

Mexico Is Making the Wrong Bet on Venezuela

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Lopez Obrador's tacit support for Maduro will diminish his political capital at home and abroad.

Mexico stands alone within the 14-country Lima Group in not recognizing Juan Guaido, leader of the National Assembly, as interim president of Venezuela. The nation doubled down on its tacit backing of President Nicolas Maduro by also [rejecting](#) the joint call from Spain, France, United Kingdom, Netherlands and other nations of the European Union, along with left-leaning Ecuador, Costa Rica and Uruguay, for a peaceful democratic transition through new and transparent elections. Rather than join some 50 democratic nations, Mexico has sided with a more autocratic bunch, Cuba, Russia, China and Turkey among them, proffering weak calls for dialogue along the lines of those that have failed many times in the past.

Mexico's about-face on Venezuela has surprised many. It wasn't just that Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, colloquially known as Amlo, rejected the previous administration's position: That has happened across many policy arenas. It was that he spurned a growing regional and indeed global consensus against the Maduro regime, and that he has eschewed domestic public opinion. Amlo's more callous take on the political goings-on in his South American neighbor will diminish his political capital at home and abroad.

Just weeks into Amlo's presidency, Venezuela's dismal situation exploded. With last May's rigged elections unrecognized by so many in and out of the country, the opposition rallied around the head of the National Assembly to take the helm and call new elections. Nearly all of Latin America, Canada, the United States and Europe backed the call.

In contrast, Mexico dusted off the "[Estrada Doctrine](#)," named after a 1930s foreign minister determined to stay out of the business of governments abroad (with the hope and expectation that they would return the favor). It grew out of an isolationist mindset, inward-looking economic development model and deep suspicion toward the United States. The basis for Mexican diplomacy during the military dictatorships of the 1970s, this doctrine went by the wayside over the last two decades as Mexico democratized and became more economically integrated into the world. It no longer fit with a diversified global manufacturing base and closer ties with the United States. Yet now Amlo has brought it back, declaring that supporting new elections is tantamount to illegal "interference" in Venezuela.

This retrograde foreign policy position goes against domestic public opinion. While Mexicans mostly care about their daily lives — [security](#), corruption, and jobs — when

asked about [Venezuela](#), more than half don't want their government to recognize the Maduro regime.

And Amlo and his foreign minister Marcelo Ebrard had to know their new position wouldn't win accolades to the north. Washington's strong anti-Maduro stance began under President Obama with individual sanctions against regime members, and has only expanded under the Trump administration.

To explain Amlo's solitary path (at least among the world's democracies), one doesn't have to buy into conspiracy theories about Venezuela funding his presidential campaign, as it reportedly did for Argentina's Cristina [Kirchner](#) in 2007. The victory of ideology over pragmatism suffices.

Many long-time loyalists of Amlo's Morena Party are Chavistas at heart. Yeidckol Polevnsky, his party's head, has long proclaimed her admiration for the [Venezuelan leader](#). Foreign policy advisor John Ackerman has [argued](#) that Maduro's Venezuela is more democratic than Mexico. And Paco Ignacio Taibo II, now head of Mexico's cultural institute, opines on Venezuela's [virtues](#).

Those searching for a pragmatic rather than dogmatic explanation might argue that by remaining "neutral," Mexico can help bring about a future resolution, becoming a peace broker as it once did during the 1980s Central American wars as a leader within the Contadora group.

Yet this time it is Mexico on the outside (as the United States was then), stymieing a regional consensus pushing for peaceful transition.

The fact is, Mexico doesn't have the financial or intelligence leverage that Russia, China or Cuba have to make a difference in what is to come in Venezuela. More likely the nation will be marginalized as the standoff unfolds.

Many have wondered which Amlo will govern: the pragmatic mayor or the nationalist firebrand. On Venezuela, one of the biggest foreign policy issues for the Western Hemisphere, it looks to be the latter, relegating Mexico to the wrong side of democracy and history.