

Global 20: Curtis, Mallet-Prevost

By Allissa Wickham

Law360, New York (July 16, 2015, 9:24 PM ET) -- From representing Venezuela in an over \$30 billion dispute with ConocoPhillips to advising China's commerce ministry on major trade battles, Curtis Mallet-Prevost Colt & Mosle LLP has become a major power player in international arbitrations, deals and trade, landing the firm on Law360's Global 20 list.

With 17 offices in 13 countries, New York-based Curtis boasts a truly global reach, including offices in Turkey, France, Mexico, Argentina, Kazakhstan, Germany and the U.K., just to name a few.

Roughly 55 percent of Curtis' 322 attorneys are based outside the U.S., giving the firm some serious international firepower and helping it nab a spot in Law360's Global 20 rankings. And while the firm isn't as big as some of its competitors, the seamless coordination of its attorneys on various global projects gives Curtis a leg up, according to firm chairman George Kahale III.

"I think the secret to our success is that all of these offices work together," Kahale told Law360. "Matters are staffed across offices. Everybody knows each other."

Curtis has specifically developed a serious reputation for international arbitration, as it frequently handles high-stakes disputes for countries like Venezuela and Uganda. Just in the last five years, attorneys from Curtis have tackled over 100 international arbitrations, with claims totaling over \$100 billion, according to the firm.

In Venezuela's case, Curtis recently represented the country in a major dispute with Exxon Mobil Corp. over nationalized assets. Although Exxon had sought roughly \$16 billion in damages, the company walked away with a \$1.6 billion award from the World Bank's International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes this October.

Curtis is also representing Venezuela in its arbitration with ConocoPhillips Co., in which the oil giant is said to be seeking over \$30 billion, in the wake of the country's alleged seizure of its oil investments 2007. The ICSID has already shaved off \$10 billion of ConocoPhillips' claim, according to Curtis.

Not only are these disputes challenging because of their considerable size, but they also involve cutting edge issues of international law, Kahale said.

"This entire arbitration area is a new area of practice that's grown up over the last 10 to 15 years," he said. "And it's something, frankly, that everybody wants to get into. We were very fortunate to get in

relatively early, and that's why people consider us the leader now.”

Curtis also brings the heat in the international trade department, following the addition of five experienced IT attorneys from Winston & Strawn LLP in 2012. The firm currently represents major companies like LG Electronics Inc. and governmental entities such as China’s Ministry of Commerce, otherwise known as MOFCOM, in various trade battles.

In an effort to assist its trade group, Curtis opened an office in Beijing in March 2014, marking the launch of its first branch in eastern Asia.

“The Beijing office was primarily to support our international trade group, which is in Washington,” said Matias Vega, managing partner at Curtis. “They have a very active international trade practice emanating to a large extent out of Asia, and particular, for trade cases involving China.”

Curtis also opened an office in Rome in November, complementing its office in Milan, which has grown to almost 30 attorneys. Given Rome’s government and regulatory centers, Vega said there was plenty of push to set up shop in the city.

Vega noted that while some larger firms are loosely bound to their foreign branches, Curtis’ offices around the world are closely tied within a single structure.

“For regulatory and other purposes, we might have other entities involved, but the soul of the enterprise is still one firm,” Vega said. “And that's the way we continue to operate.”

As for how its globally minded attorneys keep in touch, Kahale said that when its lawyers aren’t catching a flight to visit Curtis’ international offices in person, they’re swapping emails or making frequent use of videoconferencing and Skype.

“We're probably one of the first firms to make extensive use of videoconferencing internally, going back to the early 1990s, when literally it was ... unheard of,” Kahale said.

The firm’s high level of connectedness and dexterity with different aspects of international law has also opened up diverse opportunities with the same client. For instance, after handling an arbitration with Turkmenistan, Curtis was brought in to help the country negotiate the purchase of its first telecommunications satellite for roughly 350 million euros, Vega said.

Curtis also flexes its international muscles when it comes to global transactions, having represented the exploration unit of Mexico’s national oil company, Petroleos Mexicanos, in the acquisition of two offshore drilling rigs worth \$230 million, the firm said.

It has also represented companies in cross-border deals involving printing and beverage brands — such as Pernod Ricard’s sale of the Mexican line of drinks known as “Caribe Cooler” — and continues to advise global financial giant Merrill Lynch & Co. on private equity matters.

Curtis has also shown a willingness to jump into areas of the world before other firms, having become the first global law firm to open an office in Turkmenistan, and setting up what is likely the largest international office in Muscat, Oman, according to Kahale.

Its offices in the Middle East and Central Asia have certainly been successful, with Curtis recently

advising Kazakhstan on a settlement over the development of the Kashagan gas and oil field. Kahale also pointed to Mexico City as a “big producer” of business for a number of years, while Vega noted that Curtis has essentially led the charge in opening an office in Buenos Aires.

“We took on a Buenos Aires office three years ago now, and then continuing today, we haven't had a lot of law firms running down to Buenos Aires,” Vega said, noting that Curtis was drawn to the region for its corporate transactions opportunities.

As for where Curtis is headed next, Kahale said the firm has been considering another office in one of the Central Asian countries — with Vega noting that Kahale has yet to meet an office he didn't like. With two recently opened branches, however, that new office likely won't happen in the near future.

“I would say, for the time being, for certainly for the rest of this year, probably no more offices,” Kahale said.

--Additional reporting by Dan Packel and Kelly Knaub. Editing by Jeremy Barker.