

A truly global citizen

INTERVIEW WITH JOSÉ ANTONIO MEADE KURIBREÑA

SECRETARY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, UNITED MEXICAN STATES



JOSÉ ANTONIO MEADE earned his BA in Economics at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México, later completing a BA in Law at the National University of Mexico and then a PhD in Economics at Yale. He began his career in public office as Director General of Financial Planning at the National Commission of the Retirement Savings System. Prior to taking up his post as Secretary of Foreign Affairs, he was first Registrar at the Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit, then Energy Secretary, and after that Secretary of Finance and Public Credit.

Much has been said and written about the ambitious domestic reforms undertaken by the current government, but relatively little about its international agenda. Would you say there has been a comparable shift in respect of Mexico's foreign policy objectives? What are the administration's most important international priorities for the next 3-4 years?

By geography, history, culture and economy, Mexico stands as a country of multiple belongings in the world. We belong in North America because of geographical proximity, large trade flows and similar political institutions. We are also a Caribbean nation that shares African, European and Asian roots with the island countries in this region. We identify ourselves as Central and Latin American, heirs to durable values and aspirations. Our economic relations place us in close contact with G20 and European countries, with whom we also share deep cultural traits. We are linked to Asia through the Pacific Ocean and trade routes that started 400 years ago, and feel close to Africa and the Middle East in our efforts to tackle common challenges. Our main priority is to use policy in each of these cases to transform our country's belongings into concrete opportunities of development.

By 2050, Mexico can be among the ten biggest economies in the world. Today we rank 15th. Foreign policy has traditionally played a role in making this happen, by fostering international conditions that are conducive to Mexico's development objectives. That is true today. In our strategy each region and country gets a focused treatment. So do international organisations and mechanisms. We employ the diplomatic tools at our disposal to make the most of every bilateral relationship. We strengthen our dialogue with other countries and other actors, we promote our country's potential, and cooperate in finding opportunities for shared development. We also stand by Mexicans living abroad, be they workers, students, researchers, businesspeople or artists.

Mexico has a long and respected tradition as a supporter of international organisations and international law. In fact, our Constitution includes a provision that clearly states that the main principles of international law on which the UN is founded shall be observed in defining foreign policy objectives. Today we continue our efforts to promote a safer and more prosperous world, striving for

consensus and agreements in favour of non-proliferation, disarmament and conventional arms control, a climate regime to effectively combat climate change, social inclusion, open government and peace keeping.

Mexico benefits from a unique geopolitical position – it is the only Spanish-speaking country in North America, shares a border with the world's largest economy and diplomatic power, enjoys maritime access to both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans and has international free trade agreements with more countries than any other, etc. Would you say that Mexico 'punches its weight' accordingly in international affairs?

It is fair to say that any country strives to punch above its weight, if by doing that its weight can be improved. In our case we see these conditions as opportunities for development and innovation. Internally Mexico is doing the right thing by strengthening its institutions and legislation in order to gain more competitiveness and provide a better standard of living to society. Abroad we see our geographical and qualitative conditions as a means to contribute to domestic development.

We want to consolidate North America as the most competitive and dynamic region in the world. We have seen shared prosperity grow by fostering the creation of value-added chains between the US, Canada and Mexico. As an example, today US-Mexico overland transactions are worth over one million dollars per minute. US value-added in Mexican manufacturing exports is about 37 per cent, which is ten times higher than the 3.7 per cent of US value-added in Chinese manufacturing exports. To complement this level of economic integration, the three countries are finding ways to promote education, innovation and entrepreneurship programmes, to improve human capital, student mobility and business environments.

Promoting prosperity, inclusion and security in Central American countries helps us achieve these same objectives in our country. Mexico trades more than 6 billion dollars a year with Central America, and this volume grows by 12 per cent annually. Therefore, it makes sense to invest in infrastructure, connectivity, energy and public health in countries such as Guatemala, Honduras or El Salvador, for it translates into increased shared growth. This in turn will diminish the incentives for young people to

emigrate in search of opportunities elsewhere.

Integration in South America has been a long-standing goal. Mexico contributes to achieving it by actively participating in the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, the Organisation of American States and the Pacific Alliance. The latter mechanism was born as a pragmatic and innovative mechanism to promote the free flow of persons, goods, services and capital among its members, and has attracted worldwide attention, as illustrated by the more than 30 countries that have attained observer status.

Asia-Pacific and Europe are also a key component in our foreign policy strategy. Mexico and China have launched an unprecedented new strategic association, investments from Japan and Singapore are on the rise, and cooperation is gaining strength with New Zealand and again, China and Japan. The start of the negotiations leading to a new trade and cooperation agreement between Mexico and the European Union is within reach now, while dialogue and cooperation with individual European countries means new investments, yearlong cultural and multi-themed business events.

You have called for a debate over the structure of the United Nations Security Council, saying it should be more representative, responsive and inclusive. Is Mexico prepared to lead the discussion on this issue and bring other emerging economies to the table? In broad terms, what needs to be done to reform the organisation, in your view?

The United Nations Security Council reform is long overdue. The current Security Council (15 members) is no longer representative of the total UN membership (193 members). The Security Council portrays a picture taken in 1945 while the international system continues evolving and changing at a fast pace. Take for example, the question of its working methods and particularly, the use of the veto by the permanent members. This simply does not reflect the values of transparency and accountability that many of our governments promote inside and outside our borders.

We have been discussing Security Council reform for over 20 years without arriving at even a single result. The reason behind the impasse lies in the unwillingness of many Member States to break away from their original positions and attempt to find a common agreement on what we like to refer to as a “compromise solution”. We are ready to reach out to all UN members and strive for a compromise. To achieve this, we

should not be looking for a Security Council reform that is desirable to just a handful of States, but a reform that is acceptable to all.

In this regard for example, some believe that adding new permanent members is essential in any Security Council reform, and have even stated their aspirations to occupy those potential additional seats. Others, like Mexico, believe that adding new permanent members will further limit the capacity of the Security Council to act swiftly and effectively when facing threats to international peace and security, particularly if those new permanent members have the right to veto any key decision that, if otherwise approved, could translate in saving lives from, let us say, mass atrocities. When crafting the best formula, we are obliged to think about the people on the ground enduring all sorts of threats and hardships.

The compromise solution that Mexico – together with a group of States called the “Uniting for Consensus” – is advancing, calls for the establishment of new long-term seats. These new non-permanent seats could satisfy the appetite of those States interested in serving in the Council for longer terms than the current two-year mandate, while preserving the accountability to the UN General Assembly through periodic elections and re-elections. Mexico believes in the need for the international community to assess the Council’s members’ performance through elections in the General Assembly where all 193 countries cast a vote. This proposal might not be the ideal solution but we should not give out ‘blank cheques’ by allowing for the creation of new permanent seats to countries that in 20 or 50 years’ time would not necessarily hold the same stance and weight in the international system.

One of the priorities of the current administration in Mexico is to reposition the country and prepare it to fulfil its role as a regional leader and a global player

HRH The Duchess of Cornwall and HRH The Prince of Wales with HE Enrique Peña Nieto and First Lady Angélica Rivera during the Royal visit to Mexico in 2014



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Along with France, Mexico has been vocally urging the permanent members to voluntarily limit their use of the veto when facing situations such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes or crimes against humanity. The Security Council cannot refrain from action in those extreme humanitarian situations that require the swift involvement of the global community, in order to halt atrocities from being committed.

Mexico will continue to be actively engaged in achieving a comprehensive Security Council reform. We are fully aware that to avoid doing so will progressively erode the Council's relevance and credibility in performing its main duty: maintaining international peace and security.

The death of Hugo Chávez and Venezuela's ongoing problems, together with the recent re-election of leaders like Dilma Rousseff, Michelle Bachelet, and Juan Manuel Santos, and the prospect of better relations between Havana and Washington, present Mexico with an opportunity to help forge a new pan-American consensus to foster greater stability in the region. Are you optimistic that Latin America could be entering a new era?

We are moving into a new age for hemispheric relations based upon mutual understanding and respect for national sovereignty, fostering constructive engagement, as well as equality and social justice. In many ways, the Western Hemisphere is one of the most dynamic regions in the world: individually and collectively we have been pushing for meaningful economic, social, security and political changes, which together have created a positive momentum both at domestic and regional levels.

One of the priorities of the current administration in Mexico is to reposition the country and prepare it to fulfill its role as a regional leader and a global player. We have been confidently working on building consensus in Latin America and the Caribbean, while reaching out to all sub-regional organisations in order to shape a robust single voice regarding the most demanding challenges present in the region, while improving its relations with other areas of the globe.

Latin America and the Caribbean is a politically and economically diverse region. We are working to take advantage of that diversity to build stronger ties between countries and a more influential community in world affairs. We have built a set of regional and sub regional forums to advance our integration. All Latin American and Caribbean nations participate in CELAC, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. In April 2015, for the first time all the countries of the Western Hemisphere will gather at the Summit of the Americas, in Panama. In addition, the Organisation of American States (OAS) is working

on a strategic vision to plan for the future. Sub-regional mechanisms, including the Caribbean Community or CARICOM, the Pacific Alliance, UNASUR and MERCOSUR, have the ability to foster integration regionally, and gradually converge into wider integration schemes.

How important are collaborative efforts between Mexico and other Central American countries to the economic and political strengthening of the region, and what initiatives are you undertaking to improve trade and investment, as well as cooperation to deal with issues such as the trafficking of drugs and guns?

Prosperity in Central America means stability and security. If Central America prospers, so does Mexico. In the region, our country is working on the following priorities: strengthening the political dialogue; promoting trade and investment; increasing tourism flows; taking advantage of cultural relations as a source of greater economic growth; and building a broad framework of cooperation for development.

To strengthen bilateral relations, President Enrique Peña Nieto has appointed new ambassadors to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. He visited Costa Rica, Panama and Honduras, and hosted the presidents of Panama and El Salvador. Beyond mere protocol, these actions will translate into tangible results for our societies.

In infrastructure, for instance, Mexico is actively promoting the Tuxtla Mechanism for Dialogue and Cooperation, the Mesoamerica Project and the Infrastructure Fund for Mesoamerican and Caribbean Countries. All these initiatives provide financial resources and technical support to improve infrastructure initiatives that complement the process of Central American integration and foster economic development and job creation.

With the signing of the Single Free Trade Agreement between Central America and Mexico on November 22nd, 2011, significant investments of Mexican companies in the region were further enhanced, creating jobs and prosperity in the region.

Promoting a more integrated and low-cost energy infrastructure will certainly contribute to making the countries of Central America more competitive. Mexico is committed to assist in decreasing energy costs in the region through its plans to increase the capacity of the Electrical Interconnection System of the Central American Countries (SIEPAC) and bringing natural gas to the region.

Additionally, Mexico is determined to strengthen bilateral cooperation with Central American partners in order to eradicate transnational organised crime. To cooperate towards this common goal with the

countries of the region, Mexico has developed institutional cooperation mechanisms, specifically the High Level Groups on Security (GANSEG) that allow security and law enforcement agencies of Mexico and Central American countries meet at a regular basis and establish direct channels of communication, information exchange, organisation of joint operations and training to strengthen security institutions in the region. Mexico has agreed to the formation of these mechanisms with Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Belize over the past two years.

At a multilateral and regional level, Mexico remains committed with Central American nations on this issue through the Central American Integration System (SICA) in order to promote cooperation on security issues. The most relevant mechanism at this level is the Central American Security Strategy (ESCA), through which Mexico transfers best practices and contributes with specialised cooperation initiatives in order to achieve the goals set by the SICA countries in ESCA.

What are your thoughts on the rise of the so-called 'MINTs' (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey)? Is the Mexican Government interested in strengthening ties with these countries to create a kind of informal 'club', as the BRIC nations have attempted to do?

Country groupings such as the so-called 'MINTs' are not a new phenomenon anymore. Since the inception of the BRICs, the alphabet soup has not ceased to pour and the variety of acronyms and the diversity of countries they group is just astonishing. However, there is something to be said about this phenomenon and its implications and usefulness in today's world.

Global politics and economics are currently in flux due to power shifts among states in the international system and increasing interdependence at all levels due to the rapid changes brought about by globalisation. In this complex global scenario, middle powers such as my own country have an important role to play. The gradual transformation of the international system into an increasingly horizontal arrangement opens a window of opportunity for us to increase our influence and unleash our constructive and conciliatory roles, while tackling pressing international problems.

In our opinion, the best way to go about it has been to embark on the pre-existing trend that gave rise to various groupings, characterised by the creation of innovative informal forums, based exclusively on the political will of their members and specifically designed to exchange views on a regular basis to find ways of addressing collectively the new challenges of our day. Driven by these ideas, in 2013 the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, Indonesia, the Republic

of Korea, Turkey and Australia decided to create MIKTA.

MIKTA is an informal space for cooperation among our countries, based on our commonalities and on our belongingness to other international forums such as the G20 and the United Nations. Like other groupings, MIKTA is a diverse group of countries; yet, we all share core values and face similar challenges. We are open economies that enjoy democratic pluralistic systems. We are all strategically located and strongly linked to our respective regions in a multitude of aspects. MIKTA is based on our common interest in strengthening multilateralism, supporting global efforts aimed at stability and prosperity, facilitating pragmatic and creative solutions for regional and global challenges, and implementing much-needed reforms within global governance structures.

MIKTA's main objective is to strengthen bilateral ties, enhance cooperation amongst its members and promote coordination on global issues of common interest. It must be noted that exchanges within MIKTA are informal, flexible and issue-driven, because the last thing we want is to create a cumbersome structure with a rigid agenda. Administration-wise, we have agreed that each country will coordinate MIKTA's agenda for a year. Mexico was the first to perform this duty, from September 2013 to September 2014. Currently, the Republic of Korea is in charge of coordinating MIKTA's activities.

So far, we have agreed to hold high-level meetings on a regular basis in New York, Geneva and our capitals; to organise meetings on the margins of the UN General Assembly and G20 Summits, and organise academic seminars in the five capitals with renowned scholars, with the purpose of informing our ideas and activities with top-notch quality scholarship on various issues related to global governance, middle powers and public diplomacy, among other concepts, and to promote the gradual creation of an academic corpus on MIKTA within the Political Science and International Relations current debate.

During the little more than a year that MIKTA has been working, its members have reached a widespread consensus on issues such as the North Korean nuclear threat, the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 and the Ebola crisis and its repercussions on global health. Likewise, we have published two Op-Eds, with the intention of informing our friends around the world of our general aims and generating some debate around this new approach to common global challenges.

MIKTA, like every new initiative, is still a work in progress. However, I am certain that we have started something significant, definitely for our countries, which now enjoy a much closer relation than before MIKTA's creation, but maybe even for global governance at large. E

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