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**Article (Published version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Jiménez-Martínez, César (2013) *Chile: looking at the Pacific... but not at all of it.* [Public Diplomacy](#) (21 May 2013)

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Available in LSE Research Online: April 2014

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CHILE: LOOKING AT THE PACIFIC...BUT NOT AT ALL OF IT

By César Jiménez-Martínez

If, as some analysts have predicted, the 21st Century will be the ‘Pacific Century,’ Chile seems to be a promising actor. Since the 1980s, the country – which during the last three decades has championed free trade in Latin America -- has extended its diplomatic and economic ties beyond what could be considered its ‘natural’ partners, that is to say, the United States and Europe. Chile has established relations with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, and has signed free trade agreements with Australia, Malaysia, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan and China.^[1] In addition, in 1994 Chile joined the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Around the same time, the country created the ‘Pacific Foundation,’ an institution aimed at bringing Chile into trade cooperations with Asia.^[2] More recently, in 2012 Chile became, along with Peru, Mexico, and Colombia, one of the founders of the ‘Pacific Alliance,’ a bloc that promotes economic integration and free trade, and which has a particular focus on Asian markets.^[3]

Chile’s interest in the Asia-Pacific region needs to be seen in relation to the economic model of the country, which drives it to search for new markets and attract foreign investment. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that since the country recovered its democracy in 1990, it has paid increasing attention to the image that it projects to the world in an effort to shake off the shadow of Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship.^[4] Consequently, during the last two decades Chile has used soft power tools in an attempt to improve its reputation and craft a narrative that portrays it as a stable country, as well as a gateway to the Latin American market.^[5]

A notable example occurred in 1992, when the country participated in the Universal Exhibition of Seville. The main attraction of its pavilion was an iceberg brought directly from Antarctica, which was intended to communicate the coldness and efficiency of Chile’s economic success, in contrast with the Latin American stereotypes of chaos and inefficiency.^[6] The exhibit was considered a success because it allowed Chile to be ‘seen’ by the world.^[7] Chile had another chance to showcase its credentials

in 2004, when it hosted the APEC Summit^[8] and welcomed world leaders such as George W. Bush, Hu Jintao and Vladimir Putin. In 2010, Chile was in the global media spotlight with the successful rescue of 33 miners who had been trapped 2,300 feet underground. The story was watched by an estimated audience of one billion people around the world, who followed it live through networks such as BBC, CNN and China’s CCTV.

Trade has arguably been the main driver behind Chile’s interest in promoting its image abroad. The need for consistency in marketing efforts developed by various public and private Chilean actors led the country to outline in 2005 a strategy of nation branding that, at least in theory, would involve every sector of society.^[9] This strategy was developed by ProChile, the Chilean Trade Commission. However, some of the decisions made were rather controversial, such as the short-lived slogan ‘Chile, All Ways Surprising’. This slogan was eliminated because predictability and stability were considered preferable characteristics with which to represent the country.^[10]

A different direction was taken at the end of the decade with the creation of Fundación Imagen de Chile, an institution aimed at coordinating and capitalizing on public and private efforts that help to promote Chile across the world. One of its first actions was the development of the slogan ‘Chile hace bien,’ unveiled in 2010, meaning both ‘Chile is good for you’ and ‘Chile works well’. However, only the first translation was disseminated to English-speaking countries, leaving the idea of the country’s efficiency overlooked.^[11] Although some of the officers of the Fundación have described their work as public diplomacy, it seems the current efforts are understood almost exclusively in terms of nation branding, that is to say, development of slogans or logos rather than as engagement in long-term relationships with foreign publics.

It is not possible to know how much Chile’s soft power efforts have contributed to the economic accomplishments of the country, particularly in relation with the Asia-Pacific region. Chile is far from being the most successful country in Latin America in terms of its global reputation.^[12] However, its economy is one of the strongest in the

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region, it has signed free trade agreements with over 60 countries and has occupied a non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council twice. The fact that in 2010 Chile became the first South American member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) confirms its relevance in the ‘Pacific Century’.

However, the Pacific Ocean has also become a source of controversy between Chile and its neighbors. In 2008, Peru filed a lawsuit against Chile before the International Court of Justice to resolve a claim for 35,000 square kilometers of the Pacific Ocean currently under Chilean sovereignty. The verdict will not be known before mid-2013, but the dispute has been widely covered by the media of both countries and arguably has highlighted the failure of earlier attempts to negotiate a solution. Chile only has consular relations with Bolivia, and interactions between the two nations have been characterized by tension over Bolivia’s demands to recover its coastal access. Relations with both Bolivia and Peru have been particularly strained since the end of the 19th century, when the two countries joined forces against Chile during the ‘War of the Pacific’, a conflict driven by the ambition to control nitrate fields on Bolivian soil. By the end of that war, Chile had increased its territory by one third, Bolivia had lost access to the Pacific Ocean, and the Peruvian city of Arica had been annexed to Chile.

So far, it seems that the ‘Pacific Century’ is a concept that has been understood mainly in commercial terms, driven particularly by the rise of China as a major economic power. However, the 1990s demonstrated that a strengthened economy alone does not guarantee a safer and better-engaged international arena. If Chile really wants to be a relevant actor in the Pacific during the coming decades, it should address some of the aforementioned disputes. They have impacted the country’s trade, energy, and even its security. Additionally, Chile’s global reputation has been somewhat tarnished, leading it to be perceived at times as isolated.

A full resolution of these conflicts is beyond the realm of public diplomacy. However, it may play a role in easing tensions. Chile should increase its efforts to enhance its soft power within the immediate region. In doing so, it could mitigate unfavorable opinions amongst the citizens of neighboring countries.^[13] This is particularly important given that the elites of Chile, Bolivia, and Peru have occasionally agreed on political and economic issues, but


their jointly proposed policies could not be enacted due to their unpopularity with Bolivia’s and Peru’s general public, who perceived them as too favorable to Chile. One of the most obvious examples is the Bolivian ‘gas war’ of 2003, which involved a series of popular uprisings against the government’s proposition to route gas sold to the United States through Chile. The outcry forced then-president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada to put an abrupt end to his administration.^[14]

Chile’s implementation of regional public diplomacy should follow a slightly different approach to the efforts aimed at other regions, including the ones targeted at Asia. The goal should not be exclusively to increase trade, but also to forge alliances with citizens of neighboring countries

and to project a more appealing image of Chile. Thus, the emphasis should be on Chile not just as a nation unique within Latin America – as the iceberg of 1992 did in Seville -- but instead as a reliable friend with positive historic ties to Bolivia and Peru. In doing so, Chile should pay attention to the opportunities offered by each country or, using the terminology of public diplomacy, it should do more ‘listening’.

For example, in 2004 I had the chance to spend a summer volunteering

in Bolivia. At that time, the media reported extensively on squabbles between Presidents Carlos Mesa, from Bolivia, and Ricardo Lagos, from Chile. It was the same old story: Bolivia demanded the return of its Pacific coast, and Chile responded that there were no pending issues on borders available for debate. At the same time, I noticed that every Sunday afternoon, Bolivians met religiously in front of their televisions to watch ‘Operación Fama’, the country’s first reality show. Across Bolivia, viewers followed the story of a dozen young, aspiring celebrities competing for the final prize: a trip to take singing lessons in Chile.

Arguably, for a couple of hours, neither the contestants of ‘Operación Fama’ nor its Bolivian audience perceived Chile as a rival or aggressive nation, but rather as a place full of opportunities to materialize their dreams. Perhaps this can inspire future public diplomacy efforts to increase understanding between these historically linked countries. 

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12. See the Country Brand Index of 2012: Chile was listed number 39 among 50 countries of the Nation Brand Index of 2011 and 34 among 118 countries.

13. According to a 2010 survey in the Chilean newspaper *La Tercera*, 78% of Peruvians and 61% of Bolivians do not trust Chileans.

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