pacific affairs. Strengthening ties could reconfigure Mexico's external identity, enhance adaptability to 21st-century dynamics, and counterbalance U.S. predominance, thereby supporting a more diversified foreign policy aligned with emerging global opportunities. Mexico can enhance its Asia-Pacific engagement by adopting a more active role in regional cooperation frameworks and

strengthening key bilateral ties. Effective diversification requires understanding the region's economic, political, and cultural dynamics, despite challenges such as distance, limited historical ties, and weak cultural affinity. Current trade, concentrated in Japan, China, and South Korea, remains modest and often imbalanced. A more strategic and comprehensive approach is essential to expand economic opportunities, reduce trade deficits, and strengthen Mexico's regional presence for national development (González García *et al.*, 2017; Uscanga, 2019).

The Strategic Economic Significance of the Asia-Pacific Region in the Global Economic Order

According to the Mexican Foreign Ministry, Asia-Pacific is poised to become the principal engine of the global economy by the mid-21st century, with forecasts indicating that the region will generate over half of the world's GDP—an output nearly twice the size of the U.S. economy. According to projections by the World Bank, two-thirds of the global middle class will reside in this region, which is expected to achieve substantial progress in poverty reduction and emerge as a pivotal market driven by sustained demographic and economic growth. This dynamism is producing a marked increase in demand across strategic sectors such as education, healthcare, food security, mineral resources, energy, financial services, and advanced manufacturing. These trends represent a valuable opportunity for Mexico to strengthen its economic and cooperative engagement with Asia-Pacific. Concurrently, countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Australia have deepened their presence in the Mexican market through direct investment and by capitalizing on nearshoring strategies. With the formulation and execution of coherent public policies, this involvement is expected to expand further, positioning the region as a critical vector for employment generation and national development (González Saiffe, 2024).

Over recent decades, the Asia-Pacific has become a central axis of the global economy, driven by sustained growth, regional integration, and institutional frameworks addressing global challenges. Demographic expansion and a growing middle class have positioned it as a major hub of consumption, accounting for about 40% of global trade and playing a key role in supply chains. China and Vietnam have emerged as manufacturing centers, while Japan and South Korea lead in high-tech sectors. Trade integration has advanced through agreements like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), fostering cooperation and liberalization. Complementing these efforts, China proposed the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) under APEC, first discussed in 2006 and advanced in 2010. Aimed at deepening trade and investment liberalization, the FTAAP aligns with goals of ASEAN and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Although initiated within

APEC, negotiations are expected to proceed outside its non-binding framework to establish formal commitments. The FTAAP represents an ambitious step toward institutionalized economic integration beyond APEC's traditional mechanisms (APEC, 2014; Cisneros Aguilar, 2016).

In the 1960s, Asia-Pacific economies began their growth from divergent starting points: Japan rebuilt after World War II, China faced revolutionary upheaval, and South Korea and Taiwan confronted poverty, while Australia and New Zealand enjoyed moderate prosperity without full industrialization. The region also displayed sharp disparities in resource endowments. These asymmetries, rather than hindering integration, fostered economic complementarity. By leveraging structural diversity, Asia-Pacific economies promoted interdependence, sustained growth, and deeper regional ties, transforming heterogeneity into a driver of resilience and integration. The remarkable economic expansion of the Asia-Pacific region stems from a confluence of internal and external factors. Domestically, scholars have identified the emergence of an "Asian development model," distinguished by capitalist accumulation embedded in global value chains driven by transnational corporations. Within this framework, the region has specialized in labor-intensive manufacturing processes, leveraging its comparatively low labor costs to attract industrial production. Equally important has been the strategic role of the state in shaping institutional frameworks and designing public policies that promote development. Effective coordination between public and private sectors, coupled with foreign direct investment in industrial infrastructure and the assimilation of advanced foreign technologies, has further reinforced this trajectory. Central to this model is the intensive utilization of an abundant and inexpensive labor force, which has sustained the region's competitive advantage. Collectively, these elements have underpinned the structural transformation and sustained growth of Asia-Pacific economies (Das, 1996; Seric & Tong, 2019).

The "Asian Tigers" and Southeast Asia's newly industrialized economies pursued export-oriented industrialization, enhancing productive capacity and integrating into global trade. Their strategy combined gradual liberalization with state-led support, including selective protectionism to strengthen domestic firms before global competition. Industrial policies directed credit and resources to strategic export sectors, fostering competitive industries. Investment in research, development, and innovation further supported this transformation. Coordinated state intervention proved effective in driving sustained economic growth and structural change within the context of globalization. From an external perspective, Asia-Pacific's economic expansion has been driven by significant inflows of loans and foreign direct investment, enabling technology adoption and diffusion. Globalization deepened economic interdependence, with China emerging as a key actor. Despite its large population, the region achieved notable per capita

GDP growth—from \$330 in 1960 to \$4,903 in 2018, averaging 4.5% annually. This transformation underscores the region's successful integration into the global economy and highlights the critical role of international capital flows and China's influence in sustaining growth and improving living standards (Preston, 1993).

The region's sustained economic growth has significantly increased domestic consumption, raising its share of global consumption from 23% in 2000 to 28% in 2017. During the same period, the region's middle class expanded from representing 23% to 40% of the global middle class. This expansion has been accompanied by a profound structural transformation of the regional economy. In 1960, subsistence agriculture accounted for over two-thirds of total employment; today, 65% of the workforce is concentrated in the industrial and service sectors. In more advanced economies such as Malaysia, South Korea, and Taiwan, this figure reaches between 85% and 95%. By 2018, the service sector contributed approximately 54% of total value added in developing Asian economies—an indication of significant progress, albeit still below the levels observed in developed countries. These shifts underscore the transition of the Asia-Pacific region from agrarian-based economies toward more diversified, industrialized, and service-oriented growth models (Molina Díaz & Regalado Florido, 2020).

According to the IMF, economic growth in the Asia-Pacific region is projected to reach 4.3% by 2025, driven primarily by private consumption. A critical factor underpinning this trend is the expansion of the middle class, which has significantly shaped regional growth dynamics. As this demographic segment increases in size and purchasing power, its demand for goods and services intensifies, positioning it as a key driver of domestic consumption. The ongoing process of urbanization—fueled by the promise of better employment opportunities and improved access to services—continues to raise individual incomes, further reinforcing consumption-led growth. In parallel, the region has emerged as a global leader in digital technology adoption, which has facilitated the rapid expansion of e-commerce and digital platforms. These technological advances have not only transformed consumption patterns but also broadened access to a diverse array of goods and services, thereby reinforcing the structural shift toward a digitally integrated regional economy (IMF, 2024).

Identities and Economic Priorities of Mexico in the Asia-Pacific Region

Economic liberalization and the increasing centrality of trade have played a pivotal role in fostering interconnected market structures in Mexico, particularly with the Asia-Pacific region. A key example of this integration is the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), signed in March 2017 and implemented in 2018 by six founding members: Australia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, and Singapore.

Vietnam joined in January 2020, followed by Peru in September 2021. It entered into force for Mexico, Malaysia, Chile, and Brunei in 2023. The CPTPP has since extended beyond its initial geographic scope, with the United Kingdom formalizing its accession on July 15, 2023. Accession requests from China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Uruguay further underscore the agreement's growing global relevance. As a result of CPTPP implementation, Mexico increased its trade with member states by 24%, rising from USD 71.36 billion in 2018 to USD 88.53 billion in 2022 (González Saiffé, 2024).

The Pacific Alliance has strengthened Mexico's economic engagement with the Asia-Pacific region through the Associate State framework, which several regional economies have employed as a mechanism for deeper integration. In January 2022, the Alliance formalized a free trade agreement with Singapore, setting a precedent for further expansion. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea have been identified as the next prospective partners to follow this path. The Alliance's strategy centers on promoting the diversification of export markets, production chains, and goods, thereby enhancing the regional bloc's global economic projection. For Mexico, this approach offers a means to mitigate its structural dependence on traditional trade partners, particularly the United States, while positioning the country to benefit from the dynamic economic performance and expanding middle classes of East Asian economies. By consolidating ties through the Pacific Alliance, Mexico advances a more diversified, resilient, and future-oriented foreign trade strategy (Pacific Alliance, 2018).

Mexico's strategic location as a gateway to North America and bridge to Latin America provides a competitive advantage in Asia-Pacific trade. Agreements such as the USMCA and CPTPP strengthen its role as a manufacturing and logistical hub for Asian firms seeking market access. Growing middle classes in Asia create opportunities for Mexican exports like avocados, tequila, and premium goods, alongside services in tourism and higher education. Technological collaboration has expanded through partnerships in renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, and artificial intelligence, fostering trade and knowledge transfer. However, tariff and non-tariff barriers—especially sanitary and phytosanitary standards in markets like Japan and South Korea—limit full export potential. Overcoming these regulatory challenges requires stronger institutional cooperation and harmonization of standards. By leveraging its trade agreements, geographic position, and technological partnerships, Mexico can deepen integration with dynamic Asian economies, positioning itself as a regional connector and enhancing long-term economic opportunities in both goods and services (López Jiménez, 2015).

Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has identified the Asia-Pacific region as a strategic area of opportunity for advancing the country's economic agenda. Priority trading partners such as China, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam, Australia, and Indonesia offer considerable potential for expanding commercial ties and fostering

scientific and technological cooperation. Key sectors for collaboration include aerospace, pharmaceuticals and healthcare, and semiconductors—industries vital to twenty-first-century competitiveness. In response to emerging global challenges, Mexico is well positioned to deepen engagement with Asia-Pacific by forging strategic partnerships that transcend geographic boundaries. Leveraging its geostrategic location, Mexico aspires to serve as a bridge between Latin America and Asia. Collaboration in high-value areas such as technological innovation and sustainable development provides a forward-looking framework for mutual progress. Through this bidirectional exchange of knowledge and innovation, Mexico can reinforce its global standing while cultivating synergies that promote shared growth and long-term cooperation (González Saiffe, 2024).

Beyond the framework of trade agreements and bilateral investment treaties between Mexico and the Asia-Pacific region, cultural and linguistic differences continue to pose challenges to effective commercial engagement. A limited understanding of business practices and cultural norms in Asian markets frequently results in miscommunication and obstacles in both negotiation processes and the implementation of agreements. In this context, it is essential for Mexican firms to invest in cross-cultural competence and adopt tailored strategies to navigate such complexities. Consequently, many business leaders opt to concentrate their efforts on the North American market, where institutional and economic structures are more closely aligned with Mexico's. Moreover, geographic distance presents significant logistical barriers. The high costs and extended timeframes associated with trans-Pacific transportation reduce the competitiveness of Mexican exports. In certain cases, underdeveloped transport and logistics infrastructure in partner countries further complicates trade operations, limiting the region's capacity to absorb increased trade flows (Götz, 2019).

Despite the existing challenges, numerous opportunities remain for strengthening and expanding trade flows between Mexico and the Asia-Pacific region. Key strategies include market diversification, infrastructure investment, and the promotion of innovation. Deepening commercial ties with emerging economies such as Vietnam and Thailand may open new avenues for Mexican exports while providing a broader and more resilient foundation for economic growth. Enhancing infrastructure is essential to improve logistical efficiency and connectivity. Strategic investments in ports, airports, and transport corridors can reduce shipping times and costs, thereby facilitating the movement of goods to and from Asia-Pacific. In parallel, fostering innovation constitutes a critical pillar for expanding trade relations. Supporting research and development in high-potential sectors—such as advanced technology, biotechnology, and renewable energy—can enhance the global competitiveness of Mexican products. These efforts position Mexico to adapt to shifting dynamics in the Asia-Pacific and to capitalize on emerging opportunities for long-term economic integration (González Ayala, 2021).

Mexican exports constitute a cornerstone of the national economy and serve as a critical mechanism for the country's integration into global markets. Owing to its strategic geographic location, Mexico has emerged as a key player in international trade, with notable strengths in advanced manufacturing, agricultural goods, and natural resources. The North American market—particularly the United States—represents the primary destination for Mexican exports. In 2023, the U.S. accounted for approximately 83% of Mexico's total export volume. This high level of commercial interdependence is explained not only by geographic proximity but also by the institutional framework established through the USMCA, which has been instrumental in consolidating and expanding trade relations. The sustained reliance on the U.S. market, while economically beneficial, also underscores the strategic importance of diversifying Mexico's trade portfolio through enhanced engagement with other dynamic regions, including the Asia-Pacific.

Although the Asia-Pacific region has emerged as one of the most dynamic centers of economic growth and geopolitical significance in the twenty-first century, its presence within Mexico's foreign trade statistics remains relatively limited. According to data from the Bank of Mexico, only 5% of Mexican exports were directed to Asian markets in 2023. This figure is notably low given the global economic weight of countries such as China and Japan. For Mexico, the Asia-Pacific region offers a strategic opportunity to diversify its export destinations and reduce its structural dependence on the United States. Nevertheless, the available data indicate the absence of a coherent diversification strategy. As a result, the considerable economic potential of the Asian continent has yet to be effectively integrated into Mexico's trade agenda. This underrepresentation underscores the need for a more proactive and comprehensive foreign economic policy aimed at strengthening Mexico's insertion into the Asia-Pacific region.

Five Asia-Pacific economies—China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Malaysia—rank among Mexico's top ten trading partners. However, their combined share as destinations for Mexican exports remains below 4%, a figure that appears disproportionately low when compared to the overwhelming share held by the United States. While such a comparison offers limited analytical value for testing the central hypothesis of this study, it does provide important insight into the global distribution of Mexico's export priorities. The markedly low percentage highlights how Mexican economic performance directly influences the allocation of resources and the configuration of foreign policy agendas. In this context, export patterns serve as indicators of strategic orientation, revealing where diplomatic and economic efforts are concentrated. The underrepresentation of Asia-Pacific in Mexico's export profile suggests that, despite its economic relevance, the region has yet to occupy a prominent position in Mexico's external economic strategy or its broader international policy framework.

According to the Bank of Mexico, eight of Mexico's fifteen leading trading partners are in the Asia-Pacific region. Notably, China ranked second, South Korea third, Japan sixth, Taiwan eighth, Malaysia ninth, India tenth, Vietnam twelfth, and Thailand fourteenth. Trade between Mexico and these economies grew by over 17% from 2021 to 2022, signaling the growing significance of Asia-Pacific in Mexico's external economic relations. This trend suggests a promising trajectory for deeper regional integration, further evidenced by Mexico's accession to the CPTPP, which underscores its intention to expand its commercial presence in the region. In addition to CPTPP membership, Mexico maintains a bilateral trade agreement with Japan—an important instrument for diversifying its trade portfolio. With coherent strategic policies and a forward-looking approach, Mexico holds the potential to position itself as a pivotal economic partner within the increasingly dynamic Asia-Pacific marketplace (González Saiffe, 2024).

As with exports, the United States remains Mexico's principal trading partner in terms of imports, accounting for 43% of total imports in 2023, though this figure is lower than its share of exports. This trade relationship is especially prominent in key sectors such as machinery, transportation equipment, chemicals, and electronics, and is firmly embedded within the framework of the USMCA, which facilitates trade through tariff elimination, regulatory harmonization, and the reduction of non-tariff barriers. In contrast, Mexico's trade balance with the Asia-Pacific region reveals a substantial and persistent deficit, underscoring the need to diversify exports and enhance their competitiveness in Asian markets. For instance, trade data with South Korea indicate a pronounced imbalance, with a deficit approaching USD 17 billion. These figures highlight the structural asymmetries in Mexico's trade relations with Asia and the urgency of implementing a strategic agenda to correct such imbalances and foster reciprocal commercial flows.

As indicated in Table 1, five of Mexico's ten principal trading partners in 2023 were in the Asia-Pacific region. Collectively, China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Malaysia accounted for approximately 17% of Mexico's total trade volume—a figure that remains significantly lower when compared to the 63% represented by the United States. Moreover, Mexico maintains a substantial trade deficit with these Asian economies. The imbalance with China is particularly pronounced, reaching USD 104.1 billion. Although the deficit with South Korea is comparatively smaller, it still amounted to USD 16.9 billion. In the cases of Japan, Taiwan, and Malaysia, trade deficits persist, albeit at more moderate levels. These figures underscore the asymmetrical nature of Mexico's trade relations with key Asia-Pacific economies and highlight the structural challenge of improving the competitiveness of Mexican exports. Addressing these imbalances requires a strategic, long-term approach to trade diversification and regional economic engagement.

Figure 1*Mexican top 10 main trading partners (USD millions)*

| No. | Economy | Exports | Imports | Overall trade | % global | Balance |
|-----|----------|---------|---------|---------------|----------|----------|
| 1 | USA | 490,183 | 255,439 | 745,622 | 63 | 234,743 |
| 2 | China | 10,057 | 114,190 | 124,248 | 10 | -104,132 |
| 3 | Korea | 8,497 | 25,417 | 33,914 | 3 | -16,919 |
| 4 | Canada | 18,009 | 13,121 | 31,131 | 3 | 4,888 |
| 5 | Germany | 9,202 | 21,240 | 30,442 | 3 | -12,037 |
| 6 | Japan | 3,965 | 20,624 | 24,590 | 2 | -16,658 |
| 7 | Brazil | 4,484 | 13,541 | 18,026 | 2 | -9,057 |
| 8 | Taiwan | 604 | 14,327 | 14,931 | 1 | -13,723 |
| 9 | Malaysia | 442 | 12,026 | 12,468 | 1 | -11,583 |
| 10 | Spain | 5,224 | 6,276 | 11,501 | 1 | -1,051 |

Source: Banco de Mexico, 2023.

Mexico's Diplomatic Presence in the Asia-Pacific

In conceptualizing the Asia-Pacific region, it is essential to acknowledge the absence of a universally accepted definition regarding its geographic and geopolitical scope. While certain scholars delineate the region as comprising exclusively Asian states with direct access to the Pacific Ocean, others adopt a broader perspective that includes Pacific-rim countries from the Americas. Additionally, some analyses incorporate India into the regional framework, despite its geographic location along the Indian Ocean, due to its increasing economic and strategic involvement in Asia-Pacific affairs. A frequently employed criterion for regional inclusion is membership in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which serves as a functional benchmark for delineating the area. It is important to underscore that, unlike the European Union, the Asia-Pacific does not constitute a politically cohesive entity. The absence of a unified political identity is attributable to the region's considerable diversity in terms of historical trajectories, cultural traditions, and ethnic compositions. As a result, regional integration has primarily advanced through economic cooperation mechanisms, which serve as pragmatic platforms for the pursuit of shared objectives among heterogeneous actors (Martínez Legorreta, 2022).

For the purposes of this essay, the analysis of the Asia-Pacific region will focus on three subregions: Northeast Asia (China, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan), Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Philippines, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, East Timor, Vietnam, and Russia), and the South Pacific (Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and the other nations of Oceania). This delimitation is based on the common identity that the region has been shaping through the creation of various institutions that, although diverse in nature, converge on the debate and analysis of the regional agenda.

These organizations include both government entities and unofficial forums, such as the Pacific Free Trade and Development (PAFTAD), the Pacific Basin Economic Council (PBEC), the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC), and APEC. Likewise, there are intergovernmental organizations that contribute to the consolidation of the notion of a region: the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). In this way, it can be observed that the Asia-Pacific region is extremely diverse in terms of culture, languages, religions, and economies (Protsenko, 2013).

Mexico's engagement with the Asia-Pacific region can be historically traced to the 16th century through the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade; however, these connections remained peripheral throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries. It was not until the latter half of the 20th century—particularly from the 1980s onward—that the Mexican state began formulating a deliberate strategy aimed at strengthening its presence in the Asia-Pacific. This strategic shift reflected a broader recognition within the Mexican government of the need to expand trade and investment linkages beyond its traditional spheres of interaction in Latin America and North America. During the administrations of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), foreign policy increasingly emphasized economic diversification, positioning the Asia-Pacific region as a key alternative for market expansion and investment inflows due to its sustained economic dynamism. Given that the region accounts for approximately 40% of global GDP, 30–35% of international trade, and roughly 25% of global foreign direct investment, Mexico has identified Asia-Pacific economies as both potential export markets and valuable sources of foreign capital, encompassing direct and portfolio investments (Faust & Franke, 2003).

Mexico's engagement with Asia-Pacific has historically been limited in scope and depth. While migration and trade—particularly with China—have grown since the late 1990s, the region remains secondary to Mexico's priorities in North and Latin America. Diplomatic representation has been modest, reflecting this subordinate status. China, now Mexico's second-largest trading partner after the United States, illustrates the imbalance: despite rising trade volumes, Mexico maintains a significant deficit. This asymmetry highlights structural challenges that demand greater strategic attention in future foreign policy toward Asia-Pacific. César Villanueva observes that Mexican diplomacy lacks a comprehensive conceptual framework and sufficient institutional capacity to implement a coherent foreign policy, a limitation affecting Asia-Pacific and other key regions. He identifies technological adaptation as a critical challenge, stressing the need to integrate digital tools to enhance effectiveness and visibility. Persistent weaknesses in strategic planning, resource allocation, and modernization hinder

Mexico's capacity to consolidate its presence in Asia-Pacific, preventing full use of the region's economic and geopolitical opportunities. Addressing these structural gaps is essential for a more proactive policy (2017).

With respect to Mexico's diplomatic representation in the Asia-Pacific region, data available from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicate that, out of a total of 80 embassies worldwide, only twelve are in this geostrategic area. These diplomatic missions are established in Australia, China, South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The selection of these countries reflects a calculated diplomatic vision, as many of them hold significant economic weight or exert considerable influence on the regional political and economic agenda. Notably, China and Japan rank among the most prominent global economic powers and have become essential trade partners for Mexico within Asia. Likewise, South Korea and Singapore serve as key technological and commercial hubs, offering substantial opportunities for bilateral cooperation in areas such as innovation, high-tech industries, and digital infrastructure. The Mexican diplomatic presence in these states illustrates an effort to align diplomatic outreach with economic priorities, although broader representation may still be required to consolidate Mexico's regional presence and strategic engagement (SRE, 2023).

The relatively small number of Mexican embassies in the Asia-Pacific region reflects a limited commitment in both diplomatic engagement and resource allocation. As a result, Mexico's capacity to exert influence and participate meaningfully in regional affairs remains constrained. This observation aligns with the broader consensus in diplomatic studies that sustained and strategic presence is essential for fostering robust bilateral relationships, advancing national economic, political, and cultural interests, and ensuring adequate consular services for citizens residing abroad. The absence of a more expansive diplomatic network may, therefore, restrict Mexico's ability to engage effectively in key regional platforms such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Moreover, this limited presence diminishes the country's responsiveness to evolving regional developments, whether in the form of trade negotiations, multilateral initiatives, or emerging geopolitical challenges. A broader and more proactive diplomatic footprint would be necessary to enhance Mexico's visibility, influence, and strategic positioning within the Asia-Pacific context (Zottele Allende & Santiago Mendoza, 2015).

Conclusions

Mexico's foreign policy has historically prioritized relations with North America and Latin America, while engagement with other regions has remained relatively limited. In this context, strengthening ties with Asia-Pacific economies presents a strategic

opportunity to recalibrate Mexico's international agenda by diversifying beyond its traditional geopolitical alignments. Pursuing deeper integration with the Asia-Pacific region would not only expand trade and investment flows, but also create space for enhanced cooperation in cultural, educational, scientific, and security domains. Such multidimensional engagement would contribute to broadening Mexico's global presence and fostering sustainable development. By advancing a more balanced and outward-looking foreign policy, Mexico could position itself as an active participant in the evolving Asia-Pacific order, while simultaneously generating domestic benefits through increased competitiveness, innovation, and societal well-being. This strategic reorientation would thus support the long-term objective of reducing economic dependence and enhancing the country's role within the international system.

In the context of Mexico's evolving trade strategy, the government has acknowledged the imperative of reducing excessive reliance on the United States by pursuing a more diversified portfolio of economic partners. Within this framework, the Asia-Pacific region has emerged as a particularly dynamic and strategic area for expansion. The region's contribution to the global economy has experienced substantial growth, increasing from 9% in 1967 to 18% by 1989—a figure that surpasses 40% when North American economies are included. Moreover, Asia-Pacific has positioned itself as a leading advocate for trade liberalization, promoting open markets and economic integration. Within the framework of APEC, Pacific Rim economies have demonstrated greater dynamism than their Atlantic counterparts, not only in terms of economic performance but also in trade volumes. This shift underscores the relevance of reorienting Mexico's foreign economic policy toward the Asia-Pacific, where enhanced engagement may yield strategic advantages for long-term economic resilience and global competitiveness.

Given the Asia-Pacific region's growing relevance as a hub of global economic expansion, it now plays a critical role in shaping international trade and contributing to global GDP. This phenomenon positions the region as a strategic alternative for Mexico to strengthen its global economic footprint and reduce its structural dependence on the North American market. To this end, Mexico must design targeted strategies aimed at increasing exports to key economies such as China, Japan, and South Korea. However, engaging with the Asia-Pacific requires a proactive and adaptive foreign policy capable of responding to complex regulatory environments, evolving consumption patterns, and diverse distribution mechanisms. Considering the region's competitive landscape, Mexico's foreign policy must adopt a sophisticated diversification agenda—one that prioritizes innovation, enhances export competitiveness, and promotes sustained economic growth. Such a forward-looking approach is essential for ensuring Mexico's successful integration into one of the most dynamic regions of the global economy.

From a constructivist standpoint, Mexico's foreign policy alignment with North America can be understood as the outcome of a socially constructed identity anchored in shared norms, institutionalized practices, and historically embedded interactions. The relationship with the United States and Canada transcends material calculations, as it is shaped by intersubjective meanings that situate Mexico as a key participant within the North American regional architecture. Frameworks such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and its successor, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, have served not only to formalize economic interdependence but also to affirm collective commitments to liberal economic principles, regulatory coherence, and democratic governance. These institutional arrangements reinforce a regional identity in which Mexico views itself as normatively and strategically connected to its northern counterparts. As a result, Mexico's foreign policy consistently prioritizes North America as its principal axis of international engagement, deeply influencing its diplomatic orientation and regional policy agenda.

Based on this scenario, Mexico's limited diplomatic and strategic engagement with the Asia-Pacific region can be attributed to the absence of a historically embedded identity or a shared normative structure akin to that which underpins its relationship with North America. The bilateral and trilateral ties with the United States and Canada have been cultivated over decades of institutional cooperation and sustained social interaction, fostering a regional identity based on liberal economic values, regulatory convergence, and democratic principles. By contrast, Mexico's interactions with Asia-Pacific economies remain predominantly transactional, lacking the normative depth and institutional density necessary for constructing a robust intersubjective framework. The absence of enduring cultural, political, and epistemic linkages has impeded the emergence of Asia-Pacific as a meaningful referent in Mexico's foreign policy discourse. As a result, the region continues to be approached primarily from an economic perspective, without the ideational foundations required to support long-term strategic alignment or deeper regional integration. ❀

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