

Why Mexico Belongs in North America

by Allison Fedirka - August 3, 2016

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Placing a country in the correct geopolitical framework is vital to understanding its behavior and its potential for acquiring power. At times, such placement is a much more complicated issue than meets the eye. A current case in point is **Mexico**, which on the surface appears to oscillate between North America and Latin America. The question of which category Mexico belongs in has tremendous geopolitical implications and based on our analytical framework, **we identify the country as part of North America**. Viewing it this way, we can begin to see how important Mexico is, how much of its potential as a regional and even global power has thus far gone untapped, and how that will change dramatically in the long term.

Many tend to lump Mexico in together with South and Central American states and refer to the region as "Latin America." Mexico is argued to belong in this group due to its colonial roots, its Spanish-speaking population and some shared cultural elements like Catholicism. While these elements factor into Mexico's national identity, we take the view that the country's geopolitical position is more influenced by its geography.

From a geopolitical perspective, Latin America is a poor label because it groups together countries facing fundamentally different situations. Instead, the Western Hemisphere should be viewed as North America and South America. North America stretches from Canada through Panama, while South America is the giant land mass that starts in Colombia and ends in Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost point in the Americas.

Three features make it practically impossible to traverse between these two regions: the narrowing of land from the Mexican state of Chiapas through Panama, the prevalence of dense tropical forests and the Andes Mountains in northern Colombia. Mexico shares a large land border with the United States, but is isolated from South America – a region that struggles to integrate into the global system and is essentially a giant island in the Southern Hemisphere. Therefore, from a strictly geographic point of view, Mexico lies firmly in North America.



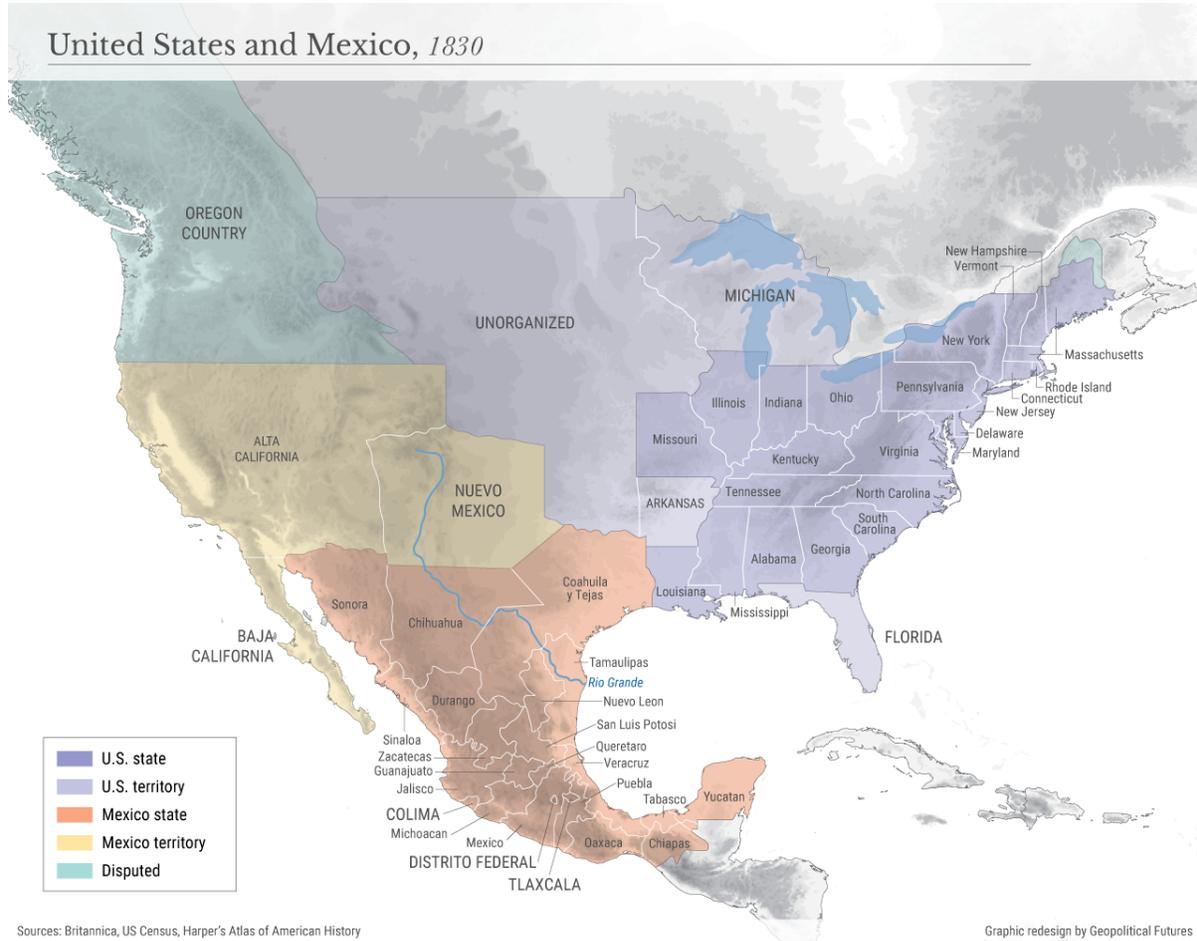
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Also, a unique characteristic shared by most North American countries is that they are bicoastal. Mexico enjoys direct port access to both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Historically, access to European markets – greatly facilitated by access to the Atlantic Ocean – was key to a country's ability to benefit from trade. However, in recent decades, emerging Asian markets and Pacific Ocean trade have grown. A country with dual ocean access is better situated to directly take advantage of major trade routes and markets. Mexico has yet to fully take advantage this access because approximately 80 percent of its exports go to the United States, rather than European or Asian markets. But that just means it has room to grow. Mexico shares this geographic characteristic with the U.S. and Canada. By comparison, none of South America's (or Latin America's for those who classify it that way) major economies are bicoastal.

These features that are common to the three largest North American countries have enormous geopolitical consequences. As explained in George Friedman's "The Next 100 Years," the centers of gravity in the geopolitical system slowly shift over time. There are long cycles measured in epochs of approximately 500 years, which can be subdivided into distinct eras. The European Epoch occurred from 1492, when the Europeans "discovered" the Americas, through 1991, when the Cold War ended. During this time, power in Europe rotated between countries, with England, Spain, France and Germany all featuring as the dominant power during different eras.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall came the rise of the American Era. The center of the world's geopolitical system now resides in North America. The region stands out for its dual ocean access and comparative calm at a time when Eurasia is in crisis. Currently, the United States is the dominant power in North America and the world, making this the American Era.

One cannot rule out the possibility that, in the future, the gap between the power of the United States and Mexico will narrow considerably. Consider that the rise of the United States as even the most powerful country on its own continent was not always assured. In 1800, Mexico covered much more territory and had a stronger military than the United States. At its peak in the late 18th century, Spanish-controlled Mexican territory expanded well into the heart of North America. This territory ran east-west from the banks of the Mississippi River to the Pacific coast of modern-day California and as far north as the current U.S.-Canada border.



Sources: Britannica, US Census, Harper's Atlas of American History

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Two hundred years later, the situation was completely reversed. Mexico's territory was first reduced by the Louisiana Purchase, signed by U.S. President Thomas Jefferson in 1803. In 1836, the Republic of Texas formed and broke away from the main territory, and 10 years later the Mexican-American War started. Mexico lost this war and its territory north of the Rio Grande, which established the country's modern borders.

History shows that over the course of an epoch, power can easily rotate between different countries. Mexico's location in North America along with its large population and large, resource-rich territory opens the possibility that the country will emerge as a potential power in the region in the long term. History has also taught us that over time, the seemingly impossible can become reality. While wealthy Spain was importing vast amounts of gold in the 1500s, it seemed crazy to imagine that 300 years later the sun would never set on the British Empire. Similarly, in 1800, Mexico seemed to have a decisive head start on dominating the North American continent. Two hundred years later, the

situation was completely reversed.

The potential for a much stronger Mexico – or even of a “Mexican Era” akin to the American Era in which we currently live – is generations away at this point. In our view, it will take the rest of the century for Mexico to capitalize on many of its advantages to emerge as a major regional and **even global power**. The processes affecting this change, however, are already in motion and one of the first ways to see them unfold is to recognize that Mexico’s geopolitical peers are not Brazil or Argentina but rather Canada and the United States. By viewing Mexico as a North American country, its potential to emerge as a regional power becomes more clear. It is also an important reminder that when trying to see far into the future using geopolitics as a tool, one must learn to ignore the conventional wisdom.

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