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FEATURED Q&A

What Is Driving AMLO's Foreign Policy in Mexico?



Since taking office nearly a year ago, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has made controversial foreign policy decisions but hasn't left Mexico once. // File Photo: Mexican Government.

Q The government of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador granted asylum to leftist former Bolivian President Evo Morales who fled his country Nov. 11 on a Mexican government plane. López Obrador also has refused to join several other Latin American countries, the United States and many European nations in recognizing opposition leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate president. Are these moves by López Obrador the result of ideology, domestic political considerations or other factors? What is driving Mexico's foreign policy? Why has López Obrador not made a single trip abroad since becoming president last year, and how is that affecting Mexico?

A Arturo Sarukhan, board member of the Inter-American Dialogue and former Mexican ambassador to the United States: "When Morales stepped off a military plane onto Mexican soil, he followed a well-trodden path. During the 20th century, Mexico was a haven for many seeking asylum. I am a product of that policy, with paternal and maternal grandparents who fled the Armenian Genocide, the Bolshevik Revolution and the fascist victory of Franco. But whether Bolivia also signals a departure from the overcautious foreign policy implemented so far by López Obrador is still to be seen. The decision is more about internal messaging and domestic politics than regional geopolitical calculations. The government correctly and proactively (potentially defusing an explosive situation in Bolivia, had Morales stayed) offered him asylum, and—per the Estrada Doctrine, which asserts that Mexico on principle neither extends nor withholds recognition of

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Bolivia Congress Unanimously OKs New Election

Both chambers of Bolivia's Congress approved legislation for a new presidential election without former President Evo Morales' name on the ballot. Morales fled earlier this month to Mexico, which granted him asylum.

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BUSINESS

Gov't Pressure on Pemex Leading to Delayed Payments

Pressure from Mexico's government on state oil company Pemex to reduce spending will delay payments due next month to suppliers, according to a report.

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POLITICAL

Lacalle Pou Leads Martínez in Uruguay Runoff

Former Senator Luis Lacalle Pou led his rival, former Montevideo Mayor Daniel Martínez, in Sunday's presidential election in Uruguay. However, the race was too close to call.

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Lacalle Pou // File Photo: Lacalle Pou Campaign.

POLITICAL NEWS

Lacalle Pou Leads in Uruguay Presidential Election Runoff

Former Senator Luis Lacalle Pou led his rival, former Montevideo Mayor Daniel Martínez, by a razor-thin margin in Sunday's presidential election runoff in Uruguay, The New York Times reported. With more than 97 percent of the votes counted, center-right Lacalle Pou had 48.8 percent of the vote, just more than one percentage point ahead of Martínez. Late Sunday, election officials had not named a winner

“We must unite as Uruguayans.”

— Luis Lacalle Pou

because the number of provisional ballots exceeded the margin between the two candidates. Exit polls and preliminary results appeared to give Lacalle Pou the edge, according to pollsters. On Sunday night, Lacalle Pou said his lead in the race was “irreversible,” though he held back from claiming victory. Lacalle Pou made note of the close result and called for unity. “We must unite as Uruguayans,” he said. Martínez, of the leftist Broad Front coalition, said the results were better than expected for his party. “Uruguayans are smart people,” he said. “They decide with their head and their heart.” Martínez appeared to have received a surge of support in the final days of the campaign. Earlier in the campaign, polls had showed Lacalle Pou poised for a clear victory. Martínez had emerged as the top vote-getter in the first round of the election on Oct. 27, with 39 percent of the vote. However, other top candidates who fell short in the first round backed Lacalle Pou in the runoff. Uruguay's electoral court said it would confirm the results later in the week, likely on Thursday or Friday, the Financial Times reported. The electoral court's leader, José Arocena, said no winner could be declared because “there was never such a tight ballot.” A win by Lacalle Pou would put an end

to 15 years of presidential rule by the Broad Front coalition. It would also come amid anti-incumbent sentiment across Latin America, where violent anti-government protests have broken out over the past month in countries including Chile, Ecuador and Colombia. Lacalle Pou, who leads Uruguay's center-right National Party, has vowed to increase the country's competitiveness and also cut the fiscal deficit without raising taxes. Lacalle Pou has said he can cut state spending by \$900 million without public-sector layoffs.

Bolivia's Congress Unanimously Passes Measure for New Vote

Both chambers of Bolivia's Congress on Saturday unanimously approved legislation to annul the results of the country's disputed Oct. 20 election and hold a new vote, without former President Evo Morales on the ballot, Reuters reported. The measure's passage was seen as a breakthrough in the country's political crisis following last month's contested vote, which observers said was marred by fraud. Morales, who had been in office since 2006, had been named the winner, edging out rival Carlos Mesa by just enough votes to avoid a runoff. However, amid violent protests that followed, Morales fled earlier this month to Mexico, which granted him asylum. More than 30 people have been killed in clashes between demonstrators and security forces. Morales has characterized his departure as a “coup,” but his Movement Toward Socialism, or MAS, party, has said it will find a different candidate to run in the next election. The measure that lawmakers passed disqualifies Morales from being a candidate as it bars individuals who have already served two presidential terms. Morales next term would have been his fourth. Bolivian lawmakers still must select members for the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, which is to set a date for the next election, the Associated Press reported. “I want to thank our parliamentarians for having understood and heard the demands of the Bolivian people,” said interim President Jeanine Áñez.

NEWS BRIEFS

Brazil's Lula Vows to Fight Government

Former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on Friday told a crowd of cheering supporters that he would fight the country's right-wing government and those he said unjustly imprisoned him, saying he would make “their lives hell,” the Associated Press reported. Lula was freed this month after 19 months in prison when the Supreme Court ruled that a defendant cannot be jailed before appeals are exhausted.

Chile's Interior Minister Makes Appeal for Calm

Following a fresh eruption of street violence last week, Chile's interior minister on Friday made an appeal for peace and the “recovery of public order,” Reuters reported. “I think we've reached a breaking point at which all citizens must say no, no more violence,” Gonzalo Blumel told reporters. Looters raided a hospital in the city of Coquimbo early Friday morning, setting it on fire. Local police, who have been criticized for heavy-handed tactics that have left hundreds of protesters blinded by pellets, clashed with protesters Friday in Valparaíso as they tried to break into the country's Congress.

Scrapping Amazon Rule May Cost Brazil Access to Some of E.U. Soy Market

A European Union agriculture industry association said that Brazilian farmers risk losing access to part of Europe's \$5 billion soy market if they scrap a rule that bars grain traders from buying oilseed from areas in the Amazon that have been deforested, Reuters reported today. Nathalie Lecocq, director general of FEDIOL, the group representing the European Union vegetable oil and meal industry, said European consumers concerned about climate change would reject Brazilian soy if the local soy industry moves ahead with plans to end its self-imposed moratorium.

Three Officers Killed in Colombia Bombing

Three officers were killed in a bomb blast late Friday at a police station in southwestern Colombia, The New York Times reported. Ten officers were also injured in the explosion, which occurred in the town of Santander de Quilichao. The explosion came a day after three people were killed in Valle del Cauca province when a protest there grew violent and led to looting. Demonstrations, which began last Thursday with a long-planned national strike to protest against corruption and human rights violations in the government of President Iván Duque, have continued over the past four days. In a televised address on Friday night, Duque called for a “national conversation” focused on six themes, such as corruption, education and inequality. Duque added that some people were taking advantage of the protests to “sow chaos.” Authorities in Colombia said they have expelled 59 Venezuelan migrants for acts of vandalism they allegedly carried out last Thursday and Friday, El Tiempo reported. [Editor’s note: See related [Q&A](#) in last Wednesday’s edition of the Advisor.]

BUSINESS NEWS

Gov’t Pressure on Pemex Leading to Delayed Payments

Pressure from Mexico’s government on state oil company Pemex to reduce spending has resulted in a decision to delay payments to suppliers due in December, Bloomberg News reported Saturday, citing a person familiar with the situation. Pemex already faces months of overdue payments to offshore suppliers. One company, Marinsa de Mexico, is owed about \$8 million, nearly a third of which is seven months late, a company executive told Bloomberg News. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has set a goal to end the year with a govern-

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foreign governments—will not recognize the new government in La Paz, which also, from an international law standpoint, partially explains why it has not done so with Guaidó. Driving Mexican foreign policy these days is the president’s stated paradigm that ‘the best foreign policy is domestic policy.’ While this enunciation is in no way unique to Mexico but rather a general default position of many incoming left-leaning governments, it does place it in a taxing juncture. Successive governments have led Mexico to punch below its weight in the international arena; a combination of navel-gazing and lack of purpose, ambition, budget and overarching grand strategy have all meant that when it comes to global or even regional affairs, its diplomatic payload was woefully underfunded and puny, compared even to other regional powers such as Brazil. Now with López Obrador’s disdain for foreign policy, seduction of a mythicized past that precludes thinking about possible futures for Mexican influence and his general austerity drive, we are witnessing the pauperization of the nation’s international footprint. This generally leads to one of two options: you either sit at the table or you’re on the menu.”

A **Amanda Mattingly, senior director at The Arkin Group in New York:** “Mexico’s foreign policy is in retreat under President López Obrador. As a result, Mexico is missing its opportunity to lead on Western Hemisphere affairs in a time of turmoil across the region. López Obrador’s leftist, nationalist ideology has aligned him more with other leftist leaders in the region, such as former Bolivian President Morales and Venezuelan President

Maduro, than the United States, Europe and other Latin American nations that have denounced irregularities in Bolivia’s recent elections and the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Venezuela. Under López Obrador, Mexico has been silent on Venezuela and most

ment-wide surplus in order to avoid a possible sovereign debt ratings downgrade, according to the report. However, Lisa Schineller, S&P’s head of Latin American sovereign ratings, said at an event in Mexico City last week that the government’s prudent fiscal policy positions have already been incorporated into its sovereign credit rating for the country, Reuters reported.

Maduro, than the United States, Europe and other Latin American nations that have denounced irregularities in Bolivia’s recent elections and the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Venezuela. Under López Obrador, Mexico has been silent on Venezuela and most

“**Mexico’s foreign policy is in retreat under President López Obrador.”**

— Amanda Mattingly

recently, whisked Morales out of Bolivia and granted him asylum. López Obrador and his foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, have not recognized Juan Guaidó as the legitimate interim leader of Venezuela, and they have criticized the Organization of American States for not condemning the military coup in Bolivia. These foreign policy decisions can only be seen through an ideological prism, and they put Mexico at odds with the United States. So far, López Obrador has worked pragmatically with the Trump administration on a host of thorny issues, such as security, drugs, immigration and trade. However, this shift in Mexico’s foreign policy could make his dealings with Trump much more difficult. With ratification of the USMCA trade agreement still hanging in the balance, this seems short sighted on Mexico’s part. Recall that bilateral U.S.-Mexico trade totals approximately \$671 billion. Additional delays in ratifying the trade agreement due to ideological differences could further weaken Mexico’s already sluggish economy and threaten Mexico’s business climate, which is already

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The ratings agency is unlikely to modify its credit rating on Pemex as well, at least in the near term, according to the report. Pemex is burdened with about \$100 billion of debt, the most of any major oil company, and Mexico’s national budget relies on Pemex revenue for a fifth of its funding. [Editor’s note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Sept. 27 Energy Advisor.]

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suffering from a number of López Obrador's domestic economic policies."

A **Andrés Rozental, president of Rozental & Asociados in Mexico City and senior policy advisor at Chatham House:** "Asking Evo Morales to petition Mexico for political asylum was clearly one of López Obrador's foreign policy missteps. Another was pulling out of the Lima Group and abandoning efforts with the other major Latin American governments to push for regime change in Venezuela. President López Obrador has changed a very traditional Mexican foreign policy with an undeniable ideological shift to the left. He doesn't travel outside of

“ I don't believe domestic pressures are involved in the way López Obrador sees the world.”

— Andrés Rozental

Mexico, doesn't attend regional or global summits and is doing his utmost to appease Donald Trump, even if it means fundamental changes to Mexico's positions regarding migration, trade and border security. The new government has also begun campaigns to ask Spain, the pope and others to apologize for historical grievances. Fortunately, however, Mexico's career foreign service has partially mitigated the swings in AMLO's behavior and continues to guide many of the principles that successive governments have followed in shaping Mexico's relationships abroad. I don't believe domestic pressures are involved in the way López Obrador sees the world. Rather, it is a result of his limited exposure to other countries and his avowed strategy to concentrate his six-year term on internal issues. The outcome of Mexico's

isolating itself is unfortunate as it nullifies many years of active participation in global affairs."

A **Alma Caballero, director for Mexico at McLarty Associates:** "President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's strong political mandate and centralized decision-making process have been the main drivers of the way Mexico has designed and implemented its foreign policy agenda thus far. When questioned about his lack of international travel, President López Obrador often states that 'the best foreign policy is domestic policy.' His decision to skip international forums, such as the G20 meeting in Japan or the U.N. General Assembly in New York, limits Mexico's international exposure through missed opportunities to engage with key global leaders and address issues that are critical for the country's peace and prosperity. Mexico can't separate domestic policy from foreign influences such as the current state of domestic politics in the United States, as they are fundamental levers that affect the welfare and development of the Mexican people. The recent developments with Bolivian President Evo Morales have left AMLO's government susceptible to accusations of inconsistency in its approach to foreign policy, and it has faced pressure to explain how this decision fits with López Obrador's affirmed and continuous commitment of nonintervention. The president's foreign policy marks a return to Mexico's past, adopting the Estrada Doctrine of the 20th century and reversing the government's approach to international crises. All of this makes one wonder whether Mexico is looking backwards in order to move forward."

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