

# ANÁLISIS

## Formal Friendship, Real Suspicions: Diplomatic Relations between Mexico and South Korea, 1962-1987<sup>1</sup>

DOI: 10.32870/mycp.v13i38.340

José Luis León-Manríquez<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

**T**his article deals with the initiation and development of diplomatic relations between Mexico and the Republic of Korea. Both countries started relations in 1962, but in a rather idiosyncratic way. While South Korea immediately opened an embassy and appointed a resident ambassador, Mexico made a deliberate effort to keep bilateral contacts to a bare minimum. Thus, Mexico only opened its embassy in Seoul in 1978 and posted a resident ambassador until 1987. The text addresses the explanation of this asymmetric relation, posing as main hypothesis that, given the anti-imperialist lineages of its revolution, Mexico sought to establish a distance

- 
1. An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the 5th Kyung-Hee University-University of Guadalajara Workshop, *The Asia-Pacific relations in the context of the global economic crisis*, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, February 22-23, 2010. I wish to thank participants in the workshop for their kind comments. I also want to thank my Korean colleagues Kim Won-ho, Kwak Jae-sung, and Lim Hyo-sang for their helpful orientation during my research stay in Seoul in October-November, 2008. Usual caveats strongly apply.
  2. José Luis León-Manríquez is Professor at the Department of Politics and Culture at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco in Mexico City. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Columbia University, New York, and is a member (Level II) of the National Research System in Mexico. Contact: jll18@columbia.edu

from the international positions of the United States. This position did not entail, however, a preference for the DPRK. The situation would change over time. The successive *détentes* between the great powers in the 1970s and 1980s, the tensions between Mexico and North Korea due to Pyongyang's support of a Mexican guerrilla group, and the increased social, cultural and economic links between the two countries were the main factors for overcoming such distrust.

*Key words:* South Korea, ROK, Mexico foreign policy, diplomatic relations, Good Will Mission, North Korea, DPRK, Latin America, equidistance.

## **Resumen**

En el presente artículo se estudia el desarrollo inicial de las relaciones diplomáticas entre México y la República de Corea. Ambos países comenzaron su relación en 1962, pero de una manera muy peculiar. Mientras que Corea del Sur abrió inmediatamente una embajada y nombró un embajador residente, México hizo un esfuerzo deliberado para mantener los contactos bilaterales al mínimo indispensable. Así, México sólo abrió su embajada en Seúl en 1978 y nombró a un embajador residente hasta 1987. El texto busca explicar esta relación asimétrica, planteando como hipótesis principal que, habida cuenta de los linajes antiimperialistas de su revolución, México trataba de establecer una distancia respecto a las posiciones internacionales de Estados Unidos. Esta posición no implicaba, sin embargo, una preferencia por la RPDC. La situación cambiaría con el tiempo. Las sucesivas *detentes* entre las grandes potencias en los años setenta y ochenta, las tensiones entre México y Corea del Norte debido al apoyo de Pyongyang a un grupo guerrillero mexicano, y los crecientes vínculos sociales, culturales y económicos entre los dos países fueron los principales factores para la superación de esa desconfianza.

*Palabras clave:* Corea del Sur, República de Corea, política exterior de México, relaciones diplomáticas, Misión de Buena Voluntad, Corea del Norte, RPDC, América Latina, equidistancia.

## **Introduction**

South Korea is one of the most relevant economic and political partners of Mexico in the Asia Pacific region. For instance, in 2009 Mexico imported more goods from the Republic of Korea (ROK) than from all of the Latin American

countries together. However, this relationship did not always have the same importance for both countries. While the ROK and Mexico established diplomatic relations in 1962, Mexico only opened its embassy in Seoul in 1978, and appointed a resident ambassador until 1987. By contrast, the ROK opened an embassy in Mexico City from the very beginning of the diplomatic relations between both countries.

This paper analyzes the reasons of this asymmetry in the early stages of the bilateral relation, and investigates how this situation changed over the years. I explore the hypothesis that Mexico's initial "friendly distance" towards the ROK was not an intrinsic rejection to that country. It was, instead, a delicate balancing act, whereby Mexico City sought to establish a distance from the international positions of the United States. This situation would change over time. The successive *détentes* between the great powers in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the increased social, cultural and economic links between the two countries were the main explanatory factors of such a change.

### **South Korea and Mexico: between suspicion and geopolitical balances**

The analysis of the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Mexico must start from a basic fact, emphasized by Kim Won-Ho: between the division of the Korean peninsula in 1948 and the 1980s, the main objectives of the ROK's diplomacy were obtaining diplomatic recognition by the international community, winning the fierce competition with North Korea on all fronts, and defending its own national security.<sup>3</sup>

Let me start this story with the first President of South Korea, Syngman Rhee, who remained in office between 1948 and 1960. The United States thought that Rhee would lead a process of modernization of Korean politics and economy. Holding the prestige of an anti-colonial fighter, as well as having attended prestigious U. S. universities, Rhee seemed the best candidate to build the American dream in the ROK —i. e. a market economy melted with a democratic polity. However, Rhee's administration established a political

---

3. Kim, Won-Ho, "Korean relations with Latin America: policy goals and constraints." In Faust, Jörg, Mols, Manfred and Kim, Won-Ho, *Latin America and East Asia- Attempts at Diversification*, Korea Institute for International Economic Policy and LIT Verlag Münster, Seoul and Münster, Germany, 2005, p. 165.

system of dubious democratic orientation. The ideological construct to justify Rhee's authoritarianism was the threat of communism —specifically the version incarnated in neighboring North Korea. Washington, concerned for the same reasons that Rhee, did not hesitate to sacrifice democracy in the altar of political stability and anticommunism.

At a broader international level, and despite bearing the support of the United Nations (UN), which recognized South Korea as the only legitimate state in the Peninsula, Rhee did not show too much enthusiasm and diplomatic expertise to expand South Korean bilateral relations. Mexico,

The main objectives of the ROK's diplomacy were obtaining diplomatic recognition by the international community, winning the fierce competition with North Korea on all fronts, and defending its own national security

however, was one of the target countries for Seoul to establish diplomatic relations. Since 1949, the ROK contacted Mexican diplomats in Washington and New York, pushing them to submit proposals to Mexico City aimed at starting diplomatic relations. Invariably, Mexican diplomats were instructed to eschew such requests. Towards the end of Rhee's administration, Seoul had only been recognized by 13 countries. The main feature that South Korea shared with them was an irreducible anticommunism.<sup>4</sup>

After a series of student protests, discontent against the Rhee government provoked a coup in 1960. The new government of Chang Myun, whose discourse was progressive and liberal, had obtained the sympathy of the Kennedy administration. Washington ensured the new government that U. S. economic aid to the Republic of Korea would continue. Chang's government was also able to launch, in December 1960, the first five-year development plan in the nation's history.<sup>5</sup> Despite these achievements, domestic and

---

4. *Ibidem*.

5. Oh, John Kie-Chiang and Cho Oh, Bonnie Bongwan, *The Korean Embassy in America*, Hollym International, Seoul and Elizabeth, NJ, 2003, p. 73.

international political instability in South Korea continued. A few months later, in May 1961, Chang was ousted by a coup led by General Park Chung-hee.

By then, the Republic of Korea was a very poor country and, above all, showed very little prospect of future improvement. In the early 1960s, in fact, most economic studies of international organizations regarded the ROK as a “basket case”, and its future was foreseen grayer than most countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America; meaningfully enough, the latter was labeled as “the continent of hope”. Using retrospectively the methodology proposed by Robert Barro to detect countries able to grow rapidly in the 1960s, nearly three dozen countries (including Guyana, Jamaica, Paraguay and Sri Lanka), were perceived more suited than Korea to become “economic miracles”.<sup>6</sup> For the period 1960-1985, the ROK had only 1 chance in 11 of recording gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates above 5%, needed to qualify as a “miracle”.

In the days after the coup of May, 1961, Park Chung-hee addressed the situation in a gloomy mood: “I felt, honestly speaking, as if I had been given a pilfered house or a bankrupt firm to manage... Around me I could find little hope. The outlook was bleak”.<sup>7</sup> To overcome this unfavorable prognosis, the new government immediately restructured the bureaucratic apparatus, pressed business elites to support the economic program of Park, maintained and strengthened institutional mechanisms for economic planning, and began to use the nationalized banks to channel credit to strategic sectors. Furthermore, Park made important changes to the import substitution industrialization strategy (ISI) followed by Rhee. While the new strategy kept some features of ISI, the new government also introduced a strong emphasis on export promotion.

Unlike his predecessors, Park sought to complement the changes in the economic model with a more active foreign policy. With the support of the U. S.,<sup>8</sup> South Korea launched a diplomatic campaign, aimed at recruiting political

---

6. Easterly, William, “Explaining Miracles: Growth Regressions Meet the Gang of Four.” In Sato, Takatoshi and Krueger, Anne O. (eds.), *Growth Theories in the Light of Asian Experience*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995, pp. 269-271.

7. Quoted by Clifford, Mark, *Troubled Tiger. Businessmen, Bureaucrats, and Generals in Korea*, M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, N.Y. and London, 1999, p. 45.

8. During the long presidency of Park Chung-hee (1961-1979), the U. S. support would continue, although at times Washington came to feel uncomfortable by the South Korean government’s authoritarian spirit. Such was the case in the months after May 1961, the March 1963 announcement which recognized that the military government would stay longer in power,

allies and getting new markets for ROK's exports in the world. Given the political configuration of Latin America and the favorable economic growth in the region, one of the goals of Park's diplomacy was the pursuit of diplomatic allies and trading partners in Latin America. Unlike Africa and Asia, where socialist or "third options" proliferated, in Latin America there were plenty of right-wing military regimes, which would soon become natural partners of Park's South Korea.

In June 1961, just weeks after the successful *putsch* of Park, the diplomatic representation of the Republic of Korea in the United States contacted Mexican ambassador in that country, Antonio Carrillo Flores. The goal was to inform him that a Good Will South Korean Mission would visit the Americas in the following months; the delegation would be led by Kim Dong-Ha, Ambassador at Large and member of the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction. The South Korean diplomats in Washington sought to include Mexico in the trip, warning Carrillo Flores that the newly established military government would return power to civilians "once it finishes its undergoing cleanup effort".<sup>9</sup>

The Mexican response was far from enthusiastic. Telegraphic instructions of the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs Manuel Tello to the Embassy in Washington showed a clear evasiveness:

[...] Ask Korea's Charge d' Affaires what would be the specific purposes of the Good Will Mission and what the approximate date of the visit, as we have scheduled several similar missions and we would not want them to interfere each other. Of course, the visit could not be done in the upcoming months.<sup>10</sup>

The polite refusal of Mexico to welcome the South Korean delegation was anything but innocent. While Mexico endorsed UN recognition of Seoul as the legitimate representative of the Korean government, it did not want to get too close with South Korea. Although Mexico had a "soft authoritarian" political regime, it sought to highlight his progressive roots, anchored in a social

---

or the Yushin reform of 1973, which deepened the repressive features of Park's government. Notwithstanding its occasionally stressed relation with Park, Washington always accepted the successive *fait accomplis* of the South Korean President, in exchange of his loyalty in the struggle against communism. See Oh and Cho Oh, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-104.

9. Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (Genaro Estrada Diplomatic Archive of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, henceforth AHGE-SRE), III/312.5 (51.9:72), Telegram from Antonio Carrillo Flores to Manuel Tello, June 15, 1961.
10. *Ibidem*, Telegram from Manuel Tello to Antonio Carrillo Flores, June 26, 1961.

revolution. While the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) had not been socialist, it featured an anti-imperialist discourse. Thus, Mexico tried to distance itself from international policy guidelines stemming from Washington. In a complex political balancing act, Mexico wanted to keep distance from authoritarian, anti-communist and U. S.-supported political regimes, but was fearful of being perceived as an ally of Washington's enemies.

Parenthetically, Mexico also rejected continuous proposals of forging closer ties with Pyongyang. Most of these insinuations came from Havana, as long as the Cuban leader, Fidel Castro, was a good friend of both North Korean and Mexican rulers. Regardless its appreciation for Castro (a sort of younger and more rebellious brother of those Mexican rulers who still paid lip service to nationalism and revolution), Mexico's government was far from an ally of either China or the Soviet Union.

Hence in August, 1961, an always polite Mexico rejected to host a group of top North Korean diplomats, headed by the Vice Prime Minister. As the ROK had done some weeks before, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was planning an Economic and Cultural Mission throughout Latin America, aimed at recruiting political partners. North Korea made contact with the Mexican Ambassador in Havana, Gilberto Bosques, who forwarded documents on DPRK's mission to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, SRE). In his response to Bosques, the Director General of the Mexican Foreign Service wielded two reasons for rejecting such a visit. On the one hand, Mexico City did not have diplomatic relations with Pyongyang. On the other hand, and sticking to international law principles, the Mexican government invoked the Resolution 195 (III) issued by the UN General Assembly on December 12, 1958. The resolution established that the only legitimate government in the Korean Peninsula was that of the Republic of Korea.<sup>11</sup>

Back to the ROK, the Good Will Mission in the Americas finally took place in July and August, 1961. There was a sharp contrast between the Mexican skepticism towards the South Korean mission and the warm reception it found in most of Central and South American countries, which were ideologically sympathetic to the Park's regime. During its long journey, the "Good Will Mission" visited, among other countries, the United States, Canada, Haiti,

---

11. AHGE, III/312.5 (51.9:72)/30581, from Alfonso de Rosensweig-Díaz to Gilberto Bosques, August 30, 1961.

Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Some of those countries hosted the Korean delegation by mere diplomatic courtesy; others, as a result of direct suggestions from Washington. Most of them, however, did it by self-interest, given their natural affinity with a country endowed with a military, anti-Communist and pro-American regime. As Alain Rouquié reminds, in the early 1960s Latin America was experiencing a swift transition from civilian to military rule: between 1962 and 1966, nine countries of the region (including influential Argentina and Brazil) underwent military coups.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, and just to mention one case, in Nicaragua the South Korean delegation was received with high-level honors by the President, Luis A. Somoza, and the Head of the National Guard, Anastasio Somoza.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the diplomatic objectives that it pursued, the mission of the South Korean delegation through the Americas achieved encouraging results. As an immediate outcome of the tour, South Korea managed to deepen its relations with countries like Brazil, and succeeded in establishing diplomatic relations with other countries in the region. On a broader level, the strategy of setting bilateral relations worldwide would be quite successful: by 1965, the ROK was recognized by 76 countries.<sup>14</sup>

However, the puzzle of the Latin American strategy of Seoul seemed to be incomplete without Mexico, then considered by many analysts as one of the “elder brothers” of the rest of Latin America. Therefore, South Korean diplomacy did not slacken in its attempts to initiate formal diplomatic relations with Mexico. In August 1962, towards the end of the goodwill tour, the head of the Good Will Mission met with Daniel Escalante, Mexico’s ambassador in Nicaragua.

Stating that Mexico was a very influential country in Latin America, as well as “a champion for the cause of democracy”, South Korean envoy to the ambassador expressed his disappointment with Mexico’s refusal to welcome the group. He also remarked that the purpose of the tour had been to lay

---

12. Rouquié, Alain, *The military and the State in Latin America*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987, p. 344.

13. “Visita a Nicaragua de su excelencia el señor Dong-Ha Kim.” In *La Prensa Gráfica*, Managua, Nicaragua, August 11, 1961.

14. Stone-MacDonald, Donald, *U. S.-Korean Relations from Liberation to Self-Reliance: the Twenty-Year Record*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1992, p.113.



the groundwork for the establishment of ROK's embassies in Latin America, "in order to strengthen ROK's position and to be able to counteract more forcefully, the penetration and permanent aggression from North Korea".<sup>15</sup> In his response to Escalante's report, the General Director of the Mexican Foreign Service, Alfonso de Rosenzweig-Díaz, praised the discretion of the ambassador in Managua and added: "The Government of Mexico thinks that is inappropriate to maintain relations with countries in which capitals, for practical reasons, we are unable to open diplomatic missions".<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps due to pressures from Washington, this skeptical position would change soon—if only partially—. Indeed, on January 26, 1962, the Republic of Korea and Mexico established formal diplomatic relations. Immediately, South Korea opened its embassy in Mexico City and appointed Lee Sung-ka as ambassador. The new embassy would also handle concurrencies with Central American countries, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica. Mexico, meanwhile, kept a low profile with respect to Seoul, and decided that relations with South Korea would be served, concurrently, by the Mexican Embassy in Japan. As I shall point out later, it would take 16 long years before Mexico opened its Embassy in Seoul, and almost 25 years to appoint a resident ambassador. Clearly, this asymmetry is unusual in diplomatic relations.

### **Rationale and development of a unilateral love**

What explains, then, what the former ambassador of the ROK to Mexico, Koo Choong-Hoi has called "long period of patient waiting and unilateral love"?<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, there is no doubt that the South Korean desire to establish relations with Mexico could be explained by the urgency of having allies in good quantity and quality for its diplomatic war with North Korea. The reluctance of the Mexican side needs further reflection. In the words of former Foreign Minister José Ángel Gurría, the explanation is more geographical than political: "In this first stage, relations between such different countries, so far

---

15. AHGE III/312.5 (51.9:72), From Daniel Escalante to Manuel Tello, August 16, 1961.

16. *Ibidem*, From Alfonso de Rosenzweig-Díaz to Daniel Escalante, September 9, 1961.

17. Koo, Choong-Hwoi, "En el 35 aniversario de relaciones diplomáticas de Corea y México." In Garza Limón, Cecilio (coord.), *México y Corea. Testimonios de amistad*, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Mexico City, 1997, p. 87.

apart geographically, and so focused on their respective geographical areas, were still very recent and rather limited to formal grounds”.<sup>18</sup>

A similar explanation is offered by the retired ambassador, Shim Kook-Woong, former minister of the ROK embassy in Mexico, who argues that in the 1960s “Mexico was more interested in the U. S. and Europe than in Asia and Korea.”<sup>19</sup> The former Mexican ambassador to Japan, concurring with South Korea, Sergio González Gálvez, offers a somewhat different explanation: “According to its best traditions, Mexico had an equidistant relationship between the two divided states (at least, it tried to show impartiality)”.<sup>20</sup>

The latter seems the most appropriate explanation, although the other cannot be utterly discarded. Forced to express its Western affiliation through a relationship with Seoul; prevented by vocation to take sides with Pyongyang, and engaged in seeking a political differentiation with Washington, the best option for Mexico was to reduce its formal ties with South Korea to the bare minimum required to avoid unnecessary conflicts with the United States.

Despite the Mexican government’s diplomatic caution, in the 1960s and 1970s contacts between the two countries grew both at governmental and societal levels. In this area, for instance, there was a continuous presence of Mexican Catholic missionaries in the Republic of Korea. In November 27, 1962, two members of the Missionaries of Guadalupe began their religious work in Pusan, at the request of the archbishop of that city. The Marists, meanwhile, settled in South Korea since the mid-1960s and early 1970s; several of them taught courses on culture, history and Mexican society in universities such as Hankuk Foreign Studies and Dankuk in Seoul, and Hyo Song in Taegu. Clarisse’s settled in Taejon in 1987, while the Franciscans, the Sisters of Perpetual Help and the Jesuits launched South Korean missions that, ultimately, had no significant following.<sup>21</sup>

In the realm of diplomatic relations, educational and cultural cooperation showed some significant advances. For instance, in April 29, 1966, the

---

18. Gurría Treviño, José Ángel, “Prólogo.” In *Ibidem*, p. 10.

19. Personal interview with Ambassador Shim Kook-Woong, Seoul, Republic of Korea, November 4, 2008.

20. González Gálvez, Sergio, “Memorias.” In Garza Limón, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

21. On the presence of Mexican missionaries in South Korea, see Wimer, Alfonso, “Hermano marista mexicano en Corea”; Arriaga Méndez, Francisco, “Misioneros de Guadalupe, 1964”; Ramírez Ramírez, Eduardo Armando; Cabral, Gerardo, “Los 20 años de un sacerdote guadalupano en Corea”. All of them included in *Ibidem*. See also personal interview with ambassador Shim Kook-Woong, *loc. cit.*

Cultural Agreement between both countries came into force. In 1967 the National University of Mexico (UNAM) and Hankyong University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) signed a cultural exchange agreement. The signing of this cooperation arrangement laid down favorable conditions to establish and enhance exchanges in the cultural field. The UNAM-HUFS agreement opened the door for Mexican students and scholars to be hosted by Korean universities and vice versa. The first UNAM exchange student from Mexico was Alfredo Romero Castilla. After returning to Mexico, Romero Castilla would become a leading Mexican expert on Korea.<sup>22</sup>

About the same time, and facing the imminent celebration of the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico, the South Korean government built and presented to Mexico, in March of that year, a replica of a pavilion found in the Central Garden City of Seoul. The Korean Pavilion is still located on Reforma and Molino del Rey in Chapultepec, the main park in Mexico City.

Mexican music also had its imprint on the emerging bilateral relations: South Korea welcomed with the same glad fever as Japan the visit of Mexican romantic singers “Los Panchos” and “Los Diamantes” as well as other expressions of Mexican music. After many years, Korean *karaoke* rooms still feature such Mexican songs as *Bésame mucho*, *La Bamba* and *Las Golondrinas*, just to mention a few of them. Finally, throughout the 1960s, Mexico received several applications and issued the appropriate permits to allow the entry of South Korean boats wishing to visit Mexican ports for refueling purposes.

In the 1970s, the economy brought new opportunities for the development of bilateral relations. Both The ROK and Mexico attempted strategies for heavy and chemical industrialization. In both cases, import substitution industrialization had become exhausted. Similarly, in the two countries, financing further industrialization created fiscal imbalances, bred inflationary tendencies and forced governments to contract increasing amounts of foreign debt from international banks. However, while Mexico received large funds from oil revenue, South Korea experienced firsthand the increases in energy prices. At the end of that decade, the differences between the two countries outweighed the similarities: by the early 1980s South Korea had managed to become a major producer of steel, electronics and machinery, while Mexico continued to rely on foreign technology and investment to produce this kind of goods.

---

22. The testimony of Alfredo Romero Castilla can be found in *Ibidem*, pp. 351-352.

Since the early 1970s it was increasingly clear that South Korea was becoming a high economic growth country, both in relative and absolute terms. The dynamism of the South Korean economy, coupled with the enduring diplomatic efforts of Seoul, and the personal interest of Mexico's ambassador to Japan, Gustavo Romero Kolbeck, for strengthening bilateral ties with the ROK, contributed to the gradual modification of the cautious Mexican position. In October, 1972, the Trade Counselor of the Embassy of Mexico in Japan made a 10-day visit to the South Korean capital in order to discuss the possibilities of bolstering bilateral economic exchanges.<sup>23</sup>

The following year Romero Kolbeck, an economist by training, submitted to the SRE studies on the potential costs of opening a Mexican representation in Seoul. SRE's response was that if the Mexican Foreign Trade Institute (Instituto Mexicano de Comercio Exterior, IMCE) deemed it appropriate, Mexico could establish, at most, a trade office in Seoul. If approved, this office would depend on the Trade Counselor of the Mexican Embassy in Tokyo. IMCE, however, was lukewarm to the proposal. Addressing the inadequacy of Trans-Pacific shipping, the low volume of bilateral trade, and the lack of Mexican entrepreneurs with knowledge on South Korean markets, IMCE expressed that bilateral economic issues might be addressed with regular visits to Seoul by the Trade Counselor of Mexico in Tokyo.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the skepticism of IMCE and different officers within SRE, some Mexican diplomats were still interested on expanding bilateral relations with the ROK. In October, 1973, Mexico's ambassador in Turkey, Alfonso Castro-Valle, visited South Korea, attending an invitation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kim Yong-shik. In the report of his trip to Seoul, Castro Valle (who had been the first concurrent ambassador of Mexico in South Korea) rehearsed radically different findings from those previously made by other Mexican officers.

The diplomat wrote: "It is a real surprise to get to Seoul and see the progress, the cleanliness of the streets, the enormous progress and discipline of the inhabitants of the country... I saw the spirit of unity of purpose of the Koreans, where each one feels as a determining factor for the country's progress". After

---

23. AHGE III-6001-18, "Oficina Comercial de México en Corea". From Manuel Álvarez Luna to Alfonso de Rosensweig-Díaz, May 15, 1973.

24. AHGE III-6001-18, "Oficina Comercial de México en Corea". From Raúl Valdés Aguilar to Gustavo Romero Kolbeck, July 30, 1973.

providing indicators on GDP growth, GDP per capita and South Korean exports, Castro-Valle wrote: “it would not be a blunder for us to open an embassy in that country... we could increase our trade if we had an office there.”<sup>25</sup>

In addition to Castro-Valle’s enthusiastic comments, a key reason that must have pushed Mexico to change its cautious view of the ROK dwells in the political tensions between North Korea and Mexico. Such conflict arose from Pyongyang’s training of three successive groups of Mexican guerrillas in 1968-1970. These groups were originally organized by Mexican classmates at the Patricio Lumumba University in Moscow. Even before the repression of the Mexican government to the student movement in October 2, 1968, these and other radicalized groups had come to the conclusion that a peaceful change was not possible in Mexico, advocating instead for a socialist revolution.

The nucleus of students from Lumumba managed to convince other cells of youngsters in Mexico to create a full-fledged guerrilla. The leaders gathered a meaningful group and created the Movement of Revolutionary Action (Movimiento de Acción Revolucionaria, MAR). After its inception, in 1966, MAR looked for ideological support and military training in the socialist countries, but its initial efforts were rather fruitless. Ironically, MAR did not seek support from the USSR, as long as they distrusted Nikita Khrushchev’s theses on peaceful coexistence. The new guerrilla looked for support elsewhere. According to the memories of one of the MAR’s founders:

International solidarity was indispensable. But who could help us? It was not easy. The Mexican government, the only one in Latin America with a solidarity position with Cuba, was the early winner of the applause and sympathy of the island’s rulers. No “treat” with us was feasible. Vietnam, in war with the Yankee imperialism, concentrated its efforts and resources on this task. We were not able to iron out a deal with the Algerian comrades. The People’s Republic of China was another option. Initially, the comrades did not close the door... but tried to make of us, above all, divulgers of *Pekin Informa* and the Mao Zedong thought.<sup>26</sup>

Unexpectedly, the only real support that MAR could get in the socialist field came from the DPRK. Exhaustive military and ideological training started

---

25. AHGE, III-6001-18, “Oficina Comercial de México en Corea”. From Jorge Castro-Valle to Emilio O. Rabasa, October 18, 1973.

26. Pineda Ochoa, Fernando, *En las profundidades del MAR (El oro no llegó de Moscú)*, Plaza y Valdés, Mexico City, 2003, p. 45.

in late 1968. By late 1970, 53 members of MAR had gone back to Mexico to implement the guerrilla warfare they had learned in a military facility, located 50 kilometers far from Pyongyang. MAR was technically well-prepared and undertook some bank robberies. However, its social support did not grow drastically and some divisions arose among its members. Moreover, Mexican intelligence was able to detect, neutralize and fiercely repress MAR and other guerrilla movements. On March 15, 1971, a group of 19 members of MAR was caught by the federal intelligence services in the city of Jalapa. In the ensuing investigations, the guerrilla cadres reckoned that they had been trained in North Korea.

The incident was widely covered by the international press, including *The New York Times* and *Reader's Digest*.<sup>27</sup> The Mexican government blamed the USSR as the ultimate responsible for training MAR, and expelled five Soviet diplomats. Given the politico-ideological dispute between the two Koreas, the ROK sought to take advantage of the MAR's episode, by showing Mexico's government and public opinion the difference between a loyal Seoul and a double-faced Pyongyang. On March 16, 1971, the South Korean Embassy in Mexico issued a press communiqué that warned: "North Korea is the shrewdest regime of International Communism and the best linked to the so-called Tri-Continental Organizations settled in Cuba. Together with the Red China, Russia and Cuba, it is astutely devoted to guerrilla and sabotage worldwide and especially in Latin American countries".<sup>28</sup> Given the challenge of the DPRK to Mexican political stability, the ROK expected Mexican diplomacy to halt its equidistance policy towards the Korean Peninsula, taking a more pro-Seoul stance.

### **Embassy, ambassador and trade: in the path of a reciprocated love**

In view of all of the above developments, in the second half of the 1970s the Mexican ice towards Seoul began melting, albeit in a rather gradual fashion.

---

27. "Mexico sees plot by North Koreans." In *The New York Times*, March 16, 1971, p. 9; Barron, John, "Complot contra México". In *Selecciones del Reader's Digest*, Mexico City: November, 1971, pp. 145-146.

28. Quoted by Oikión Solano, Verónica, "El Movimiento de Acción Revolucionaria. Una historia de radicalización política," In Oikión Solano, Verónica and García Ugarte, María Eugenia (eds.), *Movimientos armados en México, siglo XX (vol. II)*, El Colegio de Michoacán and CIESAS, Zamora, Mich. and Mexico City, 2006, p. 445.

In 1977 the South Korean government submitted to its Mexican counterpart the draft of an agreement on fisheries cooperation, which ultimately was not signed by Mexico City. On the Mexican side, attention to the ROK's economic growth continued, and additional reports on this matter were prepared by the Mexican Embassy in Japan.

An excellent document for the information of top officers at SRE, titled *Realidades y potencialidades de relaciones comerciales entre México y Corea* (*Realities and potentialities of trade relations between Mexico and Korea*), dated on January 25, 1977, drew attention about South Korea's economic dynamism, its strict compliance with all of its five-year plans, and its success in building such industries as shipbuilding and electronics.

The report recognized that bilateral trade was still lean (less than 1% of Mexican exports were sent to the ROK), that trade balance favored widely Korea, and that Mexican entrepreneurs were wasting opportunities to become suppliers of raw materials for the ascending Korean industry. The report considered, however, that South Korea would be a good partner to diversify Mexico's international economic relations. While the memorandum did not recommend explicitly the opening of a Mexican embassy in Seoul, the text called for seeking "more active and fruitful relations between our countries".<sup>29</sup>

In March of the same year, the foreign minister of South Korea visited Mexico City. During the official dinner, Mexico agreed to send Eduardo Gutiérrez Evia, Legal Adviser of the Foreign Ministry, to study the possibilities of establishing an embassy in Seoul.<sup>30</sup> In 1978, Mexico decided at last to open its embassy in the ROK. Although SRE appointed two members of the Mexican Foreign Service to work full-time at the small office in Seoul, the representation continued to depend on the Mexican ambassador to Japan.

Although the ambassador was absent from Seoul, the new embassy started to generate its own dynamic of work. Sooner than later, the new embassy concluded a bilateral agreement on visa suppression, founded the Mexico's honorary consulate in the city of Anyang, supported the creation of the

---

29. AHGE, V/401.1(72:519.2)/35745, "Oficina Comercial de México", *Realidades y potencialidades de las relaciones comerciales entre México y Corea*, January 25, 1977.

30. López Narváez, Froylán M., "México y Corea del Sur." In *Proceso*, No. 0021-33, March 28, 1977.

Association of Mexico-Korea Friendship and organized meetings between businessmen from both countries.<sup>31</sup>

As in the case of Mexico's relationship with Japan in the early 1980s, oil would become a pillar of the relationship with the Republic of Korea. After the second oil *shock* in 1979, the business sector and the South Korean government shared a concern for ensuring a stable supply of energy, trying to diversify its dependence on oil imported from the Middle East.

In this scheme, Mexican oil began appearing as an attractive opportunity for South Korea. By the mid-1980s, exports of Mexican light oil (*Istmo*) had increased significantly, marketed by the Lucky Goldstar *chaebol*. In September, 1981, thanks to the efforts of Ambassador Won Shin-Dong, the ROK signed a contract under which Mexico would provide South Korea 20,000 barrels per day of crude oil —i. e. more than seven million barrels a year—. <sup>32</sup> This growing trade of energy precipitated a trade surplus for Mexico, to be kept between 1981 and 1987.<sup>33</sup>

Generally speaking, the diplomatic rapprochement with South Korea was well received in business and government circles. However, the Mexican left and some publications linked to it were quite critical of the government in Seoul. The magazine *Proceso* published several reports on the Kwangju rebellion in May, 1980. Reporters and columnists who handled the case, proposed more or less fortunate analogies: some matched the South Korean situation with the social turbulence that then lashed Central America; others felt that the ROK was an Asian version of Pinochet's Chile; still others referred to the massacre of Kwangju as a replica of the repression of Mexican students, which took place on October 2, 1968. It was also felt that the struggle for democracy in South Korea was an opportunity for Mexicans to continue their own democratic claims.<sup>34</sup> The critical attitude towards the government of Chun Doo-Hwan led some journalists to demand the termination of the bilateral meetings and the breaking of bilateral diplomatic relations with Seoul.<sup>35</sup>

---

31. Chan Baquedano, José G., "Una nueva embajada en Seúl." In Garza Limón (coord.), *op. cit.*, p. 169.

32. Won, Shin-Dong, "Tras el petróleo mexicano y el deporte coreano: una visión retrospectiva." In *Ibidem*, pp. 234-235.

33. See *Estadísticas Históricas de México*, vol. II, INEGI, Aguascalientes, Mexico, 1999.

34. See, for instance, Mergier, Anne Marie, "Como en Centroamérica, el pueblo se rebeló y lo aplastaron," In *Proceso*, No. 187, June 2, 1980, p. 19; and López Narváez, Froylán M., "De París a Kwanju". In *Proceso*, No. 239, June 2, 1980, p. 20.

35. López Narváez, Froylán, "México como Corea." In *Proceso*, No. 239, 1 June, 1981, p. 19.



The relationship, however, was proceeding in quite the opposite direction. In January 1987, at last, the first resident Mexican ambassador in South Korea was appointed. The responsibility would lie in Ricardo Galán Méndez. Apart from the growing economic, social and cultural relations between both countries, the appointment of a permanent ambassador in Seoul coincided with at least three other factors:

1. The second international detente, through which South Korea began to normalize relations with former enemy powers, like the Soviet Union and China in the late 1980s.
2. The imminence of the Olympic Games to be held in the city of Seoul in 1988, an event that would mean the official debut of South Korea as an emerging power.
3. The growing demands for pluralism in political life in Korea, which eventually led to the “Promise of Democratization” issued by the establishment’s candidate to Korean presidency, Roh Tae-Woo, in 1987.<sup>36</sup>

In 1988 the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor, conducted the first-ever visit of a Mexican Foreign Minister to Seoul. In the same year Korean firms began investing in Mexico with the establishment of electronic appliances plants such as Samsung in Tijuana, and Lucky Goldstar and Daewoo in Mexicali. In 1989, Hyundai opened a container factory in Tijuana.<sup>37</sup> In view of this increasingly mature and intense economic relationship, Mexico and South Korea signed in Seoul the Agreement on Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation. Two years later, in Mexico City, the Joint Commission on Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation between Mexico and South Korea would meet for the first time.

The road was open to the rapid growth of commercial, social, economic and cultural contacts, which would develop over the next two decades. Finally, the South Korean love was reciprocated by Mexico. The end of the Cold War, the persistence of cultural interactions, the democratization of both countries, the formation of economic blocs and the structuring of more

---

36. On this respect, see León Manríquez, José Luis and López Aymes, Juan Felipe, “Corea del Sur”. In León Manríquez, José Luis (coord.), *Historia mínima de Corea*, El Colegio de México, Mexico City, 2009, p. 167.

37. Galán, Ricardo, “Recordando la época de primer embajador en Corea”. In Garza Limón (coord.), *op. cit.*, p. 241.

pragmatic diplomacies in Seoul and Mexico City would pave the way for what has become a robust Trans-Pacific partnership.

## **Conclusions**

The peculiar history of the initial years of Mexico-ROK diplomatic relation is an interesting case study on how the Cold War was faced by a middle-range power such as Mexico. In the early 1960s the South Korean attempt for opening a new diplomatic front found an enthusiastic response from most of Latin American countries; Mexico, however, was extraordinarily cautious. While it was not a supporter of the DPRK, Mexico did not want to be included among the unconditional supporters of U. S. international positions. The revolutionary lineages of the Mexican regime as well as the survival of a nationalist and anti-imperialist wing in the hegemonic party help explaining Mexico's distrust toward South Korea.

A second point to be underlined is the careful diplomacy that Mexico employed in its relations with the two Koreas. Invoking budgetary constraints, UN resolutions or scarcity of time to take due care of Korean delegations, Mexico managed to maintain its "equidistance policy" for more than two decades. It is noteworthy the use of international law as a resource that Mexico employed when it felt too pressed by either Seoul or Pyongyang. Needless to say, this foxy legalism was one of the main tactics employed by Mexican strategists to substantiate their diplomatic positions on many other polemic issues.

A third and last reflection has to do with the way in which international, political and economic conditions changed over time, thus facilitating closer relations between the ROK and Mexico. The international system moved towards successive stages of détente that made easier to improve political contacts between different political and ideological regimes. Both countries underwent rapid industrialization and incremental transitions to democracy; by the late 1980s, it became clear that Mexico and South Korea were in the route of setting up pluralistic political regimes. Bilateral trade, virtually inexistent until the mid-1970, became very dynamic in the ensuing decade. After almost a quarter century of "unilateral love", changes in both countries and the international system became the building blocks of a meaningful diplomatic relation. [m](#)