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South Korea Establishes Diplomatic Ties with Cuba; North Korea Is

Likely Furious

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South Korea established full diplomatic relations with Cuba on February 15, 2024, when the ambassadors of the two countries to the United Nations in New York City exchanged diplomatic notes formally establishing diplomatic ties. The move was unexpected since there had been no recent public reports that the two countries were engaged in discussions regarding the establishment of diplomatic ties. Some media reports suggested that the Yoon Suk Yeol administration deliberately carried out the establishment of formal ties with Cuba in a low-key manner.

Efforts to improve South Korean relations with Cuba, however, has been underway for some time. Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se (who served as South Korea's top diplomat from March 2013 to June 2017) visited Cuba in June 2016 for a summit of Caribbean States, and he held a private meeting with Cuba's foreign minister Bruno Rodreguez. There was speculation at that time about the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. In May 2023, South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin met with Cuba's Deputy Foreign Minister on the sidelines of a meeting of Caribbean states, and he also reportedly raised the issue of the resumption of foreign relations between the two countries.

Diplomatic ties between Seoul and Havana would be a ho-hum event if it were not for the fact that North Korea and Cuba have had a particularly close and cordial relationship for the last six decades. Cuba has had a particularly close relations with North Korea since the

two established diplomatic ties in 1960 soon after Fidel Castro came to power Cuba. That relationship was driven by their mutual hostility toward the United States. Prior to 1960, Cuba had diplomatic relations with South Korea, but the Castro government severed those ties when relations were established with the North.

Cuba is the 193rd country with which South Korea has established diplomatic relations. North Korea has diplomatic relations with 160 countries, but only 24 have established an embassy in Pyongyang. Of the 193 countries which maintain diplomatic links with South Korea, 115 have embassies in Seoul and another five have "Representative Offices" there. In addition, some of those countries also maintain consulates (not including honorary consulates) in cities other than Seoul.

The Shift in U.S. – Cuba Relations Creates Opportunities

South Korean relations with Cuba were made considerably more complex because South Korea has such close political, military, economic, and cultural ties with the United States. The closeness of Seoul and Washington complicated Seoul's ability to develop its relations with Cuba because of the difficult history of Cuba and the United States after Fidel Castro and his 26th of July Movement took control of Cuba in 1959.

The failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles to overthrow the Castro government, which had United States support, led the Castro regime seek support from the Soviet Union. The Cuban Missile Crisis the following year in October 1962 made U.S. relations with Cuba particularly difficult for the following four decades. The imposition of U.S. economic sanctions against Cuba, the exodus of Cuban refugee to the United States, and periodic incidents between the two hostile neighbors continued to undermine efforts of those who sought to improve U.S. relations with Cuba.

As he aged, Fidel Castro gradually withdrew from involvement in his government's activities, and in 2006 he handed over the responsibilities of the Cuban presidency to his brother Raoul. As Fidel's involvement declined, gradual efforts were made to improve relations with the United States. During the Barak Obama presidency significant steps were taken to change the relationship. In December 2014 President Obama and Raoul Castro agreed on a prisoner exchange and the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States.

Ambassadors were exchanged and embassies were reopened in July 2015. These important steps led to improved relations between Havana and Washington. Though domestic U.S. politics limit how far relations will improve between the United States and Cuba, in the last few years Cuban-American relations have no longer been an obstacle for Seoul to improve ties with Havana.

The North Korean Aspect of South Korean Ties with Cuba

Establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries would be normal for both South Korea and Cuba. What makes the issue of diplomatic links its unique twist is the very close relationship between Cuba and North Korea, and the North is a major international preoccupation of Seoul.

South Korea does not need any unique products from Cuba. One of Cuba's leading sources of foreign income is the tourism industry, with well over 5 million tourists in 2018.

There is not a particular need for diplomatic relations to deal with South Korean tourists in

Cuba. Tropical tourism is available for South Korean vacationers in Hawaii, Indonesia, or many other places all much closer to South Korea than Cuba. The unique element of Cuba has been that North Korea has had a close and cordial relationship since 1960.

North Korea and Cuba's relationship is largely political without significant economic underpinning, and trade between the two countries is modest and limited. Before relations with the United States improved under the Obama Administration, Cuba and North Korea shared a common "enemy," the United States. Both Cuba and North Korea are designated "state sponsors of terrorism" by the United States government and both are subjected to significant limitations under U.S. law. (Currently only four states are designated "state sponsors of terrorism" – North Korea, Cuba, Syria and Iran.)

Senior officials from North Korea and Cuba have exchanged visits. Recently, for example in 2017, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho was in Havana and was received by Cuban President Raoul Castro, while news reports on the visit spoke of "a brotherly encounter" and "historic friendship." Cuba's Miguel Diaz- Canel made an official visit to Pyongyang shortly before he became head of the government as well as head of the Cuban Communist Party. Furthermore, Cuba has been one of the most vocal and consistent defenders of North Korea in the United Nations when North Korea's human rights record has been critically reviewed.

The opening of formal diplomatic contacts between Cuba and South Korea could create problems for the Cuba-North Korea relationship. News reports from Seoul suggest that some officials in the President's office are expecting that result. One South Korean news report on the establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba said that officials at South Korea's presidential office expected that the move would deal a "political and psychological blow" to Pyongyang. Another unnamed "observer" said that official relations between South Korea and Cuba "could deepen Pyongyang's diplomatic isolation and put more pressure on the recalcitrant regime to shift away from its provocative streak and return to dialogue."

Comments from the South Korean Foreign Ministry were more practical and diplomatic in discussing the impact on North Korea. An official of the Ministry cautioned against reading too much into the establishment of relations with Cuba, noting "it would be hard to say how Cuba-North Korea relations will be affected by [South Korea] forming diplomatic ties with Cuba."

The Foreign Ministry highlighted the practical benefits of diplomatic representation: "Our establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba, the only country without such ties in the Caribbean, Central American and South America, marks an important turning point in strengthening our diplomacy in the region. We expect it will help us further expand our diplomatic horizons as a global pivotal state." The change in diplomatic status will "help expand actual cooperation between our two countries and enable us to provide systematic consular assistance to Koreans who are visiting Cuba."

Thus far there has been no public reaction from North Korea about the decision of Cuba and South Korea to establish diplomatic relations. There was, however, a clear indication of displeasure. North Korean state media reported on a banquet given by the North Korean ruling party on the day before diplomatic relations were announced. No mention was made in North Korean media of the presence at the event of Cuba's Ambassador to North Korea, but a photo released by the Russian embassy in Pyongyang clearly showed

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the Cuban Ambassador at the event. North Korean media have generally mentioned the presence of the Cuban envoy when reporting on diplomatic events when he has been in attendance. The failure of North Korean state media to mention the Cuban ambassador's presence is a clear sign of displeasure in Pyongyang.

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Return to the Peninsula