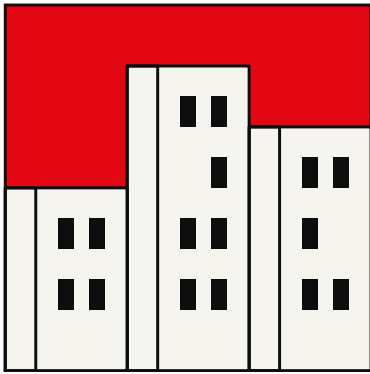


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The Americas | Missing in action

Mexico's foreign policy is unambitious and erratic

Blame its president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador

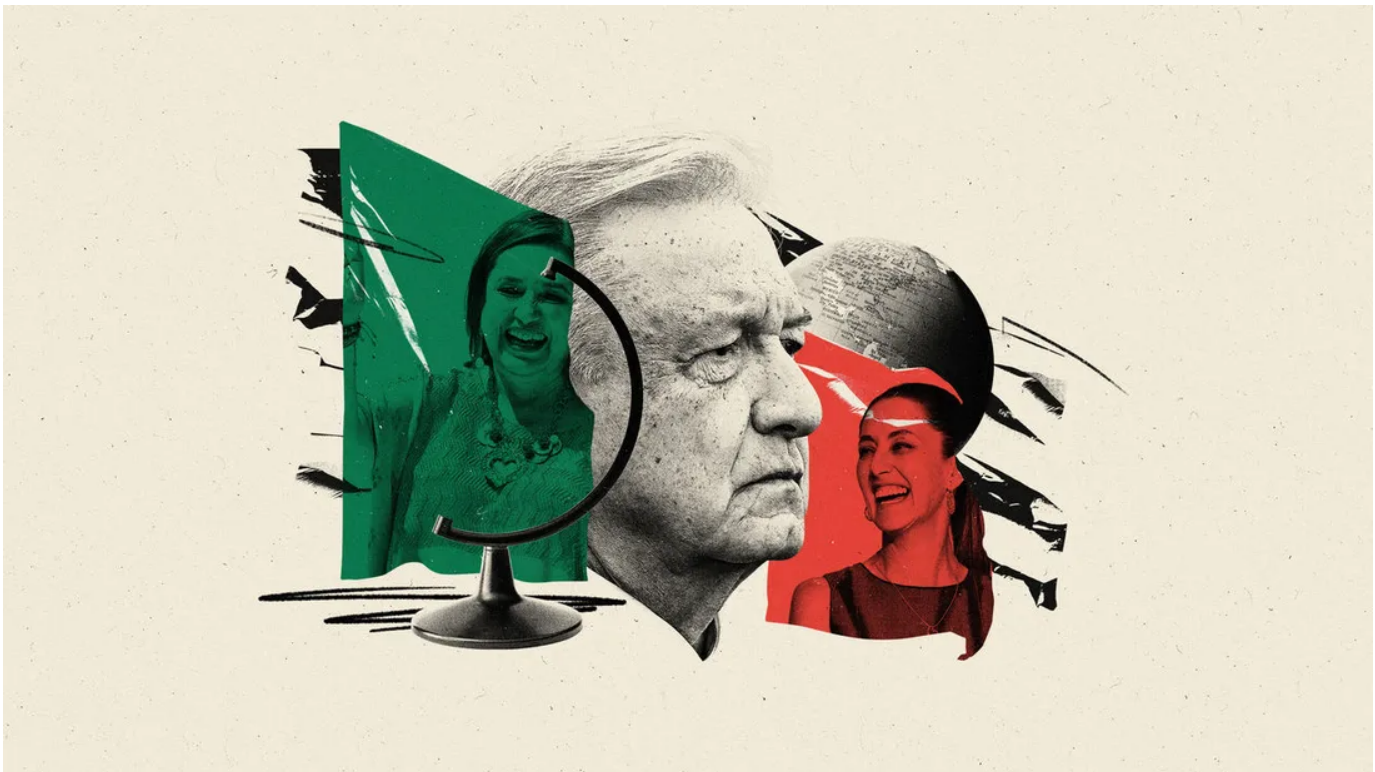


IMAGE: KLAWE RZECZY

Nov 16th 2023 | MEXICO CITY

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ANDRÉS MANUEL LÓPEZ OBRADOR, Mexico's president, is no globetrotter. His trip to San Francisco on November 15th to attend the summit of Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation, an economic club of 21 countries, was only his seventh foreign jaunt in five years in office. Before going, he said: "I won't go the whole time. It's going to be, like, you arrive a day before, sleep, participate, eat—and come home." Since becoming president, he has not visited a single country outside the Americas.

Foreign policy has never been easy for Mexico, squished as it is between the dissimilar regions of North America and Latin America, each of which tends to view Mexico as part of the other. Close ties with the United States limit its relationship with China. A lack of internal bodies to discuss foreign policy—there is only one think-tank focused on it in Mexico—means individual whim looms large. Even so, past administrations managed to carve out international roles for themselves, on disarmament, free trade and climate policy. "Until López Obrador [Mexico] had a very strong voice in multilateral organisations," says Shannon O'Neil of the Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank in New York.

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Mr López Obrador is not interested in this kind of engagement. He does not attend G20 meetings or the UN's General Assembly. He has stymied Mexican diplomats by cutting costs, reducing their travel budget by 42% between 2018 and 2022. This has hurt Mexico's standing, says Arturo Sarukhán, a former Mexican ambassador to the United States. "A country that isn't a military or geopolitical superpower has two ways to navigate the international system: sit at the table or be on the menu: we are the latter," he says.

Mexico's most important relationship is with the United States. Alicia Bárcena, Mexico's foreign minister, says it is a "positive moment" for the two countries. It is true that there is some good news: Mexico overtook China as the United States' leading trade partner earlier this year. But that is a result of tensions between China and the United States. Trade has surged despite Mr López Obrador, not because of him.

Where Mr López Obrador has engaged with the United States, he has done so along mercantile lines. His crackdown on migrants making for the US border via Mexico—a break from Mexico's friendly stance on refugees—seems to have earned leeway from the United States on other matters. He understands that Mexico needs the United States, and that the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which replaced the North American Free Trade Agreement, acts as a guardrail. Mexico has co-operated on policy around fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that killed 71,000 people in the United States in 2021, curbing imports of precursors (a rare bilateral meeting between Mr López Obrador and Xi Jinping, China's leader, was scheduled for November 16th on that subject). Mexico has rightly argued for the southward flow of guns to be stemmed.

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But beyond that, Mr López Obrador has turned his back on his northern neighbour. He was slow to congratulate President Joe Biden on beating Donald Trump in 2020. He has hollowed out the security relationship, tearing up the bilateral security framework that had been in place since 2008. Co-operation was restarted under a new, weaker agreement in 2021. In economic matters he has failed to take enough advantage of the realignment of supply chains prompted by US-China tensions. He has formulated few policies to attract companies to Mexico.

Elsewhere Mexico's foreign policy has been erratic. In Latin America Mr López Obrador has been guided by ideology, hugging close leftists old and new. Mexico was one of the few countries that recognised Nicolás Maduro's sham election win in Venezuela in 2019. Mr López Obrador is a vocal supporter of Pedro Castillo, Peru's former leader, who was ousted last year after a bungled coup attempt. He is friendly with Colombia's Gustavo Petro and Chile's Gabriel Boric, but came away from a recent trip to both countries with little to show for it. He has failed to build rapport with Brazil, Mexico's natural rival for the spotlight on the regional and global stage. His policy of support for Central America to address the causes of migration has had little impact; it requires more money than Mexico has to spend.

Farther afield, Mr López Obrador has frozen Mexico's relationship with its main European ally, Spain, because its government spurned his demand for an apology for the conquest of Mexico 500 years ago. He has flip-flopped on war in Ukraine, seeming to favour Russia in public comments even as his diplomats backed Ukraine at the UN. In September he angered many by inviting Russian troops to take part in Mexico's Independence Day parade.

Mr López Obrador has just 11 months left in power. "Foreign policy will change when he has gone," says one diplomat. So what should his successor, most likely Claudia Sheinbaum, of his own party, but perhaps Xóchitl Gálvez, the candidate of the opposition coalition, do?

Mexico needs to start showing up. That means a president who travels more, beyond the Americas, and a sufficiently funded diplomatic corps.

The next president should act strategically, pursuing closer co-operation with the United States, especially on security but also on economics. The world needs vast amounts of equipment to electrify transport and boost renewable energy output. Mexico is well placed to manufacture a fair chunk of it. But capitalising on that good fortune requires an ambitious foreign policy. Mexico must co-ordinate with the United States and Canada, as well as venturing abroad to lure multinationals. Both Ms Sheinbaum and Ms Gálvez have promised to attract investment, though the latter is more convincing, as she can more easily step away from Mr López Obrador's path.

Mexico must also renew other foreign bonds, says Olga Pellicer, another former diplomat. Relations with Spain (and so Europe) must be mended. A more active role in multilateral institutions would help. Whoever succeeds Mr López Obrador needs to put Mexico back on the map. ■

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This article appeared in the The Americas section of the print edition under the headline "Missing in action"

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