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Geoeconomic Strategy for Exportadora de Sal (ESSA): Sustainable Competitive Advantage, Market Diversification and Green Industrial Policy

Estrategia geoeconómica para Exportadora de Sal (ESSA): ventaja competitiva sostenible, diversificación de mercados y política industrial verde

Dr. Adolfo Alberto Laborde Carranco, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), Mexico (adolfo.laborde@cide.edu) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4925-5229

Abstract

The State-owned enterprise (SOE) Exportadora de Sal, S.A. de C.V. (ESSA) can leverage its scale, product quality, and environmental benefits in the global commodity market. Following the company's full nationalization, the paper reassesses ESSA's competitive position and proposes strategies for geographic diversification, product development, and improved governance. The analysis integrates various tools—e.g., the resource-based view, the natural-resource-based view, etc.—within a qualitative explanatory case-study design. The empirical strategy employs source triangulation and strategic tools—such as SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis and Porter's Five Forces—for diagnosis, including prospective scenarios for 2025–2035. The results show that ESSA's strategic core is underpinned by a combination of scale, high-purity solar salt, favorable geoclimatic conditions, accumulated technical expertise, and a relatively low-carbon production process. ESSA's strengths and weaknesses are highlighted, concluding that it can transition into a model of sustainability for State ownership in Latin America by focusing on natural advantages, market diversification, and improved logistics and governance, thereby advancing Mexico's green industrial policy.

Resumen

La empresa estatal Exportadora de Sal, S.A. de C.V. (ESSA) puede aprovechar su escala, la calidad de sus productos y sus beneficios medioambientales en el mercado mundial de materias primas. Tras la nacionalización total de la empresa, el artículo reevalúa su posición competitiva y propone estrategias de diversificación geográfica, desarrollo de productos y mejora de la gobernanza. El análisis integra distintos instrumentos —por ejemplo, la perspectiva basada en los recursos, la perspectiva basada en los recursos naturales, etc.— en un diseño cualitativo de estudio de caso explicativo. La estrategia empírica emplea la triangulación de fuentes y herramientas estratégicas —como el análisis DAFO (debilidades, amenazas, fortalezas y oportunidades) y las Cinco Fuerzas de Porter— para el diagnóstico, incluidas futuras situaciones hipotéticas para el periodo 2025-2035. Los resultados muestran que el núcleo estratégico de ESSA se sustenta en una combinación de escala, sal solar de alta pureza, condiciones geoclimáticas favorables, experiencia técnica acumulada y un proceso de producción con emisiones de carbono relativamente bajas. Tras destacar sus fortalezas y examinar sus debilidades, se concluye que ESSA puede convertirse en un modelo de sostenibilidad para la propiedad estatal en América Latina, centrándose en las ventajas naturales, la diversificación de mercados y la mejora de la logística y la gobernanza, y así impulsar la política industrial verde de México.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Competitiveness, sustainability, industrial policy, international trade, State-owned enterprises (SOEs) / Competitividad, sostenibilidad, política industrial, comercio internacional, empresas estatales.

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1. Introduction

Exportadora de Sal, S.A. de C.V. (ESSA), located in Guerrero Negro, Baja California Sur, operates the world's largest solar-salt complex and publicly reports production capacity above eight million tons annually. Its scale, product purity, and low-energy solar evaporation process make it a strategically significant industrial asset for Mexico and an analytically rich case for examining how State ownership, sustainability, and competitiveness can be aligned in global commodity markets.

The company's full nationalization in 2024 reopened an old but unresolved Latin American question: Under what institutional conditions can a State-owned enterprise (SOE) compete internationally while also serving broader industrial policy, regional development, and ecological transition goals? ESSA matters precisely because it does not fit neatly into the conventional stereotype of the inefficient public firm. Its historical export discipline, strong product reputation in the Pacific basin, and environmentally favorable production model suggest a more nuanced reality.

At the same time, ESSA is not free from structural constraints. Its commercial exposure remains highly concentrated in a limited number of external markets; its delivered competitiveness is heavily shaped by port and freight performance; and its current product mix is still dominated by bulk industrial salt. These issues are strategically relevant because future competition will be shaped not only by output volumes, but also by traceability, environmental compliance, logistics reliability, and the capacity to move into higher-value applications.

This article begins with a simple proposition: ESSA possesses the material and organizational conditions to become a competitive green SOE, but that outcome is not automatic. It depends on whether the firm can transform its natural endowments into coordinated capabilities in logistics, certification, market intelligence, governance, and portfolio upgrading.

The contribution of the article is fourfold. First, it refines the theoretical framing of ESSA by reducing generic conceptual discussion and concentrating on how the Resource-Based View (RBV), the Natural-Resource-Based View (NRBV), dynamic capabilities, and institutional analysis illuminate the case. Second, it synthesizes the descriptive discussion of the global salt market to sharpen the strategic diagnosis. Third, it makes the relationship between diagnostic findings and the proposed recommendations more explicit. Fourth, it updates the literature by drawing on recent scholarship on SOEs, sustainability, and green industrial policy.

The guiding research questions are the following:

- Which firm-specific resources and sustainability attributes underpin ESSA's competitive position?
- How do governance and institutional arrangements condition ESSA's capacity to adapt, diversify, and upgrade?
- Which geographic and product diversification pathways are most plausible for strengthening ESSA's strategic autonomy between 2025 and 2035?
- What broader lessons does ESSA offer for Latin American debates on SOEs and green industrial policy?

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents an integrated theoretical framework. Section 3 explains the methodology. Section 4 develops the strategic diagnosis and proposes an action agenda. Section 5 discusses the implications for SOEs and industrial policy in Latin America, and the conclusion is presented in section 6.

2. Theoretical Framework

Rather than treating the main theories as isolated conceptual blocks, this section uses them as complementary lenses for interpreting ESSA's strategic position. The objective is not to restate the full literature, but to show how each framework clarifies a specific dimension of the case.

2.1 RBV and NRBV: from Resource Endowment to Ecological Advantage

The Resource-Based View (RBV) explains competitive advantage through the possession and organization of valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate and difficult-to-substitute resources (Barney, 1991). In ESSA's case, the relevant resources are not abstract. They include exceptional geoclimatic conditions for solar evaporation, industrial-scale salt flats, consistently high product purity, specialized technical know-how accumulated over decades, and a production model with relatively low energy intensity.

The Natural-Resource-Based View (NRBV) extends this logic by arguing that environmental performance can itself become a source of competitive advantage when it improves legitimacy, efficiency, and market access (Hart, 1995). ESSA's solar process is important here because its ecological profile is not merely reputational: in more demanding markets, low-carbon production, traceability, and environmental compliance increasingly function as commercial qualifiers. For ESSA, the strategic issue is therefore not simply whether it has valuable resources, but whether those resources can develop into a credible sustainability-based market position.

2.2 Dynamic Capabilities and Strategic Adaptation

RBV and NRBV help explain why ESSA is well-positioned, but they are less effective at explaining how the firm should adapt to changing market conditions. Dynamic capabilities theory addresses that problem by focusing on the firm's capacity to sense opportunities, seize them, and reconfigure assets and routines under uncertainty (Teece et al., 1997). This perspective is especially useful for ESSA because commodity competition is no longer determined solely by extraction or production efficiency; it also depends on the ability to respond to freight volatility, certification requirements, sustainability reporting demands, and changes in industrial demand.

Recent work on dynamic capabilities for sustainability suggests that organizational adaptation increasingly depends on integrating sustainability-oriented innovation and stakeholder coordination (Ortiz-Avram et al., 2024). In practical terms, ESSA's challenge is to develop capabilities in three connected areas: market sensing for new destinations and applications; strategic seizing through certification, commercial alliances, and product differentiation; and organizational transformation through logistics modernization, traceability systems, and managerial professionalization.

2.3 Institutional Governance and the Return of Green Industrial Policy

Institutional economics highlights that organizations do not perform in a vacuum. Their outcomes are shaped by formal rules, incentive systems, monitoring mechanisms, and the degree to which governance arrangements reduce transaction costs and protect long-term objectives (North, 1990). This dimension is crucial for

ESSA because State ownership can either enhance strategic coordination or amplify rigidities, depending on whether governance is mission-oriented, professionalized, and insulated from short-term political interference.

Recent scholarship has revived industrial policy as a legitimate tool for building resilient supply chains, supporting decarbonization, and positioning national firms in strategic sectors (Benito & Meyer, 2024; Allan & Nahm, 2025). At the same time, newer work on ownership structures and green industrial policy argues that public and hybrid ownership forms can be significative institutional vehicles for sustainability-oriented transformation when incentives, accountability, and strategic clarity are aligned (Amankwah-Amoah, 2024). From this angle, ESSA should be understood not only as a commercial exporter of salt but as a possible platform through which the Mexican State can combine competitiveness, territorial development, and green transition objectives.

Considered as a whole, these perspectives suggest an integrated proposition: ESSA's long-term performance will depend less on the mere possession of natural advantages than on its ability to organize those advantages through adaptive capabilities and credible public governance.

3. Methodology

The article uses a qualitative explanatory case-study design. This approach is appropriate because the objective is not to estimate causal effects statistically, but to identify plausible strategic mechanisms linking resources, environmental attributes, governance arrangements, and market positioning (Yin, 2018).

The empirical strategy relies on source triangulation. The evidence base combines: (i) academic literature on RBV, NRBV, dynamic capabilities, industrial policy, and SOEs; (ii) official public information on ESSA and the Mexican government; (iii) recent institutional and sectoral materials on sustainability and green industrial policy; and (iv) market-oriented information on salt production, logistics, and downstream demand.

The analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the case was coded around its strategic resources, organizational capabilities, market exposure, and governance constraints. Second, the global salt environment was synthesized to identify opportunities and external pressures. Third, strategic tools—SWOT, Porter's Five Forces, and scenario

analysis—were applied to structure the diagnosis. Fourth, the main findings were connected directly to a prioritized strategic agenda for 2025–2035.

Two limitations must be stated. The first is the lack of access to internal financial and operational data, which prevents highly granular benchmarking. The second is the absence of elite interviews with managers, regulators, and buyers. For that reason, the conclusions should be read as analytically grounded strategic inferences rather than as a claim to exhaustive firm-level measurement.

4. Results and Strategic Analysis

4.1 Global Salt Market Conditions and ESSA's External Environment

The global salt market is mature, but it remains strategically significant because it supplies essential inputs to chlor-alkali production, water treatment, food processing, de-icing, pharmaceuticals, and selected energy applications. Market competition, therefore, combines commodity-like price pressure with segment-specific quality requirements. In that context, ESSA does not compete only on volume; it also competes on purity, reliability, logistics and, increasingly, sustainability.

Public and industry information indicate three broad structural features relevant to ESSA. First, production is geographically concentrated, with Asian producers dominating total volume, although not necessarily the premium high-purity segment. Second, freight and port performance remain decisive for delivered competitiveness, especially in long-distance maritime trade. Third, sustainability-related requirements are becoming more salient in industrial procurement and in regulatory environments where buyers demand clearer information on origin, environmental performance, and compliance.

To reduce descriptive repetition, Table 1 summarizes the main market trends and their strategic implications for ESSA (see Table 1).

Table 1. Main Market Trends and their Strategic Implications for ESSA

Market trend	Analytical significance	Implication for ESSA
Greater emphasis on high-purity industrial inputs.	Quality-sensitive segments reward consistency and lower contamination risk.	ESSA's product quality supports upgrading beyond bulk salt.
More demanding environmental and traceability expectations.	Sustainability increasingly affects market access and supplier selection.	Certification and carbon-footprint disclosure can become differentiators.
Persistent logistics volatility.	Freight costs and port reliability materially affect delivered price competitiveness.	Infrastructure and shipping strategy are now central, not secondary.
Concentration of industrial buyers.	Large downstream customers retain bargaining power in contract negotiations.	ESSA needs to diversify its customer base and strengthen long-term contracting.
Re-emergence of industrial policy and resilient supply-chain strategies.	Governments increasingly seek secure and lower-carbon inputs for strategic sectors.	ESSA can position itself within green industrial and supply-chain agendas.

Source: Prepared by the author.

4.2 Strategic Diagnosis of ESSA

4.2.1 Resource Profile and Competitive Position

ESSA's strategic profile is anchored in a combination of large-scale solar evaporation, high product purity, accumulated operational know-how, and a comparatively favorable ecological profile. From an RBV perspective, these characteristics constitute a defensible bundle of valuable, hard-to-replicate resources. The point is not that ESSA faces no competitors, but that few competitors can reproduce the same combination of scale, purity, and process advantages under comparable natural conditions.

4.2.2 Sustainability as a Market Asset Rather than a Narrative Add-On

An important strength of ESSA is that sustainability is embedded in the production process rather than tacked on. Solar evaporation reduces energy intensity relative to more carbon-intensive alternatives, which can support both reputational

legitimacy and market access. However, this advantage will remain underexploited unless it is translated into measurable indicators, certifications, and buyer-facing documentation. In other words, environmental advantage becomes strategic only when it is verified, communicated, and contractually valued.

4.2.3 Operational Efficiency Versus Delivered-Cost Vulnerability

ESSA's production logic is structurally efficient, but delivered competitiveness depends on much more than ex-works cost. Maritime freight, cargo handling, dredging needs, shipping coordination, and port efficiency all affect the final commercial result. All this means that a firm can be operationally efficient at the plant and still lose margin or market flexibility at the logistics stage. For ESSA, logistics is therefore a core strategic variable, not a back-end operational issue.

4.2.4 Excessive Market Concentration

ESSA's export structure remains highly dependent on a small set of external markets, especially in East Asia and North America. That concentration has historically provided scale and continuity, but it also increases exposure to regulatory changes, freight disruptions, industrial downturns, and buyer bargaining pressure. Commercial concentration is thus one of the firm's clearest strategic vulnerabilities.

4.2.5 Governance and Organizational Agility

The 2024 nationalization created a new opportunity to align ownership and strategy, but ownership consolidation alone does not guarantee better performance. What matters is whether governance arrangements produce managerial continuity, investment discipline, accountability, and faster decision-making. ESSA's strategic potential will depend heavily on whether public ownership is organized as a platform for long-term capability building rather than as an additional layer of administrative rigidity.

4.3 SWOT Synthesis

Table 2 summarizes the internal and external diagnoses. Presenting the SWOT as a matrix makes the strategic logic more explicit and avoids repetition across the narrative sections (see Table 2).

Table 2. SWOT Synthesis

Strengths • High-purity solar salt and large-scale production capacity. • Favorable geoclimatic conditions that are difficult to replicate. • Relatively low-energy and low-carbon production process. • Longstanding technical know-how and export experience.	**Weaknesses** • Heavy dependence on a narrow set of export markets. • Logistics and port constraints that weaken delivered competitiveness. • Limited product differentiation beyond bulk industrial salt. • Potential bureaucratic rigidities under public ownership.
Opportunities • Access to sustainability-sensitive markets in Europe and the Middle East. • Premium niches linked to pharmaceuticals, food processing, and specialized industrial uses. • Certification, traceability, and ESG reporting as commercial differentiators. • Alignment with Mexico's green industrial and supply-chain strategies.	**Threats** • Freight volatility and maritime disruption. • Powerful downstream buyers with contract leverage. • More demanding environmental and traceability regulations. • Competitive pressure from subsidized or scale-intensive producers.

Source: Prepared by the author.

4.4 Porter's Five Forces

Rivalry among existing competitors is moderate rather than extreme. Global salt markets are broad, but not all suppliers compete in the same quality segment. ESSA's real competitors are those capable of combining scale, reliable purity, and stable maritime delivery.

The threat of new entrants is low because large-scale solar salt production depends on an unusually favorable geographic location, long development periods, and substantial infrastructure requirements.

Supplier power is limited in the strict sense because ESSA's basic resource base depends primarily on natural conditions rather than on scarce upstream vendors. However, logistics service providers and shipping arrangements can become quasi-strategic bottlenecks.

Buyer power is high. Large industrial consumers can negotiate aggressively on price, quality standards, and delivery conditions, especially when export concentration reduces ESSA's outside options.

The threat of substitutes remains low in ESSA's core uses, but the firm should still monitor technological shifts in downstream industries and potential substitution in specific market niches.

4.5 Strategic Scenarios for 2025–2035

The scenario exercise is designed to clarify the consequences of strategic inertia versus capability building.

Base scenario. ESSA preserves its current export structure and improves only incrementally. This path preserves short-term continuity but leaves the firm exposed to concentration risk and logistics vulnerabilities.

Moderate diversification scenario. ESSA enters selected new markets, secures environmental certifications, and improves contractual and logistics management. This scenario reduces concentration risk without requiring a full organizational overhaul.

Transformative green-upgrading scenario. ESSA combines diversification with logistics modernization, traceability systems, portfolio upgrading, and governance reform. This scenario is the most consistent with the firm's potential to act as a competitive green SOE.

4.6 Linking the Diagnosis to the Strategic Agenda

One of the manuscript's original weaknesses was that some recommendations were not explicitly tied to the strategic diagnosis. Table 3 corrects that problem by mapping the main findings to corresponding responses (see Table 3).

Table 3. Diagnosis and the Strategic Agenda

Key Finding	Why it Matters	Priority Recommendation
High product purity and a favorable solar production process.	These are the foundations of differentiation in quality-sensitive and sustainability-sensitive segments.	Position ESSA as a certified low-carbon supplier and develop premium market narratives.
Export concentration in a small number of destinations.	Commercial dependence weakens bargaining power and increases exposure to external shocks.	Pursue gradual diversification toward Europe, the Middle East, and selected niche markets.
Logistics materially shape delivered competitiveness.	Plant-level efficiency cannot compensate for persistent port and freight bottlenecks.	Prioritize port upgrading, freight strategy, and long-term shipping coordination.
Environmental advantage is real but insufficiently monetized.	Without traceability and measurable sustainability indicators, the advantage remains latent.	Adopt ISO 14001-type systems, life-cycle metrics, and buyer-facing reporting.
Public ownership creates both opportunity and risk.	Strategic coordination improves only if governance becomes more agile and accountable.	Strengthen professional management, performance targets, and board-level strategic oversight.
Bulk commodity sales still dominate the current portfolio.	Limited product differentiation constrains margins and strategic autonomy.	Develop selected higher-value industrial, food-grade, and pharmaceutical applications.

Source: Prepared by the author.

4.7 Proposed Strategic Agenda

Building on the diagnosis, the recommended strategy for ESSA during 2025–2035 should rest on five coordinated priorities:

- Geographic diversification through phased entry into sustainability-sensitive and contract-based markets beyond the traditional Pacific core.
- Product upgrading toward higher-value industrial, food-grade, and pharmaceutical applications that reward purity and process reliability.
- Certification and traceability systems that convert ESSA's ecological profile into a verifiable commercial asset.

- Integrated logistics modernization, including port infrastructure, cargo handling, and shipping strategy.
- Governance reform centered on professional management, strategic planning, and accountability mechanisms compatible with public ownership.

These priorities are mutually reinforcing. Diversification without logistics reform would be fragile; certification without market development would be under-monetized; and product upgrading without governance reform would be difficult to execute. The strategic problem is therefore systemic rather than sequential.

5. Discussion

5.1 From Passive Comparative Advantage to Active Strategic Advantage

The central analytical lesson of the case is that ESSA's natural advantages are substantial but insufficient on their own. A large salt flat, favorable climate, and high purity create a strong starting point, yet they do not automatically generate long-term strategic autonomy. That autonomy depends on the firm's ability to organize those assets through adaptive capabilities, institutional coherence, and forward-looking market positioning.

This distinction matters for broader development debates. Latin American commodity producers often rely on resource abundance as if it were self-sustaining. ESSA illustrates a more demanding reality: resource endowments become durable strategic assets only when they are connected to logistics, certification, innovation, and governance. In that sense, the company's next stage of competitiveness is organizational rather than geological.

5.2 ESSA as a Case of Sustainability-Oriented State Ownership

Recent scholarship has become more attentive to the role of government-owned and SOEs in sustainability transitions. The emerging consensus is not that public

ownership is automatically superior, but that State ownership can be advantageous when it is linked to credible missions, long-term horizons, and governance structures that align strategy with accountability. ESSA fits that debate particularly well because it operates in a sector where environmental performance, supply-chain resilience, and industrial policy now intersect.

The firm, therefore, offers a concrete example of how public ownership can combine commercial viability with broader national goals. If public ownership is organized effectively, ESSA can support regional development, strengthen Mexico's standing in selected industrial chains, and contribute to a more credible green industrial policy agenda. If governance remains rigid or fragmented, however, the same ownership structure could suppress the agility needed for diversification and upgrading.

5.3 Implications for Latin America

Three regional implications follow. First, SOEs should not be assessed solely in terms of the binary opposition between efficiency and inefficiency; they should also be evaluated on whether governance enables strategic learning and sustainability upgrading. Second, ecological attributes can become sources of competitive advantage when they are institutionally translated into standards, certifications, and market access. Third, diversification should be understood not merely as a firm-level commercial tactic but as part of a wider industrial-policy effort to reduce dependence on narrow export structures.

For Latin America, the relevance of ESSA lies precisely in its hybrid nature. It is neither a classical heavy-industry SOE nor a purely private commodity exporter. It is a public firm with rare natural advantages, a tangible sustainability profile, and a realistic pathway toward capability-based upgrading. That combination makes it analytically and policy relevant beyond the Mexican case.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that ESSA's strategic value lies beyond size. The company combines rare natural conditions, product quality and a relatively favorable ecological profile with the potential to become a more sophisticated actor in international salt markets. However, its future competitiveness will not be determined solely by its

resource endowment. It will depend on whether public ownership is translated into adaptive governance, logistics modernization, credible sustainability systems, and a disciplined diversification strategy.

Theoretically, the case confirms that RBV, NRBV, dynamic capabilities, and institutional analysis are more useful when deployed in combination than in isolation. Empirically, it shows that ESSA remains a strong producer, but its next stage of competitiveness requires organizational and strategic upgrading. From a policy standpoint, the company illustrates how a SOE can function as an instrument of green industrial policy—provided that mission, management, and accountability are aligned.

Future research should deepen the analysis through buyer interviews, trade-flow reconstruction, comparative benchmarking with other large salt producers, and closer examination of how sustainability metrics affect contract formation in industrial markets. These lines of inquiry would help move from strategic diagnosis toward more precise measurement of ESSA's commercial and policy impact.

In sum, ESSA has the components to become an emblematic competitive green SOE in Latin America. The decisive question is no longer whether the firm possesses strategic assets; it does. The question is whether those assets will be organized and governed in ways that transform exceptional natural potential into a durable strategic advantage.

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About the Author

Dr. Adolfo Alberto Laborde Carranco holds a Ph.D. in Political and Social Sciences from UNAM. He is a tenured C-level professor and researcher in the Division of Development Studies and the director of the APEC Center at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (Center for Economic Research and Teaching—CIDE). Laborde is a Level I member of the National System of Researchers. Dr. Adolfo Laborde's work focuses on trans-Pacific relations between Mexico/Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region, international development cooperation, international economics, and links between academia and the productive sector. He served as Minister (Head Representative) of the Secretariat of Economy of México at the Mexican Embassy in Japan (2021–2023). Laborde has extensive teaching experience at UNAM and Anáhuac University, as well as a substantial body of academic work, including books, peer-reviewed articles, and book chapters. He also has vast experience as an international affairs media analyst.