

Cooperation in Times of Pandemic: Challenges for the Soft Power of South Korea in Latin America

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic posed multiple challenges to the development of cooperation policies around the world. Different cooperation donors such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union experienced several limitations in maintaining the level of aid due to the internal urgency because of the pandemic, as well as the difficulties that the pandemic generated for the flow of people, goods, and capital. As Kim et al. (2023) point out, crises such as the pandemic allow us to evaluate the strength of international cooperation policies and the will of donor countries to sustain them. South Korea, as a provider country of cooperation, from the successful internal control of the Covid-19 pandemic has allowed it to strengthen outward cooperation relations with other countries, since the South Korean country's response to the fight against the pandemic has also become one of the most effective models in the world, both from the economic and public health point of view (Lee & Kim, 2021; Botto, 2020). There is significant variation in the responses and adaptability of this policy. In that sense, the case of South Korea deserves special attention due to the activist role it played during the pandemic to offer support, which has served to strengthen its soft power with different international actors.

In this article, we will focus on how Korea uses its international cooperation policy to strengthen its soft power simultaneously. To do this, we will evaluate the relationship between Korea and Latin America during the pandemic. In this context, Korea channeled its international aid through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), a government agency cooperating with its partner countries on different continents. Due to the health crisis, KOICA increased the need to strategically implement Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects in response to globally shared threats to healthcare, negative economic growth, global food crisis, and harm to the vulnerable (KOICA 2020). Latin America is an essential region for Korea but also presents significant challenges for the Asian country that must be evaluated in more detail.

Cooperation between Korea and Latin America in times of pandemic

The start of the COVID-19 pandemic marked the beginning of the implementation of the cooperation strategy between KOICA and the Latin American region for the next four years (2020-2024). This strategy seeks to contribute to the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting inclusive economic growth in Latin America, as well as facilitating development through four key initiatives, also known as “4Ps” (people, peace, prosperity, and planet), which encompass 17 SDGs (KOICA 2019; KOICA 2020). The “4Ps” denote the fundamental values that the agency considers when establishing cooperative relationships and encourages its partner countries in the region through the implementation of development assistance programs at the international level in a more efficient manner, making use of its experience in this field and a diversity of technologies.

According to the KOICA report published in 2020, **23 countries in Central and Latin America benefited from a total of 66,358 million KRW** (South Korean won) in assistance, making it the third continent that receives the most assistance, after Asia-Pacific and Africa. Furthermore, the total amount of aid for its four priority partner countries in the region (Paraguay, Colombia, Bolivia and Peru) is 29.0 billion KRW, which represents 73% of the amount for the entire region with emphasis on health (36.3%), public administration (22.2%) and technology, environment, and energy (20.1%) (KOICA, 2020). In 2021, the aid provided by KOICA to Central and Latin America remained in the same line as the previous year, occupying the same position compared to the same continents as in 2020, with an increase of 81,124 million KRW in the total amount of assistance.

In the Latin American region, a total of 41.4 billion KRW were provided to the first four priority partner countries, which represents 69.9% of the total granted to the entire region, with Paraguay benefiting the most with 27.1%, followed by Colombia (17.7%), Bolivia (14.8%) and Peru (10.3%). However, KOICA's performance by sector changed its position, with technology, environment, and energy occupying the highest percentage at 28.7%, followed by public administration (24%) and the health sector (23.6%) (KOICA, 2021).

Due to the pandemic, KOICA's programs towards its main partners focused mainly on the health sector. In general, the four countries mentioned had accessibility, capacity, and strengthening of medical services by the agency to prevent the spread of Covid-19 by providing diagnostic kits, tour booths, disease boxes, knowledge sharing of Korean doctors to Latin Americans, installation of screening stations inspired by Korean ones, among other supplies, complying with the line of its fundamental values in health by expanding universal educational and health care services to establish a social safety net (KOICA, 2020). The pandemic severely hit the four countries, and the resilience offered by their governments relied significantly on the support received from international cooperation from several countries, including Korea.

Cooperation as a tool of Korean soft power in the region

South Korea has been one of the most active countries as a cooperation donor during the pandemic years. Although cooperation policies have specific purposes, they are also a tool for projecting a state's foreign policy. South Korea, an emerging state, has used different strategies as part of its soft power, which Josep Nye (2008) defined as “the power of attraction” or generating followers internationally. South Korea has been classified as the country that has best known how to deploy its soft power in recent decades (Carminati 2022), mainly due to the positioning of its cultural products. However, due to the multiple existing audiences at the international level, different tools are used to significantly position the country's branding: the development cooperation policy is also part of this set of strategies.

In a highly complicated context such as the pandemic, which generated a severe economic and humanitarian impact in Latin American countries, the intensification of cooperative relations between South Korea and Latin America is significant. As we saw, the cooperation that KOICA has promoted has focused on urgent areas for the fight against the pandemic and in a context of feedback from donors from the Global North, such as the United States or the

United Kingdom, which, by limiting their cooperation policies and Economic assistance, creates a window of opportunity for the arrival of new donors, such as China and South Korea. As Lee & Kim (2021) point out, in this context, South Korea has strengthened its nation branding, significantly improving its prestige internationally using cooperation policies in health, technology, and others.

In that sense, KOICA is an exceptional foreign policy tool in promoting cooperation with Latin America. Kim et al. (2023) suggest that overall, KOICA has helped define an international aid policy defined by the specific interests of the Korean government and the interests of recipient countries. On the other hand, and to a large extent, the attractiveness of cooperation with Korea is also reinforced by the successful way in which the country dealt with COVID-19 at the domestic level, becoming a global reference for how to contain the virus. Snyder and Sindjukov (2020) and Wang (2020) study how countries that managed to contain the virus effectively significantly improve their image internationally and, in the specific case of Korea, can more easily “offer” the know-how. -how to combat the pandemic. This suggests that domestic conditions can also reinforce the projection of Korean soft power in Latin America.

Latin America is a fundamental region for South Korea's projection towards the Asia-Pacific. In the last two decades, Korea has become a vital economic partner, signing FTAs with different countries in the region, including Peru and Colombia, which, as we have seen, are two of the most crucial target countries of Korean cooperation. In 2018, it became the second Asian country that traded the most with Latin America only after China. However, South Korea's international projection is comprehensive and is accompanied by technical cooperation, which, in times of crisis such as the pandemic, can be a game-changer in its relationship with Latin American countries. In this regard, and as Gülten (2023) points out, South Korea views China as a potential rival in its approach to Latin America, so its projection to the region is also defined by strategic considerations.

Concluding Remarks

This article has presented how South Korea has become an essential donor of international cooperation for Latin America in a highly critical context. The pandemic generated many difficulties for developing countries in the region, which were finally able to count on the support of many developed countries, including Korea. The data suggests that this has been a very active cooperation and a priority in Korea's foreign policy towards the Asia Pacific. In all this effort, KOICA's role has been notable. Academic research on cooperation between Korea and Latin America requires paying more attention to the role, operation, and challenges this agency faces in countries such as Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, and Paraguay.

At the same time, this article also suggests that Korea, an emerging economy, and a global benchmark in the fight against the pandemic, uses its cooperation policy to strengthen its soft power. This should not be new given that developed countries have a wide set of international projection strategies to strengthen their image and generate followers in different regions of the world. However, the case of Korea is notable for having achieved significant progress in a context of crisis and in a distant region like Latin America. Korea already has several

countries as critical economic partners, but the Asian country's approach is to build more comprehensive relationships that allow for a more strategic insertion in the region. In competition with other Asian countries for regional influence, developing cooperative relations is a priority for Korea.

Future Expectations

Looking ahead, South Korea's role as a key player in international cooperation, particularly in Latin America, is poised for further enhancement and strategic development. As the world continues to grapple with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are several areas for improvement and future expectations in Korea's cooperation policies. Firstly, there is a growing need for increased collaboration and coordination among donor countries to address not only immediate health crises but also long-term development challenges. South Korea can leverage its experience and success in managing the pandemic to provide expertise and resources for building resilient healthcare systems and promoting sustainable development in Latin America. Secondly, there is a potential for diversification and expansion of cooperation initiatives beyond the traditional focus areas. While the health sector remains paramount, exploring opportunities in areas such as education, digital technology, and environmental sustainability can further strengthen Korea's soft power and contribute to holistic development in the region. Lastly, fostering partnerships with local governments, civil society organizations, and private sector stakeholders will be essential for ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of cooperation projects. By engaging with diverse stakeholders and incorporating their perspectives and expertise, South Korea can tailor its cooperation efforts to the specific needs and priorities of Latin American countries, thereby maximizing their impact and fostering mutual benefit. In essence, the future of Korea's cooperation with Latin America lies in innovation, inclusivity, and strategic collaboration, paving the way for a more prosperous and interconnected global community.

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