

Non-formal diplomacy during the post-diplomatic stage between Colombia and China

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The world power set-up changed radically for the first time during the 20th century when Fascism was defeated in 1945, thanks to the political and military conjunction of the allied forces in the European as well as in the Asian scene. In that same year, the whole planet, with no exception, simultaneously entered the nuclear era and the bipolar world competition between the two political and military structures that led the anti-fascist alliance: The United States and the Soviet Union.

Just like the national socialist axis defeat in Europe could not have been possible without the presence of England and its people's great determination to overcome adversity and survive as a nation, in Asia couldn't have been possible either without the patriotic struggle of the Chinese people who displayed an impressive capacity to rise and stand to proudly overcome the longest period of national humiliation they had ever suffered during their thousand-year-old history.

The way in which the Second World War ended would have a bearing in the development of later events in China, which was coming out of the anti-Japanese war to face a civil war after a short period of armistice between the communist party and the Guomindang, in between the end of hostilities with Japan¹ and the outbreak of the Civil War after negotiations in Chongqing². The world war ended with nuclear attacks over Japan in a dramatic demonstration of the new military technology and with only two winner protagonists, both ambitious for world power, who did not recognize neutrality in any other country of the world.

Shortly before the military victory, Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party, now leader of the new China, presented the guidelines for country's future diplomacy. One was "to start all over again" and the other "to lean to one side"³. The first one meant that China would approach its foreign politics from an absolutely new perspective. The second was understood that in the context of the bipolar dispute, China would tend to associate with the Soviet Union.

¹ Japan announced unconditional surrender on August 15, 1945, and the Japanese Chief Command ordered to cease combat the next day, but allowed "combat acts" for self-defense purposes. This all took them to a certain level of minor hostilities until September 2, 1945, when Japan officially signed the Instrument of Surrender.

² After the Japanese were defeated, the Soviet Union and the United States sponsored a two-party dialogue between Guomindang and Chinese Communist Party tending to peace dialogues. American Ambassador in China, Mr. Patrick Hurley, extended personal security guaranties to Mao Zedong in order to facilitate the dialogue. In between September 1945, and June 26, 1946, there was an armistice, which both parties used for the reorganization of their forces and thus prepare for the unavoidable civil war.

³ The other would be "to clean the house before inviting guests".

Specifically, by “ starting all over again”, China didn’t recognize any diplomatic relationship previously established by Guomindang, and the diplomatic representatives and their missions already accredited in China before 1949, were treated as citizens in the usual foreign facilities. China revised each country’s situation and representation, declaring they were not in a rush to be recognized by foreign governments.

The new country that arose from 1949 was in the crossroads. Although a winner of the Second World War, its international position was questioned due to its poor political recognition, since most of the countries kept diplomatic relationships with remaining officials of the nationalist Government who looked for sanctuary in Taiwan, with the exception of the socialist countries, a few independent foreign policy European countries and other border countries with substantial interests in China. With 25 per cent of the world’s population, China, the fourth biggest state in the world, came to be in 1950, accepted as a country by only 18 nations at the end of its first year of life; not one belonging to the American continent among them. The first one was Cuba who established diplomatic relations in 1960. Ten years later Canada did the same in 1970.

The contrast intensified by the way in which China performed the leading role in many and most important issues of the new world order: it helped to defeat the United States in the Korean War; by facilitating a “safe and broad rearguard”, and by supporting personnel to the North Vietnam Government during the Indochina conflict; it developed nuclear technology, thus entering the arms race and the discussion about the need to contain nuclear proliferation.⁴

Reasons for a non-formal diplomacy

In order to cope with the absurd situation of not being diplomatically recognized, and at the same time being each time more present on the world agenda, the Central Government of China designed a parallel strategic diplomacy, also called cultural diplomacy or non- formal diplomacy. The institutional foundation of this politics would be Chinese Peoples Friendship with Foreign Countries Association, founded in May 1954.

The purpose of non-formal diplomacy is to promote non-diplomatic relations between the highest spheres of the Chinese State and foreign countries,

⁴ Between 1945 and 1964, only five countries had access to war purpose nuclear technology: The United States (1945), The Soviet Union (1949), England (1952), France (1960), and China (1964), same nations that were part of the United Nations Security Council on a permanent member level.

regardless of ideologies, based on understanding, respect, and to support policies of national unity which expressed that there was only one China and its unique legitimate Central Government. In exchange, the friendship organizations with China in foreign nations were recognized in their national nature by the Chinese and they became privileged channels for cultural exchange with foreign countries.

Free of ideological conditions, many foreign political and social sectors who sympathized with China as a society and a culture, started to work in order to expand recognition in each country, based on the idea that to understand and to know its history and culture was essential to soften that which once prevented diplomatic recognition, since they were almost all political and ideological conditioning factors.

The task was considerably supported by the fact that China subtracted some of the ideological weight from its foreign politics, when it set as a fundamental principle the respect for each country's choice about its own political and social system. China also proposed that relations among all countries should be ruled by their common interests and not by their ideological affinity.

The Colombian case

Due to very concrete historical reasons, Colombia also defined its relationship with Taiwan and not China since 1949, but in our case, tension with China was especially strong due to the participation of both countries on opposing sides during the Korean War. Thus, two countries separated by an ocean, and no important historical or social contact ended up facing each other as enemies.

There were several attempts in Colombia to create associations or cultural centers in order to promote knowledge about China. However, these first associations generally had a strong ideological weight that prevented the expansion of their activities outside the Chinese sympathy circles, which identified themselves as pro-Chinese left-wing or socialists, coming into an ideological speech that prevented their acceptance and recognition inside governmental sectors and conventional social groups.

In September 1977, a group of Colombians from all political and ideological tendencies and varied social origins was organized under the Colombia-China Friendship Association. This group understood the situation and started actions under the ideas already established by its Chinese counterpart. In other words, to be a cultural exchange association in search of support for the establishment of relations between China and Colombia based on the principle of just one China, in

order to expand cultural and historical recognition regardless of political or ideological affiliation.

Between 1977 and 1980, when diplomatic relations were opened, there were various exchange activities among which the visit made by the Chinese national soccer team, many theater companies, and Chinese circuses stand out. Reciprocally, a delegation of Teatro Libre de Bogota, business groups, economists, and people connected to the cultural world, and journalists traveled to China.

During the years prior to the opening of diplomatic relations, people like former president of the National Bank (Banco de la República) Mr. Francisco Ortega, former president of Federación de Cafeteros de Colombia (Colombian Federation of Coffee Growers) Mr. Jorge Cardenas Gutierrez, and journalist Daniel Samper Pizano, among others, came to be part of the Colombia-China Friendship Association. Although non-members of the Association, intellectuals like Guillermo Plazas Alcid, Jorge Child, and Marco Palacios also contributed with their opinions and diligence to smooth the path towards the recognition of China.

When diplomatic relations were established, and the exchange of the first ambassadors came to be, the foundation of the association in Colombia, as in many other countries, was renewed in a different way, since the responsibility of the cultural work was transferred to the Chinese diplomatic delegation in Colombia and vice versa. Culture became a fundamental element of the two governments' work and the non-formal diplomacy national organizations which had worked in favor of that cause had to find their own place in the new order.

Non-formal institutions in the post-diplomatic era

The non-formal diplomacy national institutions do not disappear after achieving their goals basically, because the cultural closeness between the countries goes beyond the diplomatic work, although there are additional reasons as to why, in the specific case of China and Colombia, those institutions continue being current and vigorous.

One of the reasons is that many political, economic, and social sectors rallied around the Colombian association. They performed a relevant role in national life during the post-diplomatic era, some as members, and others as mere sympathizers: Daniel Samper and Hector Mora, journalism. Jorge Cárdenas Gutiérrez, Francisco Ortega, and Guillermo Perry, Economy. Lia Guberek de Ganitsky, Santiago Garcia, Fausto and Mauro Cabrera, and Enrique Posada Cano, in Culture. Luis Villar Borda and Jaime Moreno Garcia, academy and law; Carlos

Lemos Simmonds, politics, and many others who within and outside the organization helped governments, the press, companies, and public opinion enhance their knowledge about China, and understand the fundamental aspects that supported the bilateral relationship during the post-diplomatic era.

Another reason is the Chinese knowledge and the experience gathered for decades by some of the association members. As a consequence, some co-founders or people sympathizing with the association ended up in posts with the Colombian diplomatic delegation in Beijing. There have been two ambassadors: first, Luis Villar Borda, followed by Jose Maria Gomez Osorio. Three advisory ministers: Enrique Posada Cano, Ricardo Samper Carrizosa and Guillermo Puyana Mutis. Similarly, many Chinese accredited diplomats were, after and before, representatives of the Chinese People's Foreign Countries Friendship Association.

The third reason is that although once Taiwan lost status as a country, it still kept strong business and political bonds with Colombia for 30 yearlong efforts to promote state decisions and policies that questioned the grounds of the relations with China. Due to this, the Colombian association took the steps in order to restrain those policies. According to this, political and parliamentary trips to Taiwan were and are still not unusual. Five years ago, a small group of parliamentarians submitted a bill that raised the status to consular delegation of the commercial representation of Taiwan in Colombia; it was filed with no debate in the Chamber of Representatives, thanks to the effort of both governments and the action of the Colombian association.

Finally, it's worth mentioning that the work done by the non-formal diplomacy institutions maintains their importance as the governments' bilateral agenda gets more complex and diverse. In fact, Colombia and China share bilateral relations that go beyond economic topics that sometimes fully occupy public attention. In order to exchange ideas and proposals, non-formal diplomacy becomes relevant particularly in those aspects in which diplomacy demands certain protocols and languages of difficult interpretation for the public opinion.

The current Colombian ambassador in China, Guillermo Ricardo Velez, usually starts his interventions by pointing out that Colombia has a harmonious political relationship with China. China's position at international scenarios regarding relevant topics for Colombia turns to be a critical issue for the development of bilateral relationships. The way China votes in the United Nations for the Human Rights Commission, in the International Labor Organization (ILO), in the Association of Countries of the Pacific Basin, and even at the United Nations

Security Council greatly affects, not only the capacity for dialogue on both sides, but also the way the message of a substantial relationship that exceeds economy and commerce is passed on to the public opinion.

This last aspect, that usually captures national attention, refers to the fact that China and Colombia failed to reach a solution for the commercial imbalance through the increase of exports to China or by reducing imports from China, which has intensified local tensions and the idea has already started to spread. An idea which is easy to spread but not necessarily true: China is a predator economy for our businessmen and our capacity to generate jobs, or “all Chinese products are bad”. The national Government through its embassy in Beijing, identified a realistic strategy, adapted according to national conditions in which the economic imbalance would be solved by Chinese investment in Colombia.

This is a major challenge, since it means a long term solution for the main disturbance factor in the bilateral relations and the resistance from public opinion. However, it's a solution that implies a thorough comprehension of culture in both countries at different levels: negotiation culture; structure, legislation and guaranteeing the rights of companies; contractual, and adaptation to foreign conditions, among others.

In this scenario, the whole task remains to be done; the new strategy of the Colombian Government has not been there for long compared to the time that problems take to be solved and the real time that will be necessary to solve them.

The fundamental point is that the task of non-formal diplomacy changed radically when it gave way to the diplomatic stage between China and Colombia. Just like in other countries, cultural centers, bilateral chambers of commerce, and friendship associations have started to play their role dozens of years later. We could say that after thirty years of diplomatic relations between Colombia and China, what the future has in store for both cultures is a lot more effort and work to keep bilateral relations as solid as they are today; for that reason, knowledge and experience of non-formal diplomatic institutions will act in favor of a common purpose.

