



Article

Morocco Korea: Assessing Six Decades of Diplomatic Relations¹

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Abstract – By 2022, Morocco and Korea had inaugurated 60 years of diplomatic relations, established in 1962. These relations can be described as ancestral and were characterized by their constancy and continuity. However, the economic relations are not at the same level of consistency and continuity as the political ones, despite the promising future. The geographical factors, among others, have had always an impact, however, recently, the presence of Korean companies has been increasingly apparent in Morocco revealing the promising opportunities between the two countries. This paper seeks to analyze and assess six decades of bilateral relations between Morocco and Korea, analyze the challenges that hinder improving economic and political relations, and provide opportunities to build strong relations.

Keywords: Morocco; Korea; Diplomatic Relations; Economic Opportunities; Challenges.

Introduction

Both the Kingdom of Morocco and the Republic of Korea (ROK, hereafter Korea) have rich historical and civilizational backgrounds, during which they interacted with their neighbors through wars and trade. After World War II, both Korea and Morocco gained independence from their former colonizers—Japan in 1945 and France in 1956, respectively. In the aftermath of their independence, both countries aligned with the Western capitalist world under American leadership.

Soon after its independence, the divided Korean Peninsula plunged into a devastating civil war that resulted in roughly 4 million casualties and left both the North and South on the brink of collapse, particularly the South. As the North launched its first attack on the South, an international coalition was formed under the UN umbrella, consisting of 16 nations that fought alongside the South. Among the personnel who fought and lost their lives on Korean soil were soldiers from many countries still under European colonization, including Moroccans who fought under the French flag, as Morocco had not yet gained its independence. As the war ended, Korea sought to gain international support for its UN seat and launched an active diplomacy in Africa, which consisted largely of newly independent nations. Morocco was among the first African nations to establish diplomatic relations with Korea in

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July 1962. Consequently, their relationship can be described as ‘ancestral’ compared to Korea’s relations with other Arab and African countries (Saaf, 2022). They established diplomatic ties during the Cold War when both countries were part of the American-led global alliance against Communism. Over the following years, both countries strengthened their political ties, with Morocco supporting Korea’s quest for a UN seat, while Korea backed a UN resolution on the Sahara issue, carefully balancing its relations with both Algeria and Morocco. However, despite the strong political ties, their economic relations have not reached the same level of development.

Long-standing political relations

Morocco and Korea established formal diplomatic relations in July 1962, making them one of Korea’s longest-standing diplomatic relationships. Morocco was among the first African nations to formalize diplomatic relations with South Korea. Given the global engagement in the anti-Communism war led by the US, Morocco did not join the majority of Arab and African nations in opening a diplomatic mission in Pyongyang. Even during the 1960s and 1970s, when North Korea normalized diplomatic relations with several sub-Saharan African countries (Wertz et al., 2016), North Korea had a greater presence in Africa than the South. For example, in 1974, 11 out of 36 African countries established diplomatic relations with the DPRK, while only 9 recognized the South, and 14 countries had diplomatic relations with both (Park, 1978). While maintaining continuous relations with Seoul, Morocco normalized diplomatic relations with the DPRK in February 1989 (NCNK, 2016). Today, trade between the two nations is nonexistent, and the Moroccan embassy in Beijing manages diplomatic ties with Pyongyang, as there is no Moroccan diplomatic mission in North Korea.

In the aftermath of their independence, both countries focused on state-building and domestic stability. In Seoul, the military regime that resulted from the May 1961 coup d’état sought to gain political legitimacy domestically and secure a UN seat internationally. As a result, General Park aimed to expand Korea’s diplomatic relations by launching an open-door policy towards Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries. Meanwhile, Morocco, as a member of the NAM, had no diplomatic relations with the DPRK, which allowed Korea to include Morocco in all its diplomatic campaigns (Saaf, 2022).

Before its independence, Moroccan soldiers fought under the French flag as part of the so-called “*effort de guerre*” in various locations, from Europe to Asia (Maghraoui, 2015), alongside personnel from France’s former colonies, particularly during WWII in Tunisia, Libya, Italy, and even as far as Indochina (Quisefit, 2013). This has always raised the question of Moroccan soldiers’ participation in the Korean War (1950-53), especially given the Arabic names of the fallen soldiers who fought under the French flag. This question was recently answered when the Korean Embassy in Rabat revealed a previously unknown chapter in the shared history between Korea and Morocco. According to the Korean Ambassador to Rabat, 26 Moroccans “fought and sacrificed themselves for the freedom and liberation of the South Korean people” (Chung, 2022).

Recently, two Moroccan soldiers who fought in the Korean War under the French flag were identified. Mohamed Lasri, originally from Taza, fell during the Battle of Hill 1037, which was fought near the small city of Pyongchang. He was among the 30 soldiers who lost their lives in the battle in 1951 (French Ministry of Armed Forces, 2024). Another Moroccan soldier, Julian Djian, a Moroccan Jew from Marrakesh, died during the Battle of Song Kok in 1953, just a few weeks before the signing of the armistice (Korean Embassy in Morocco, 2024).

After the opening of the Moroccan embassy in Seoul in the late 1980s, reciprocal high-level visits increased, reaching 35 visits from Korea to Morocco between 1995 and 2021, and 38 visits from Morocco to Korea between 1991 and 2018. The highest-profile visit from Morocco was that of Prince Moulay Rachid, the King’s brother, in 1991, followed by the visits of Heads of Government Abdelilah Benkirane and Saadeddine El Othmani in 2015 and 2018, respectively. High-level visitors from Korea

included the Prime Minister's visits in 2014 and 2018, respectively (Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

The Korean Deputy Minister for Economic Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs labeled 2018 as the Year of Morocco because it witnessed significant high-level visits from both sides. From the Korean side, a delegation from the National Assembly visited, followed by the Vice Speaker of the National Assembly and Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon. From the Moroccan side, three high-level political figures visited Korea: the Head of the House of Representatives, Habib El Malki; the Head of Government, Saadeddine El Othmani; and the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Mounia Boucetta.

As the Sahara Question has been the cornerstone of Moroccan foreign policy for decades, Korea has consistently supported a peaceful political solution to the conflict over the Sahara under the United Nations, despite its strong relations with Algeria (L'Opinion, 2024). Moreover, Korea welcomed Morocco's return to the African Union in 2017, as well as Morocco's accession to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) following its official request (Saaf, 2022).

Six decades later, their steady and uninterrupted diplomatic relations can be characterized as a strong partnership based on mutual benefits and cooperation. Morocco, as one of Korea's oldest diplomatic partners, has concluded several cooperation agreements with Korea, including the Trade Agreement, the Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement, the Cultural and Scientific Cooperation Agreement, the Convention for the Avoidance of Double Taxation, and the Cooperation Agreement on Tourism, among others.

the long-standing political relations between Korea and Morocco can be divided into two distinct periods. The first period was characterized by Korea's eagerness to gain a UN seat as the representative of Koreans; therefore, its foreign policy was oriented toward this goal. Moreover, their bilateral relations were established and developed during the Cold War, amid the ideological division between the East and West, as both countries ideologically aligned with the same camp. The second period began when Korea became a developed nation, seeking markets, raw materials, and opportunities to export its development model.

Unbalanced yet promising economic relations

Morocco is Korea's 78th largest trade partner in the world and its 3rd largest trade partner in North Africa, behind Egypt and Algeria. Today, economic relations between the two countries are unbalanced in favor of Korea. In 2021, Korean exports to Morocco totaled \$309.62 million, while its imports from Morocco amounted to only \$57.84 million (Trading Economics, 2022). Korea mainly exports automobiles, telecommunication devices, audio-visual equipment, and industrial machinery to Morocco, while Morocco primarily exports mineral commodities such as phosphate, copper, and aluminum (KIEP, 2016). It is worth noting that trade between Morocco and Korea rose from \$140 million in 2000 to \$905 million in 2016, the highest trade level achieved. Despite this positive growth, trade between the two countries still accounted for less than 1.5% of Morocco's total trade and only 0.08% of Korea's total trade (IRES, 2018).

In 2020, Korea's exports to Morocco mainly consisted of coated flat-rolled iron (\$31.1 million, 8.5%), laboratory reagents (\$26.1 million, 7.18%), and cars (\$20.9 million, 5.74%), as shown in Figure 1. Over the past 25 years, Korean exports to Morocco have increased at an annual rate of 7.66%, from \$57.5 million in 1995 to \$364 million in 2020 (OECD World, 2022). Meanwhile, Morocco exported \$149 million worth of goods to Korea. As shown in Figure 2, the main products exported from Morocco to Korea were fish fillets (\$28.4 million, 19%), non-fillet frozen fish (\$15.3 million, 10.2%), and non-knit women's suits (\$15.1 million, 10.1%). Over the past 25 years, Morocco's exports to South Korea have increased at an annualized rate of 9.42%, from \$15.8 million in 1995 to \$149 million in 2020 (OECD World, 2022).

Figure 1: Korean Exports to Morocco 2020
(Total \$364 million)

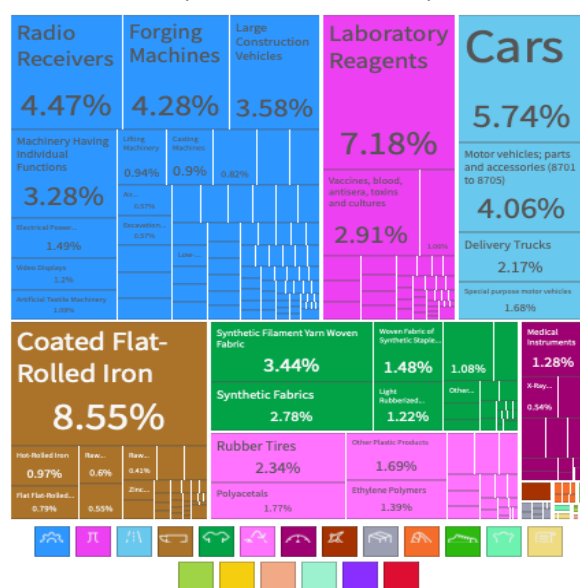
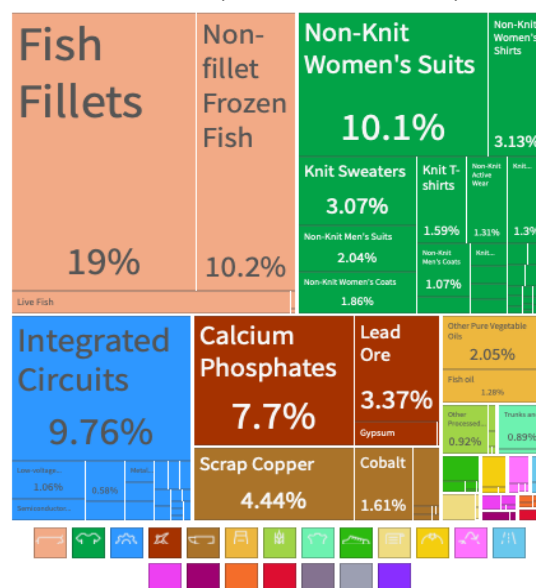


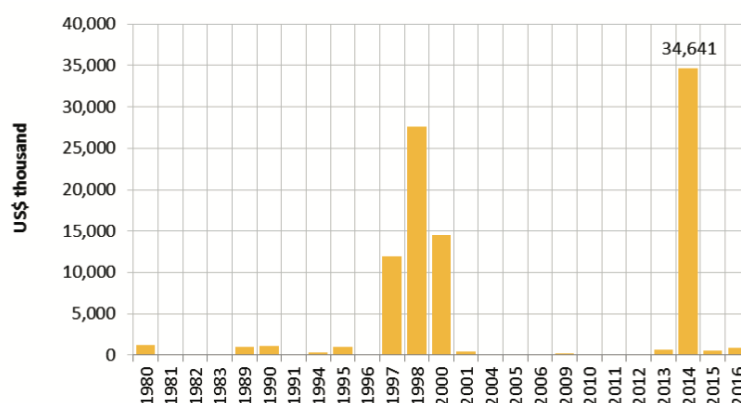
Figure 2: Moroccan Exports to South Korea in 2020 (Total \$149million)



Source: OEC World, 2022.

Contrary to political relations, Korean investments in Morocco have neither been constant nor continuous. As shown in Figure 3, the pattern of Korea's investment in Morocco has been highly uneven, if not sporadic. The late 1990s saw promising Korean investments, marking the beginning of a new era of Korean presence in the Moroccan market, with Daewoo Electronics and Daewoo Automobile entering the market. Unfortunately, the company exited the market due to the Asian Financial Crisis and the disbandment of the group. However, the following decade recorded the lowest levels of investment, starting in 2004, before rising sharply to \$34 million in 2014. The investment then plummeted again to less than \$1 million, reaching \$608,000 in 2015 and \$899,000 in 2016, respectively (KIEP, 2016).

Figure 3: Korea's Investments in Morocco 1980-2016



Source: KIEP, 2016.

The presence of Korean companies in Morocco dates back to the Green March in 1975, when Daewoo equipped and assisted Moroccan marchers in the peaceful decolonization of the Southern

provinces (Chung, 2022). After Daewoo withdrew from the Moroccan market in 1998, the company re-entered 12 years later, signing a \$1.16 billion contract for the Jorf Lasfar coal-fired power plant. In 2013, Daewoo E&C signed a \$1.767 billion contract for the construction of a private development project in Safi, which, to date, remains the largest overseas contract ever signed by Daewoo E&C (Matthew, 2013).

According to the Korean Ambassador to Morocco, Chung Keeyong (2022), Samsung C&T built and handed over the main fertilizer factory in Jorf Lasfer to the Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP). Additionally, other Korean companies have entered the Moroccan market, such as HANDS Corporation, an aluminum wheel manufacturer that opened its first African production site in Tangier in 2020. HANDS Corporation is among the top five global leaders in aluminum alloy wheels, supplying major car manufacturers, including Peugeot-Citroen, Renault, Nissan, and Volkswagen, among others (North Africa Post, 2020).

Despite their long-standing diplomatic relations, trade between Morocco and Korea remains low compared to Sino-Moroccan trade relations. Total trade rose from \$4 billion in 2016 to \$5.3 billion in 2018, but the economic relationship remains unbalanced, with Korean exports surpassing Morocco's imports. However, over the past six decades, the two countries have built mutual trust, which could allow them to engage in various business projects in the foreseeable future.

Towards the future: Challenges and opportunities

Although their bilateral relations are among the oldest in the post-independence era and present promising opportunities, Morocco and Korea face many challenges that could hinder the development of stronger economic and political ties. Various opportunities exist in areas such as the Korean developmental model, triangular north-south-south cooperation, and Morocco's strategic position as a gateway to Africa.

Korea has achieved unprecedented economic development and legendary growth, transforming from one of the poorest countries on the verge of famine in the early 1960s into an economic giant by the 1980s, and later, one of the most advanced countries in the world in the 21st century (Jwa, 2017). Korea has been working to export its model to developing countries. As a result, Morocco has much to learn from the Korean model of industrialization, particularly in industries that Morocco has been prioritizing, such as automotive, shipbuilding, and arms industries, among others, especially after adopting the New Development Model, through which Morocco seeks to achieve its own development.

The geographical position of Morocco, situated between Europe and Africa, presents a great opportunity for both countries. This strategic location makes the kingdom a gateway to both Europe and Africa. It provides Korea with a base for its companies to produce and sell in both continents, as well as other regions, thanks to Morocco's extensive network of free trade agreements. Morocco has signed various free trade agreements, starting with the Free Trade Agreement with the Greater Arab Area (which includes Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and Yemen) in 1997, followed by agreements with the United States in 2005, Turkey in 2003, the Arab Mediterranean Agreement (known as the Agadir Agreement, which includes Tunisia, Jordan, and Egypt) in 2004, the UAE in 2003, and Canada in 2016 (Mouline, 2018).

In addition to its domestic political and social stability following the Arab Spring upheavals, Morocco has positioned itself as a competitive industrial platform over the past two decades. Today, the kingdom has become one of the most attractive investment destinations in Africa (CNN, 2024). Various sectors offer investment opportunities for Korean companies, including automotive and aeronautics, renewable energy, tourism, digital industries, and shipbuilding. Regionally, Moroccan companies have expanded their reach across Africa in vital sectors such as banking, insurance, energy, and telecommunications, among others. In 2021, Moroccan foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa

exceeded \$800 million, making it the second-largest African investor, behind South Africa (Monnier, 2022). Banks, telecommunications, and insurance companies accounted for 88% of the country's FDI in Sub-Saharan Africa (The Economist, 2018). Morocco has acquired expertise in triangular cooperation with both Belgium and Japan, which could provide various opportunities for Korea to export its developmental experience to Sub-Saharan countries in cooperation with Morocco (Hur, 2017), as well as with international organizations such as the FAO (Daher, 2018).

Despite the various opportunities and challenges that might hinder the building of stronger bilateral relations, both Korea and Morocco hold important geo-strategic positions in their respective regions. However, geography plays a crucial role in politics, and the geographical distance between Morocco and Korea, which exceeds 10,000 km, remains an obstacle to developing stronger economic ties, considering that indirect flights take between 15 and 17 hours, along with very long maritime routes. As a result, Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are the closest markets to Korea and Morocco, respectively.

Another major challenge since the establishment of diplomatic relations in the early 1960s has been the absence of any head-of-state summit. Over the past decades, Korean presidents have visited Africa, including neighboring countries of Morocco such as Algeria, Egypt, and other Sub-Saharan African nations; however, Morocco was not included. Similarly, King Mohammed VI visited Korea's neighboring countries—namely Japan in 2005 and China in 2016—but did not visit Korea during these trips.

As mentioned previously, Morocco is Korea's third-largest trade partner in North Africa, following Egypt and Algeria, although both of these countries still host embassies from North Korea (Kharief, 2018). Due to its interest in natural resources and gas from both Egypt and Algeria, as well as from some Sub-Saharan African countries, Korea has prioritized these nations as stronger partners in its foreign policy (Zawya, 2022). For example, in 2021, Korean imports from Algeria totaled \$1.9 billion, with refined petroleum accounting for 53.4% and crude petroleum for 46.1% (OEC World, 2022). Meanwhile, Morocco is focused on building strong, pragmatic relations with China, given its global position as a rising superpower. This interest stems not only from Morocco's aim to benefit from the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) but also from its desire to recalibrate its foreign policy away from the West (Zoubir, 2020).

On August 20th, 2022 speech, the king Mohammed VI sent a clear message to the world: "I therefore expect certain states among Morocco's traditional partners as well as new ones, whose stances concerning the Moroccaness of the Sahara are ambiguous, to clarify their positions and reconsider them in a manner that leaves no room for doubt."

Following the American recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara territory, Morocco launched an assertive foreign policy aimed at gaining the support of its major European partners for its plan to resolve the issue under Moroccan sovereignty. As a result, Spain, Germany, Portugal, and other European countries openly recognized that the Moroccan plan was the most realistic solution to the issue. In contrast, France later fully recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara. These new developments may place some pressure on Moroccan-Korean relations, as Morocco is increasingly viewing its international partnerships through the lens of the Sahara issue. Despite these challenges, Morocco and Korea still have many opportunities to strengthen their political and economic ties and build strategic partnerships.

Conclusion

Morocco-Korean relations are not only among the oldest diplomatic ties for the ROK, but they have also remained uninterrupted and have steadily improved over the past decades. Recently, it was revealed that Moroccan patriots sacrificed their lives while fighting alongside their Korean comrades in arms. Politically, as allies in the pro-capitalist world under US leadership, both nations have shown reciprocal respect and support. Morocco supported Korea's campaign to gain a UN seat, while Korea

backed a peaceful UN resolution on the Sahara issue (positive neutrality). Economically, their trade exchange has been steadily improving, though it remains unbalanced in favor of Korea. Moreover, the modest presence of Korean companies in the Moroccan market has recently seen a positive change, despite the market being small and more competitive in favor of European companies.

Six decades after the establishment of bilateral relations, Korea has become one of the leading industrial economies, following a spectacular journey from the brink of famine to becoming the twelfth-largest economy in the world by 2022. Meanwhile, over the past two decades, the Kingdom has proven to be a safe haven in a troubled region in the post-Arab Spring era. On the international stage, it signed an FTA with the US in 2004 and was granted advanced status with the EU in 2008, reflecting strong political and economic ties, as well as the Kingdom's growing presence in Sub-Saharan Africa. The achievements of both countries present numerous opportunities. Morocco has much to learn from Korea's industrialization experience at a time when it is launching its own industrialization plan, while offering several cooperation opportunities to Korea, such as serving as a gateway to Africa and providing easier access to EU markets, among others. Over the years, both countries have built mutual trust, which will help them overcome challenges and forge a strategic partnership that will benefit both in the foreseeable future.

Notes

- I. This paper was presented at the 2022 KAMES Joint Conference themed "Commemorative Academic Conference for the 60th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Ties between Korea and Four Middle Eastern Countries (Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, and Iran", organized by the Korean Association of Middle Eastern Studies, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea. The original title was "Sixty Years of the Diplomatic Relations Between Korean and Morocco: Overview & Assessment".

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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