

Outspoken Mexican president takes surprising approach to Trump

By Frederic Puglie

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Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador now says that the U.S. president 'has a vision I respect and consider legitimate'

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Six months into his first term, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has proved a study in contradictions: pragmatic and ideological, soft-spoken and uncompromising, omnipresent but hard to pin down.

But the leftist firebrand's unexpected and most consistent trait since taking office has been an almost deferential, soft-touch approach to his American counterpart, whose "Hispanophobia" [Mr. Lopez Obrador](#) routinely derided throughout his 2018 presidential run and in a book he titled "Listen Up, [Trump](#)."

The man who in mid-2017 told a Los Angeles crowd that he would "enforce our sovereign authority" by turning [Mexico's](#) diplomatic missions into "authentic law offices to defend migrants" now says President [Trump](#) "has a vision I respect and consider legitimate."

[Lopez Obrador](#) watchers say the president, long a confrontational figure on the Mexican political scene, has turned into a shrinking violet out of prudence and political reality. He has become one of a number of world leaders who have apparently decided the best way to handle [Mr. Trump's](#) most incendiary tweets is to ignore them.

In a striking case last month, [Mr. Trump](#) raged on Twitter when Mexican soldiers drew their guns on U.S. troops in a confusing confrontation along the border. He said the clash was probably a "diversionary tactic for drug smugglers."

From [Mexico City](#): crickets.

[Mr. Lopez Obrador](#) later blandly promised reporters that his government would investigate the incident.

"To me, it's prudence on his part," said Jose Del Tronco of Mexico City's Latin American Social Sciences Institute. "Believe it or not, foreign policy often depends on one-on-one diplomacy, on how presidents get along."

The Mexican leader's change of heart also may be born of necessity. Three-fourths of his country's exports go to the United States, and ratification of the updated NAFTA trade deal — signed the day before he took office in December — may hinge largely on [Mr. Trump's](#) enthusiasm for pushing it through Congress.

“Lopez Obrador needs to negotiate many things with the administration [and] doesn’t want to predispose Trump negatively,” Mr. Del Tronco said. “[He doesn’t] have much to gain from confrontation, but probably much to lose.”

Thus, when Mr. Trump threatened last month to close down the U.S.-Mexico over what he said was Mexico’s failure to stop migrant “caravans,” Mr. Lopez Obrador, not usually known as a man of few words, all but refused to comment.

Also, as Washington upped the ante to oust socialist Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, at least in theory an ideological ally whom Mr. Lopez Obrador invited to his inauguration, the Mexican president sidestepped that minefield with bland calls against “meddling.”

Despite his reputation over the decades as a leftist populist unafraid to disrupt the Mexican political establishment, it’s restraint that the 65-year-old former Mexico City mayor and three-time presidential contender has perfected through a political career he kicked off in the late 1980s.

“Lopez Obrador has a quieter character, if you will. He’s a man from the country,” Mr. Del Tronco said. “He noticed that confrontation is not a good strategy. ... In Mexico, there’s an adage that says, ‘He who gets upset loses.’”

Although polls show that up to 80% of Mexicans support the president whom most simply call by his initials, AMLO, his pragmatism has nonetheless disappointed some spoiling for a more confrontational attitude toward the pugnacious American president.

“With Trump, AMLO betrays his principles,” leading Mexican daily El Universal titled a scathing editorial last month. “Fearful, faint-hearted and at times even cynical, Mexico’s president, on this front, is not the man of principle he always promised to be.”

They occupy opposite ends of the political spectrum, but Mr. Trump and Mr. Lopez Obrador are not polar opposites in every respect.

Much like his American counterpart, Mr. Lopez Obrador seems to have little use for the news media. He doesn’t call it “fake” but “fifi,” a slang term that translates to “elite” or “snobby.”

“Trump’s and Lopez Obrador’s way of conceiving the political system is similar in their kind of contempt of the traditional political class,” Mr. Del Tronco said. “Donald Trump is much more of an ‘outsider’ president, of course. ... But that’s a similarity.”

Taking further inspiration, perhaps, Mr. Lopez Obrador in March used a rally of supporters in the Veracruz town of Poza Rica to reject criticisms of his early months in office.

“Raise your hand if you believe I need to reply every time President [Donald Trump](#) talks about [Mexico](#),” he challenged his audience, drawing cries of “No!”

“These are my people,” the president approvingly observed.

Domestic agenda

Although his amicable dealings with Washington have proved a surprisingly easy sell, troubles moving an ambitious domestic agenda increasingly threaten to turn into a headache for [Mexico City](#)’s new boss.

Though he signed a much-anticipated labor reform bill giving workers collective bargaining rights this month, resistance in the Senate hampers the equally high-profile rollback of former President Enrique Pena Nieto’s 2013 education reform. The upper house will likely reconsider the proposal after rejecting it May 1.

It’s unclear whether the president, who spends much of his time zigzagging the country on commercial flights, will find time to work the phones ahead of the vote.

Although his trademark morning news conferences define the day’s domestic debate, the freewheeling [Mr. Lopez Obrador](#) — again like [Mr. Trump](#) — can be his agenda’s own worst enemy, said Rodrigo Paez of the National Autonomous University in Mexico City.

“He exposes himself a lot — too much, I believe — because he talks too much,” Mr. Paez said. “He puts such a priority on direct contact with the people. ... He’s basically a 24-hour president, which is also a little worrisome.”

In the all-important fight against rampant violent crime, a 10% hike in homicide rates during his first three months in office quickly called [Mr. Lopez Obrador](#)’s efficacy into question just as he was pushing a controversial plan for national guard police units.

The president must be careful to not ignite an all-out drug war, Mr. Paez said. At the same time, if he wants to end a vicious cycle, he must fix [Mexico](#)’s structural problems and lack of public safety, said Johns Hopkins University economist Steve Hanke.

“In a place like [Mexico](#), not doing much is a disaster. ... The status quo is pretty much unacceptable,” Mr. Hanke said. “You want [Mexico](#) strong, not weak. You want [Mexico](#) safe, not unsafe.”

But investors still widely perceive [Mr. Lopez Obrador](#) as “not a free-market-friendly man,” and his populist proposals such as renationalizing key parts of the oil industry are precisely the wrong recipe, Mr. Hanke said.

A recent uptick in youth unemployment numbers is already sending an ominous message.

“You’ve got a bunch of young people who can’t get jobs; well, what do they do?” Mr. Hanke asked. “They go into the underground economy, they go into the criminality. They go someplace; they’ve got to eat.”

The Trump administration, he said, has shown little enthusiasm for helping jump-start [Mexico](#)’s economy, an impression underlined this month by a 17.5% tariff on Mexican tomato imports as the NAFTA replacement agreement languished on Capitol Hill.

Even that announcement couldn’t draw the Lopez Obrador government into an open break with [Mr. Trump](#).

Luz Maria de la Mora, a top trade adviser to the president, told reporters in [Mexico City](#) that she felt disappointed by the move.

“But the good news,” she said, “is that negotiations continue.”

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