

THE HOLISTIC AMBASSADOR

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Telos: We often ask ourselves: What does an ambassador do? What does it mean to represent your country? What kind of ambassador do you intend to be in Italy? How much weight have you decided to give to your political, economic and cultural role?

Carlos García de Alba: I am a career diplomat. In Mexico there are career and politically appointed ambassadors. I have been a diplomat for 34 years, and I have climbed the career ladder to reach the rank of Ambassador.

Over the years, I have figured out one fundamental thing: yes, I am a representative of the Mexican government, but I am also, and above all, a representative of the Mexican State, a far more complex concept. *State* also means people, spirit, grit, history, and it has a far broader meaning than *government*.

That said, I am still an emissary of the Mexican government. I am an economist, and I am from a family of businessmen. Then, I earned a PhD in Political Science and Sociology at the Sapienza University of Rome. This is also maybe why I try to be a holistic, across-the-board ambassador. Each country is different. Each new appointment, for me, means research, study, curiosity, getting to know a country. When I was sent to Italy, a country I already knew and where I had been as a young diplomat, the first element that stood out for me was the strong economic and commercial relationship between our Countries. I would say that the backbone of the relationship between Italy and Mexico centres on this economic and commercial relationship. Then, there is also a positive, cordial political relationship. I asked myself how I could combine these two things. By reinforcing the economic relationship and fostering mutual investment. Mexico is the only country in Latin American that has large investments in Italy, over two billion euros. The political relationship, albeit cordial and positive, could be taken to a higher level, become more regular and more frequent. A challenge, because in this global world, there is a lot of competition. So, it is difficult for any government to treat all countries with the same care. This is the Ambassador's challenge: to ensure that the government, of the Country they have been sent to, thinks it is worth the effort to dialogue, make work plans and start working together. So, no area can be overlooked. Here are two examples: culture and sport. Mexico and Italy are two cultural powers. Few countries in the world have a history as rich as ours. And I mean archaeology, anthropology, gastronomy, festivals, traditions, cinema, even beverages. All this is soft power. Over these years of international competition, soft power has been a tremendous resource. The Mexicans and Italians are passionate about sport, especially football. I don't understand why sport has never been an important part of our relationship, so I'm trying to work towards building on this, diversifying and bringing us closer. I consider myself an Ambassador who tries to see niches of opportunity, beyond the traditional areas of politics and the economy.

So, Mexico and Italy share a strong bond of friendship with great cooperation potential that is largely untapped?

Here, I'd like to take advantage of the opportunity to remind people that sometimes we think saying we like and love each other is enough, but I am not convinced. For a long time, we have done nothing more than make these statements of principle, and we have wasted opportunities. It is true that we like each other. If a Mexican hears the word "Italy", he breaks into a smile, and vice versa. But that's not enough. We need to grow and deepen our relationship, and mainly we need to extend, throughout the country, initiatives that are often concentrated in big cities. Italy and Mexico are very *territorial* Countries, so we have to look for opportunities in small- and medium-sized towns as well, where there is space for business and for cultural, academic, sports and technology exchanges.

There is no doubt that our dialogue is very focussed on economics and commerce. There are 1600 Italian companies in Mexico that invest and create jobs. There could be many more.

For example, many Italian companies and trade associations still do not understand well the value of the NAFTA, a free trade agreement among three Countries with a greater trade volume than the EU.

North America is the top commercial bloc in the world, and Mexico is part of that. Lots of Italian companies I meet often do not realise or even know about it. They know the name, but not the substance and details.

It is essential to spread awareness about and look more closely at NAFTA. What is more, we need to identify specific opportunities for different types of Italian and Mexican business. However, the opposite is also true.

I have not heard Mexican entrepreneurs, institutions or the Government talk much about investing in Italy, in a particular industrial sector or region. Mexico has a long tradition of capital export and international investment. Some important Mexican investors are already in Italy, but there could be many more.

On 30 November Italy's term as G20 president ended, and I would like to acknowledge the professional, careful job they have done during a very complex year. Italy and the Italian Government should be proud of having been an effective president, that created consensus on issues it was hard to find agreement on. Mexico participated actively, mainly in person and virtually on

some occasions.

We were among the few Countries present at all the meetings, even the business meetings, and I am proud of that. In the B20 (Business20) meeting, the only Ambassador of the 20 participating countries was the Mexican one, because they were going to be discussing issues that are very relevant to my Country.

Mexico is an emerging power, with increasing demographic and economic weight on the international scene. How would you explain to an Italian the role Mexico can play in the world in the next 10 years? And how much does the foreign policy of the US impact this role?

Clearly, the world is globalising, but it is also regionalising. A few years ago, competition was between countries. Then, starting with the first free-trade agreement, the one between Australia and New Zealand, other similar agreements proliferated. The EU, Mercosur, these are examples of this development. Mexico belongs to North America with the US and Canada. It does not belong to Central and South America, as is often thought. Our economy is closely integrated with that of the US and Canada.

Do you remember that President Trump said, "I'll get rid of the worst single trade deal ever made in the history of the United States: NAFTA." But what happened? Not only did they not get rid of it, they strengthened it.

Now we are three integrated economies with production chains that cannot survive without the others. So, in the next 10 years, I see our region becoming even more economically and commercially integrated, just like I see more integration with the EU.

This does not mean political sovereignty will be sacrificed or eliminated. We are independent Countries and we know our neighbour very well: it is the first world power. If there is one country that knows the US well, I think it is Mexico.

Our bilateral relations are incredibly complex: a border 2300 km long, 2 million dollars in commercial traffic an hour, the border between San Diego and Tijuana is the most intensely crossed in the world, and there are also water distribution issues regarding the rivers that cross the borders! What is more, we have a lot of common goals that we always have to agree on. I see our relationship with the US becoming closer, and the two governments have figured out they always have to agree for the benefit of both of them.

Since you were appointed Ambassador of Mexico to the Republic of Italy in June 2019, you have travelled all over our Country. What condition have you found Italy in after some time?

I really admire Italy. I told this to President Mattarella when I submitted my credentials.

I told him I consider myself a lucky Mexican who is responsible for representing his government here, and I added that I have come to pay a debt to this country which gave me my academic training, a beautiful language to speak and my son – my only son was born in Rome. I am extremely appreciative and have come to pay this debt with my work! I have travelled far and wide, both as a young man and as a diplomat.

Covid slowed down my plans, but I have managed to *officially* visit 16 of the 20 Italian Regions, and I have been to some of them three, four, even five times in an official capacity.

I can say that Italy looks much better, I see people with greater international vocation. For example, one of the things that struck me positively is that now many Italians speak English correctly and fluently. It was not like that 40 years ago. I see a Country with exceptional resources and talent and with a great desire to do things.

I'd like to tell you an anecdote: when the Mexican Senate ratified my appointment, a Senator asked me this question: "Ambassador, what do you think you're going to do to eliminate the commercial imbalance between Mexico and Italy?"

I answered that it is hard for an Ambassador to eliminate a big commercial deficit like the one between Mexico and Italy, which is 4 to 1. But if you look closely, Mexico does not buy many ties, shoes or bags... The real trade between Mexico and Italy is based on technology, machines. I am 63 years old, and when I graduated in Mexico, the Mexican economy was based on oil. 80% of the Mexican economy was based on oil and gas. Today 4% of the Mexican economy is based on oil and gas.

In one generation, Mexico has become the manufacturing power of Latin America. How? By opening to international markets and believing in free trade as well as by taking advantage of the technology and machines of two important countries: Italy and Germany.

They have given us technology and machines to become a power, the eighth exporting power in the world. So, we thank this Italy that is full of talent, creativity, genius, of engineers, of scientists, who can turn it into an exporting power.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

A boundless love for Italy. A boundless love for Mexico and pride in being Mexican. These are the things you see in the kind, noble gaze of Carlos Eugenio García de Alba, Ambassador of Mexico at the Republic of Italy.

It was truly an honour to go to the embassy, thrilling, I'd say. A villa surrounded by a beautiful garden, where the embassy has been located for almost 100 years. To reach the ambassador's office, you pass Aztec and Mayan ceramics of rare beauty.

You are immersed in pre-Hispanic art... as well as other equally beautiful, contemporary works of art. García de Alba is right, our two countries share many things, but one of the things that connects us most is that we both have ancient cultures!

Our conversation with the Ambassador opened up unknown worlds. Who would have ever imagined that Mexico has 2.5 billion euros in investments in Italy? Without mentioning any names, García de Alba stated, at a public event, that the top bread producer in Italy is a Mexican company. And the same can be said about the top plastic pipe manufacturer and the top owner of water parks at 'the Boot's' beaches. The grapes of 70% of the *prosecco* produced in Italy are watered by a company that uses Mexican technology. The second largest company producing cold cuts and the second largest company developing medical software in Italy are Mexican. Who knows who he was talking about? What we do know is that important Mexican companies like Gruma, Avntk and Mexichem have a relevant presence in Italy.

Instead, Italy's presence in Mexico is too small compared to the opportunities. Its geographic proximity to the US, its financial soundness, tax incentives, openness to international commerce, the relatively low cost of labour and a young workforce: these

are just a few of Mexico's strongpoints. The Mexican economy stands out in Latin American for its stability, with domestic consumption, investments and export that are going well.

Our business world still does not fully understand all the opportunities offered by NAFTA - North American Free Trade Agreement, which in 2020 was renamed USMCA- United States, Mexico and Canada Agreement. This free-trade agreement between the US, Canada and Mexico entered into force on 1 January 1994 and created the largest free-trade zone in the world, which involved 370 million people when it was created. This **last agreement** further intensifies the integration of Mexico into the North American productive market and preferential commercial trade channels with the largest market in the world, and Italian companies could get in on this as well.

This is one of the reasons why, despite the obstacles created by Covid, the Ambassador has already travelled far and wide in Italy and has made official visits to 16 Regions. He has even been to some of them several times. But García de Alba does not just intend to deal with the economy and commerce. In addition to culture, he believes sport must play an essential role in the bilateral relations between our Countries. The Ambassador says, *"What happened in history to the relationship between Italy and Mexico in terms of sports? We don't think it's important but who said sport can't bring us closer? I won't overlook any activities, even when it comes to sports. I'm organising some initiatives, that I can't talk about in advance..."*

Well, we are very curious and can't wait to find out what they are and, why not, actively take part! Our cover, the last one of the year, features the torn white page we are all now familiar with and an insect looking up at the words. The torn part reveals part of the interview in Italian and English. For Ambassador García de Alba we have chosen **Hypocyrtus vittatus**, the beautiful Mexican walking stick. It belongs to the Phasmida class of insects, and they truly are phantoms. Its main characteristic is its shape, which, as its name says, resembles the tree branches it lives and feeds on. Thanks to the irregularities and pigments in its exoskeleton, it mimics the roughness of the branches and take on the different colours of the host plant.

An ability to adapt that seems an essential pre-requisite for embarking a career as a diplomat!

With this December issue, all of us here at Telos A&S would like to wish you a Merry and *intimate* Christmas and a peaceful 2022. We hope it is better than 2021, even though, then again, it wouldn't take much for it to be...

Mariella Palazzolo



Carlos Eugenio García de Alba has been the Mexican Ambassador to Italy since 2019 and non-resident Ambassador to Albania, Malta and San Marino. A career diplomat since 1987, in 2006 he was given the title of ambassador. His first appointment, in this rank, was as the Mexican Ambassador to Ireland in 2006. From 2009 to 2011 he was the executive director of the *Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior*, which coordinates a variety of programmes and initiatives of the Mexican government for its citizens residing abroad.

From 2006 to 2007 he was the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) representative for Mexico. From 2004 to 2006 he was Mexican Consul in Dallas, Texas. From 1989 to 1993 he was Commercial Councillor to the Mexican Embassy in Italy, and from 1983 to 1986 he was Councillor for the Permanent Representative of Mexico to the UN agency FAO in Rome.

In Mexico, from 1998 to 2000 he was the General Director of the Foreign delegations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His many academic appointments include being a member of the Work Group for the Economy and Culture at the University of Madrid. He has authored numerous publications that focus on five main areas: foreign policy, youth policy, the environment, agriculture and public administration. He has spoken at many conferences and international conventions.

In 1999 the government of the Republic of Argentina named him Grand Knight of the Order of General San Martín and in 2015 he was awarded the 2013 *Premio Alcalde de Dublin, Digital Champion*.

He graduated in Economics from the Autonomous University of Madrid and got a Master in Political Science and a PhD in Sociology from Sapienza University of Rome. He speaks Italian, French, English and Spanish.

His passions? He says, *"I'm a voracious reader and a cinema buff. I love to travel. But my greatest passion is sports, which I did in the past and now follow as a fan. Especially football. My favourite team is Naples. But at our house, it's tough when it comes to football because my son, who was born in Rome, is a Juventus fan!"*

We also found out he is a hard-core ping-pong player... and dabbles in short-story writing. He is 63 years old and was born in Guadalajara.

Marco Sonsini