



Mexico

A Pivotal State on the Global Stage

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1867 Manifesto to the Nation, Benito Juárez famously stated: “Among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others is peace.”¹ Spoken by Mexico’s first indigenous president, Juárez’s quote demonstrates Mexico’s view of the global order—that countries should promote national sovereignty, security, and prosperity through collaboration and dialogue rather than through intervention. Mexico effectively operates with one foot in the door of the Global North, via its position in North America, and one foot in the door of the Global South, as one of the leading economies and cultural powerhouses of Latin America. This hybrid role, characterized by some as a “pivotal state,” has created both opportunities for leverage and areas of tension with other countries, particularly with regards to its close but complicated relationship with its northern neighbor.²

Being the United States’ southern neighbor both grants Mexico unmatched economic benefits and presents it with a delicate balancing act.

A key player and beneficiary of a global economy underpinned by a U.S.-led order, Mexico has found itself in a state of “autonomy within limits,” by which U.S. interests oftentimes circumscribe Mexico’s range of potential actions.³ Being the United States’ southern neighbor both grants Mexico unmatched economic benefits and presents it with a delicate balancing act: In pursuing autonomy within limits, Mexico must maximize its benefits from the Western-led order while asserting its sovereignty and reducing its dependence on the order’s biggest players, especially the United States. This tension influences Mexico’s policy positions as its presidents balance nationalistic rhetoric at home and trying to assuage U.S. concerns. Mexico’s balancing act also exacerbates divisions between the country’s pro-Global North elites and its disadvantaged populations who have not received the benefits of global economic integration, which has led to the success of the social welfare and populist-oriented Morena party.

Mexico’s effort to maintain relations with its neighbor to the north consumes most of its foreign policy energy. But Mexico’s foreign policy DNA, often described as noninterventionism or the Estrada Doctrine (after Foreign Affairs Minister Genaro Estrada), can sometimes undercut its desire to play a leadership role on the global stage. Mexico

firmly believes that nonintervention in the internal affairs of other countries can earn it a seat at the tables that matter, allowing it to negotiate or mediate conflicts. In practice, however, Mexico has demonstrated little global leadership of late, preferring to stay on the sidelines (and under President Lopez Obrador, to focus on his project of domestic transformation). Mexico's ultimate goal is to exert full sovereignty over its domestic affairs; it has also used its political capital on the global stage to openly criticize the role of U.S. sanctions and containment policies against Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela for contributing the region's security and migration crises. Further, Mexico does not see the world through the West's post-Cold War lens, but rather as a group of politically equal states. China and Russia are treated as normal states in the international system the same way Algeria, Ethiopia, or Thailand might be.

HISTORY, GRIEVANCES, AND ASPIRATIONS

Mexico's troubled history with colonialism planted the seed for the suspicion of hegemonic powers that reverberates through its current foreign policy positions. Throughout its three-hundred-year rule, Spain established an extractive colonial economy in Mexico that used the hacienda system to primarily export minerals including silver and gold to Spain. This system and its exploitation of indigenous people exacerbated inequality, creating socioeconomic divisions that remain relevant today. According to recent estimates, Spain pillaged around 100 metric tons of gold in the first 50 years of the *conquista*, making it "the most powerful country in Europe."⁴ Spain's rule came to an end in 1821 during the War of Independence under the leadership of Miguel Hidalgo, but issues such as foreign ownership of mines operating in the country continue to be sensitive topics today.

After achieving independence, Mexico's exercise of sovereignty was short-lived. The country suffered invasions, first by the United States and then by France.⁵ Animosity as a result of the Mexican-American war, in which the United States took half of Mexico's territory in 1848, was a determining factor in the bilateral relationship for over a century and served as the basis of Mexico's noninterventionist policy.⁶ The French invasion from 1861-67 further cemented this position; in fact, it was after the invasion of France that President Benito Juárez immortalized the quote mentioned above. The principles of self-determination and noninter-

vention remain so present in Mexican foreign policy that after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Marcelo Ebrard said that because "Mexico suffered two invasions by France and two by the United States, we lost half of our territory, and due to history and tradition, due to our genesis as a nation, we have to reject and strongly condemn the invasion of a country like Ukraine by a power like Russia."⁷

Post-independence, Mexico bristled at the operation and foreign ownership of key industries as a way for foreign countries—particularly the United States—to limit its sovereignty. Natural resources, particularly oil, have been central to Mexico's political and economic history. The expropriation of foreign oil companies by President Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s and the subsequent creation of *Petróleos Mexicanos* (Pemex) were key moments that asserted Mexico's autonomy and sovereignty against U.S. economic interests in the region. This move stood in contrast to the policies of President Porfirio Díaz, whose 1892 subsoil ownership laws aligned closely with foreign interests, allowing landowners to exploit oil and mineral resources without special concessions.⁸ Díaz's 1909 law further clarified that resources including petroleum were the exclusive property of the landowners, which benefited foreign companies and elites at the expense of the broader Mexican population. In 1925, President Calles reversed course and solidified the nation's control over its subsoil resources through the Petroleum Law, which declared that the Mexican nation owned all hydrocarbons. This law positioned the petroleum industry as a public utility, prioritizing its development over surface land use and preparing the ground for Cárdenas' subsequent nationalization. The law, however, led to tensions with the United States, which were partially eased by the 1928 Calles-Morrow Agreement affirming the rights of foreign companies to areas they had developed before the 1917 Constitution. After Cárdenas' expropriation in the 1930s, a decline in foreign investors saw the country face an economic slowdown with a 50 percent decrease in exports.⁹ Threats from the United States and the confiscation of oil assets led to diplomatic tensions. Mexico then sided with the Allied Powers in World War II, allowing for the reinvestment and modernization of its oil industry after the war.

While Mexico and the United States grew closer as a result of World War II, it was not until the Cold War that Mexico actively sought to strengthen its relationship with

its northern neighbor. By the 1980s, Mexican policymakers shifted their economic policy to work closely with the United States, primarily due to the United States' rise as a global economic power. The signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 in particular heralded what came to be known as the Mexico's "Grand Strategy," an economic alignment with the United States and an institutionalization of bilateral relations.¹⁰

Notwithstanding, Mexico's pragmatic approach has been mostly economic and has not translated into full political alignment with the United States. The two countries continue to face tensions over issues such as drug and weapons trafficking, corruption, and immigration, with several acute issues of note. The United States pressed Mexico to declare a "War on Drugs" after the murder of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena in 1985.¹¹ Conversely, Mexico has filed a lawsuit against U.S. gun manufacturers for their role in fueling violence in the country.¹² In 2019, the United States arrested Genaro Garcia Luna, Mexico's former security minister, on charges of corruption and drug trafficking in collaboration with the Sinaloa Cartel, and General Salvador Cienfuegos on charges of drug trafficking and involvement with the H2 cartel.¹³ Cienfuegos' arrest, conducted without informing Mexican counterparts, was heavily criticized in Mexico as a violation of Mexican sovereignty.

Historically, Mexico has maintained close ties with regimes that challenge the United States in the hemisphere, even when these are repressive dictatorships, including Cuba and Venezuela.¹⁴ It is widely known that Fidel Castro sought refuge in Mexico in 1955, from where he launched the movement to overthrow the U.S.-backed Batista government. According to Castro's memoir, he, his brother, and Ernesto "Che" Guevara chose Mexico because it "was a country that had carried out a great revolution in the second decade of the 20th century . . . [and] every other nation in the region was ruled by tyrants."¹⁵ Mexico's Support for Cuba continues today—by the end of the first quarter of 2023, the government had supplied at least 2.8 million barrels of oil to Cuba, invited Cuban leadership to participate in Mexico's civic-military parades during Independence Day celebrations,¹⁶ and called for an end to the U.S.-led embargo.¹⁷

NATIONAL DEBATE

The role of Mexico on the global stage, and specifically its relationship with the United States, has been at the center

of national debate since the country's independence. On the one hand, Mexico's externally oriented economy and its integration with the United States has provided it with significant economic benefits. GDP per capita has risen dramatically, catapulting Mexico to middle-income status. On the other hand, outsized reliance on the United States as an export market has made it vulnerable to diplomatic pressure, creating a tension difficult to reconcile given Mexico's strong nationalistic and anti-interventionist stance.

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From Mexico's perspective, the question at the center of the power imbalance between Mexico and the United States is not whether the United States infringes on Mexico's sovereignty, but to what extent this should be permitted. In the apogee of the Monroe Doctrine, Latin America was often referred to as the "United States' back yard." Mexico's desire to exert full sovereignty while being constrained by U.S. economic and political interests has been a source of discontent and, at times, resentment. During the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, for example, the United States pressed Mexico to provide significant concessions to U.S. companies wanting to build railroads in Mexico's north.¹⁸ Manuel María de Amazona, Mexico City's representative in Washington, warned Díaz at the time that if U.S. railroads did not make their way into Mexico, "their bayonets will."¹⁹ Mexico interprets the demands of U.S. companies as bullying behavior even today, as U.S. companies press Mexico to provide subsidies and privatize its national enterprises at the occasional cost of Mexicans' quality of life, as seen during the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁰

While on paper it seems as though Mexico as a whole has benefited from trade with the United States, there is strong internal debate over who benefits from the wealth

that the country has seen in recent decades. Internal divisions between the industrialized north and the agrarian south, and between urban economic elites and disadvantaged rural populations, are evidence that rising levels of inequality are leading to diverging views of the role of the United States and its importance as a trade partner. The elite (sometimes of U.S. origin) tend to want friendlier relations with the United States, while much of the rest of the country hopes to assert greater self-determination.

There are two main factors at the root of inequality in Mexico: geography and race. Ethno-racial stereotyping is pervasive in Mexico, and it is a significant factor that has outsized impact on individuals' prospects for progress. In fact, recent studies have shown that race is the most important determinant for Mexicans' economic achievement, with darker-skinned—oftentimes indigenous—Mexicans achieving lower socioeconomic status and social mobility.²¹ Similar studies have also demonstrated that Mexicans with lighter skin report higher salaries (\$220 a month) than Mexicans with darker skin (\$137 a month). This has contributed to societal fractures in Mexico where progress seen as accruing from NAFTA has been primarily profitable to light-skinned, often U.S.-educated Mexican entrepreneurs.

Geographic disparities in the distribution of wealth are also evident, with inequality primarily concentrated in the southern regions of Mexico.²² In postcolonial times, the concentration of land in the hands of hacienda owners left a legacy of dispossession among indigenous people, whose occupation was primarily agrarian. Prior to NAFTA, farming was for subsistence and trade, but after the trade agreement came into effect, Mexico's agricultural production was taken up by larger U.S. companies which led to deepening inequality. Intergenerational social mobility is also greatest in the Mexican north.²³ Furthermore, most foreign direct investment (FDI) is concentrated in northern states, facilitating a more prosperous environment and deeper pro-U.S. sentiments. As of August 2024, about 46 percent of FDI was concentrated in Mexico City, followed by the Mexican states of Nuevo Leon, Baja California, and the state of Mexico.²⁴

According to some reports, the top 10 percent of Mexicans increased their share of national income in the decade after NAFTA was implemented, while the other 90 percent saw a decrease in income share or did not experience any change at all.²⁵ In 1996, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Jorge Castañeda argued in *Foreign Affairs* magazine that “as long as Mexico delays the changes that will bring

prosperity to all, the country will remain stalled, divided between a minority whose lot depends on the United States and a majority periodically buffeted by economic and political crisis.”²⁶

Mexico's inequality indices also serve as a proxy for political sentiments throughout the country. In 2018, to the surprise of many, Mexico elected a populist president, who for the first time focused on the poor (remarkably, his campaign slogan was “for the good of all, first the poor” [author's translation]).²⁷ Andrés Manuel López Obrador (often referred to by his initials, AMLO), who campaigned on addressing inequality by investing heavily in social welfare programs, made it a central point of his presidency to bridge the gap between Mexico's industrialized north and its disadvantaged south—if sometimes via dubious white elephant projects.²⁸ While there is extensive debate over the feasibility of AMLO's policies, some argue that these programs were able to decrease Mexico's inequality for the first time in six years.²⁹ President Claudia Sheinbaum has continued AMLO's legacy of social welfare, upholding support for national industries, and pushing Mexico-first policies. However, at a critical time when investors are looking at Mexico's potential to attract nearshoring investment, internal divisions over Mexico's relationship with the United States—and with other countries in Latin America—may lead Mexico once again to a more inward stance.

ECONOMICS

Mexico's economy has grown to be the 12th-largest in the world, making it the second-largest in Latin America and Mexico one of few countries with a total GDP exceeding \$1 trillion.³⁰ Its economy is primarily a competitive free market; however, state-owned enterprises and domestic champions are extremely popular, especially in the oil and energy sectors, with policies favoring them prompting worry among international partners and at times leading to trade disputes.³¹

Mexico's establishment as a global trading hub can be traced back to the colonial era, during which the ports of Veracruz and Acapulco linked the transoceanic silver trade from Europe to Asia. Like other post-independence countries, Mexico initially pursued a developmental, protectionist model with import substitution and barriers to foreign investment in the early twentieth century.³² Although Mexico's economy rose to global prominence during the colonial period as an exporter of silver commodities, the

country's economy industrialized and shifted to manufacturing in the postwar era, leading to the "Mexican Miracle" of rapid development.³³ Since Mexico adopted its economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s—largely under presidents who had trained at U.S. universities in economics and political science—trade has been central to Mexico's interactions with other countries, and it has become a pillar of Mexico's overall economy, making up roughly 88 percent of its total GDP.³⁴ Mexico has free trade arrangements with more countries than the United States does.

Mexico's geographical proximity and socio-historical links to the United States have prompted much of its trading economy to be oriented toward its northern neighbor, particularly in the manufacturing sector. Manufacturing, which started as the famous low-wage maquiladoras and has transformed into more elaborate industries, continues to be the largest sector of Mexico's economy, with strengths in automotive, aerospace, consumer electronics, and medical device production. Mexico is home to large private companies like FEMSA, Grupo Bimbo, and Grupo Mexico; however, foreign companies and their Mexican subsidiaries are among the largest employers in the country. While domestic firms tend to cater primarily to the domestic market, foreign firms are outward-focused, often more competitive, and primarily export goods to the United States.

Beyond manufacturing, Mexico has significant mineral and oil reserves, and the country's state-owned oil enterprise Pemex, despite recent financial travails, is among the most valuable firms in Latin America. While mining commodity exports no longer form the backbone of Mexico's economy, its mineral wealth provides opportunities in high-value supply chains like electric vehicles and semiconductors. The state of San Luis Potosi alone produces roughly 63 percent of the global supply of fluorspar, a mineral that is critical for the process of etching semiconductor wafers.³⁵ The state of Sonora hosts one of the largest reserves of lithium in the world, although its terrain and criminal environment makes the process of extraction challenging, compounded by legal regulatory barriers established by Lopez Obrador's nationalization of lithium.³⁶

Mexico's economic relationship to non-Western powers including China has evolved over time. China's rise and the U.S. push to nearshore manufacturing production has attracted Chinese suppliers into Mexico to take advantage of U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) provisions and

bypass U.S. restrictions on Chinese imports. Chinese FDI into Mexico has skyrocketed over the past decade, rising from \$38 million in 2011 to \$386 million in 2021.³⁷ In 2023, China announced \$12.6 billion in new investments in the country.³⁸ Unlike in much of Latin America, where China's investments aim to secure access to commodity exports, investments in Mexico are concentrated in services and advanced manufacturing. Border states like Nuevo Leon have seen particularly significant investment from Chinese suppliers of electronic vehicle components, largely to take advantage of existing infrastructure for automobile manufacturing and China's dominance in refining and producing lithium-ion batteries.³⁹ Mexico has also made deals with Huawei to expand its public Wi-Fi and fiber-optic cable networks, increasing internet access across Mexico despite privacy concerns. Huawei's market expansion is driven in part by its ability to mitigate risk through Chinese state subsidies, making it the cheapest option for telecoms hardware in Mexico and granting it almost unhindered market access after Mexico's telecoms giant, América Mavil, named it a "trusted vendor."⁴⁰

Neither fully Global North or Global South, Mexico actively participates in multilateral and global economic institutions. Upon ratifying NAFTA, Mexico was the first Latin American country to join the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has since only been joined by Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica. Mexico is likewise a member of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and joined the Grupo 23 in 2002 to advocate for trade liberalization in the agriculture sector. Mexico was a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) from 1982 to 1985, and since 2006 it has been a member of OPEC+. Through its membership in the G20, Mexico has worked to promote greater social inclusion and equity in development finance for the Global South.⁴¹

GREAT POWER COMPETITION

Mexico was one of the first countries in Latin America to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1972. Its ties with China have been expanding since the 2000s, alongside China's turn toward greater global economic engagement. With Mexico, China's economic engagement is based on North American supply chains. However, the relationship is unbalanced, as Mexico imports nearly 10 times the value that it exports to China.⁴² In 2013, Mexico and China

signed an agreement to participate in a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” and the two countries have utilized the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) forum and APEC to promote political and economic cooperation.⁴³ A more recent problem is the concern that Chinese investments target Mexico as a backdoor to bypass tariffs and take advantage of favorable USMCA provisions.⁴⁴ Mexico is currently facing the challenge of balancing U.S. interest in nearshoring supply chains with China’s growing investments in North American supply chains. So far, Mexico has refrained from joining the Belt and Road Initiative or the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, likely in an effort to calm U.S. concerns about China.

Mexico’s relationship with Russia is more limited but perhaps even more complicated. While it condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in the United Nations and even presented its own version of a “peace plan,” Mexico has declined to impose sanctions on Russia and has remained largely neutral in the conflict overall.⁴⁵ In March 2022, Mexico’s Chamber of Deputies launched a Mexico-Russia friendship caucus, which received pushback from AMLO’s Foreign Affairs Ministry.⁴⁶ In 2023, AMLO again caught U.S. attention when he invited Russian troops to participate in the country’s Independence Day parade.⁴⁷ There have long been rumors that Mexico City is a key node in Russia’s espionage network harkening back to the Cold War, when it was a top destination for Soviet spies; under the AMLO presidency, Russia has increased its diplomatic presence in Mexico City, with many speculating that additional personnel could be conducting espionage. In economic terms, Mexico is Russia’s largest trading partner in Latin America; Russia exports metals, chemicals and plastics and rubber materials.⁴⁸ For its part, Mexico exports consumer and capital goods, as well as machinery and electronics to Russia. Bilateral trade between the two countries decreased year-on-year between November 2023 and November 2024 from \$3.08 million to \$2.33 million⁴⁹. In terms of NATO expansion and alliance politics, Mexico is neither a member of NATO nor is it designated as a major non-NATO ally. It has said little about the debate over NATO enlargement, but AMLO once criticized NATO’s military aid to Ukraine, accusing it of prolonging the war.⁵⁰

Of course, Mexico’s other most important relationship—that with the United States—is often seen as dynamic, complicated, and even a love-hate relationship. Years of interaction between the two countries have yielded sig-

nificant accomplishments on U.S.-Mexico bilateral relations but have also created areas of friction. Mexico and the United States have cooperated on shared security challenges through frameworks like the Merida Initiative (2008-2021), the Bicentennial Framework (2021-present), and the High-Level Security Dialogue (2021-present).⁵¹ Fora such as the North American Leaders Summit have further established working committees on important issues like labor mobility, educational exchanges, migration, and semiconductor industry promotion.

On sensitive topics such as drugs and weapons trafficking and migration policy, Mexicans often interpret little to no desire from the United States to acknowledge its role in the matter, despite rhetoric touting “shared responsibility.”

However, unlike China, which presents itself as a partner and Global South peer, the United States oftentimes is perceived as an imposing power. On sensitive topics such as drugs and weapons trafficking and migration policy, Mexicans often interpret little to no desire from the United States to acknowledge its role in the matter, despite rhetoric touting “shared responsibility.” On gun trafficking, for example, U.S. gun manufacturers make up seven out of the top ten companies whose guns are most frequently seized in Mexico’s war against the cartels.⁵² Operations conducted by the U.S. government such as “Fast and Furious,” which allowed guns to be sold to criminal organizations in Mexico to build a legal case against the groups, further exacerbated the waves of violence ravaging communities throughout the country.⁵³ While U.S. representatives have refused to vote to curtail the sales of semiautomatic weapons and high-capacity magazines, the same representatives have advocated for kinetic action against drug cartels in Mexico which would directly violate Mexican sovereignty.

VISIONS OF GLOBAL ORDER

When conceiving visions of the global order, contemporary Mexico has no appetite for leadership. Acute security crises, an epidemic of inequality, and the reality of being

south of the U.S. border serve as self-constraint. This lack of desire for global leadership may also stem from Mexico's espousal of a foreign policy of nonintervention: a vision of a world in which every country should be left alone to exert sovereignty over its own territory, which has oftentimes left it at odds with its powerful neighbor. Mexico famously declined to support resolutions related to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, declaring it an abrogation of international law, and condemned the subsequent war declared in 2003. In the United Nations, Mexico has criticized the use of veto power by members of the security council, and while it did condemn the invasion of Ukraine, it has done little to sever relations with Russia or put pressure on Putin.⁵⁴ In Mexico's view of the world, Russia is not a pariah state in the international system, but rather a country pursuing its national interests like any other.

Mexico has sought to assert its regional leadership, competing primarily with Brazil. Mexico has a long history of playing an outsized role in international legal efforts to support human rights, rules, and norms in the international order. For instance, it was one of the 51 states that founded the United Nations. Mexico has utilized its position in multilateral organizations to promote core foreign policy priorities codified in the Mexican Constitution, which include self-determination of peoples; nonintervention; peaceful settlement of disputes; elimination of the threat or use of force in international relations; legal equality of states; international cooperation for development; respect, protection, and promotion of human rights; and the push for international peace and security.⁵⁵

Historically, Mexico has been an active participant in regional multilateral fora such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and CELAC. Mexico was a founding member of the OAS, and after the Cold War, it was an active member of the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission, one of the first efforts to coordinate policy responses to the narcotics crisis.⁵⁶ Mexico also led the working group that drafted the Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials, and it contributed financially to the Inter-American Human Rights System.⁵⁷

The OAS's analysis of the elections in Bolivia in 2019, which OAS found to be fair and Mexico viewed as the cause of the coup d'état against indigenous President Evo Morales, deteriorated its trust in the organization

and marked the start of a decisive and antagonistic turn between Mexico and the OAS. If Mexico had ambitions for a regional role, it quickly became evident that involvement in U.S.-centered multilateral institutions would not be the way to achieve it. This aversion did not come from a place of disdain but rather from a fear (likely unfounded) of U.S.-led soft intervention in these fora. AMLO, like Morales, claimed to have a mandate from a sector of the population that has long been neglected in Latin American politics, and AMLO has often referred to the OAS as an "interventionist" organization.⁵⁸

Disillusioned with the OAS, Mexico shifted its focus to CELAC. Created in 2011, CELAC seeks to serve as a counterweight to the OAS and increase the region's autonomy vis-à-vis the United States—notably, CELAC excludes both the United States and Canada. This new vehicle of multilateralism also opened the door for China to engage with the Southern Hemisphere in a forum free of its chief global competitor. The annual China-CELAC forum has established itself as an essential mechanism for China to pitch Latin America and the Caribbean on support for China-led initiatives, which often revolve around topics tied to its view of global order. Past topics have included global security and global development initiatives.

More recently, Mexico has led the CELAC grouping with the pro tempore presidency, promoting vaccine self-sufficiency and hosting the Third Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum, producing an important *Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Key Areas (2022-2024)* that still defines many of China's aims in the region today.⁵⁹ During Mexico's participation on the UN Security Council from 2021 to 2022, the country's three core priorities were outlined as (1) promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, (2) cooperation for sustainable development, and (3) avoidance of force in international conflict and the prevention of hegemony.⁶⁰

Mexico's greatest advocacy of a more rules-based order is perhaps in the trade space, partly because it has benefited from participation in a myriad of trade agreements. While Mexico has fewer trade agreements than the United States—13 in total—the agreements to which it is party comprise more countries. Mexico's free trade agreements include the USMCA, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the EU-Mexico Trade Agreement, the European Free Trade Association, the Mexico-Central

America Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the Pacific Alliance, the Mexico-Colombia FTA, the Mexico-Chile FTA, the Mexico-Peru FTA, the Mexico-Panama FTA, the Mexico-Bolivia FTA, the Mexico-Japan FTA, and the Mexico-Israel FTA. In trade matters, Mexico has supported the use of World Trade Organization dispute settlement mechanisms as the best way to resolve investment and trade conflicts.⁶¹

RECENT ACTIONS

Over the two decades preceding the Lopez Obrador administration, Mexico positioned itself as a key player in North America, at times allowing its relations with the broader Latin American region to take a back seat in its national priorities. In the early 2000s and 2010s, Mexico strengthened its ties to the United States and Canada through the establishment of institutions such as the North American Leaders Summit, as well as through policy actions to support U.S. priorities on migration enforcement and counternarcotics operations. With the signing of NAFTA and accession to the OECD and G20, Mexico has created deep links with the Western and Global North-led world order in a way that few other Global South countries can claim. In a similar vein to the United States' pivot to Asia, Mexico has taken steps to increase its orientation towards the Indo-Pacific region by joining APEC and the CPTPP, as well as by founding the Pacific Alliance alongside Chile, Colombia, and Peru. In 2026, Mexico will participate in the six-year review of USMCA alongside the United States and Canada and is expected to strongly support the renewal of the agreement in spite of contentions over labor, agricultural, and energy policies.⁶²

During the Lopez Obrador administration and the subsequent Sheinbaum administration, AMLO's Morena party consolidated power throughout Mexico. The country has taken steps to increase alignment with the Global South—at times subverting the priorities of its Global North partners. In 2023, Mexico joined the G77, signaling a reaffirmation of its self-identification with the Global South grouping of economies. Presidents Lopez Obrador and Sheinbaum have also emphasized the importance of CELAC as the best regional body and suggested that it could fully replace the OAS, calling for a deeper integration of Latin American countries under institutions that exclude the United States and Canada.⁶³ Lopez Obrador's support for CELAC as a replacement for the OAS to pro-

mote a Latin American agenda without U.S. influence aligned closely with his critical stance on U.S. policy towards the governments of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, demonstrated in his refusal to attend the Summit of the Americas in 2022 despite having the shortest trip to Los Angeles of any regional leader.⁶⁴ Lopez Obrador also assigned some level of blame to the United States and NATO expansion for the outset of the war in Ukraine, and his government maintained ties to Russia while lodging relatively tepid criticism of the invasion.⁶⁵ Mexico has maintained its support for multilateral institutions to resolve international conflicts, however, and operated within the UN system to handle its dispute with Ecuador following the latter country's violation of and ingress into its embassy in Quito.⁶⁶

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Despite moves toward closer alignment with the Global South, Mexico continues to work with the United States and other Global North countries on shared priorities like free trade and migration. This has been particularly true during the Sheinbaum administration, as she and President Donald Trump have worked closely together to negotiate tariff deals in return for stronger cooperation in combatting the flows of narcotics. Mexico's willingness to engage in limited collaboration with the United States can also be seen in its efforts to counter Chinese inroads into North American supply chains—in 2023, the United States and Mexico agreed to monitor inflows of foreign investments, largely in response to concerns over the security implications of Chinese investments, and this cooperation has continued.⁶⁷ Also in 2023, Mexico increased tariffs by 5-25 percent on 392 products from countries with which it does not have a free trade agreement, leading to tariffs on Chinese products that prompted a warning from China's Ministry of Commerce.⁶⁸ Most recently, the Mexican

Ministry of the Economy has indicated a desire to replace Chinese imports with domestically produced goods to be shipped to the United States.⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

From Mexico's resistance to colonial rule to its contemporary strategies for economic and political sovereignty, the country's journey has been characterized by a delicate balance between engagement with the Global North and solidarity with the Global South. While this position can be contradictory at times, it grants Mexico the opportunity to act as a bridge between both blocs—a true pivotal state. This equilibrium is not merely a reflection of historical grievances but a testament to Mexico's evolving role on the world stage. Mexico's growing economic prowess, as evidenced by its significant position in global trade, will likely provide it with greater bargaining power that it may use to diversify its international partnerships, most controversially with China. Efforts to navigate its historical tensions with the United States while fostering new diplomatic relationships with China and other global players will likely produce tensions in the short term but could develop and mature over the long run.

Mexico's path forward is fraught with obstacles, as increased competition between the United States and China begin to pressure it, but if Sheinbaum's presidency can successfully merge the lessons of Mexico's past with innovative solutions for the future, Mexico can transform its complex role into a source of strength and stability in the international community. ■

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ENDNOTES

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