

## THE IMPACT OF THE KOREAN WAR ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN NEW ZEALAND AND THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

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On 12 June 1962 Edward Taylor, New Zealand's ambassador-designate to the Republic of Korea, set off in a large US limousine from Seoul's Chosun Hotel, accompanied by the Korean chief of protocol and a Korean colonel as equerry. Escorted by a dozen military police on motorcycles, the motorcade 'swept through the city and its environs at a fast clip'. Arriving at the Blue House, the residence of the head of state, Taylor found a company of troops drawn up as an honour guard and a full military band waiting at the portico. As he entered the chamber he was greeted by the foreign minister, Choi Duk Shin (Ch'oe Tökshin), "and the assemblage froze to attention at appointed stations when General Pak [Chung Hee] entered." In what Taylor would later describe as a "simple but effective function" that was 'crisply executed to split-second timing,' he presented his credentials to Park, acting as head of state as chairman of the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction. Both Taylor and Park made short statements and had a brief conversation. Then Taylor accompanied Choi to the portico, where they listened to the respective national anthems (in New Zealand's case, God Save the Queen). Finally, after inspecting the guard, Taylor was conveyed back to his hotel at the same fast clip.<sup>1</sup> This ceremony, which was reciprocated when the Korean ambassador in Canberra, Lee Dong-won (Yi Tongwön), on 18 July presented his credentials as ambassador to New Zealand to Governor-General Lord Cobham, represented the end of a process that had begun on 26 March 1962 with simultaneous announcements by the two countries of the intention to establish diplomatic relations.

In all these proceedings the Korean War figured prominently. In his March announcement Prime Minister Keith Holyoake referred to New Zealand's «special interest» in the republic. «At the time of the North Korean invasion in 1950,» he stated, «New Zealand responded promptly to the Security Council's appeal to send forces to serve under the United Nations Command.» He went on to refer to the «substantial contributions» made by New Zealand to rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes «to relieve the hardship and repair the devastation caused by three years of war.»<sup>2</sup> At the credentials ceremony three months later Park, in what Taylor later termed a "graceful tribute," noted that "The bonds between us were never more emphasized

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1 Note for file 'Korea', 7 Jul 1962, Taylor to A.D. McIntosh, 28 Sep 1962, ABHS, TKY27/2/2, Archives New Zealand (ANZ), Wellington.

2 *External Affairs Review*, Vol. XII, No. 1 (1962), p.15.

than during the Korean war when your gallant soldiers joined us in defence of freedom and independence in this peninsula.” These comments, said Taylor, were “delivered in a low voice with every evidence of sincerity.” Taylor, for his part, referred to “a sense of comradeship born of common perils” and to the armed forces of the two countries fighting side by side.<sup>3</sup> In his calls on various generals in the next few days, he would repeatedly be assured of Korean gratitude for New Zealand’s assistance during the conflict. Taylor underlined the importance of the war in the linkage by visiting the UN cemetery in Pusan on the last day of his visit.

In one sense the Korean War of 1950-53 was crucial to the establishment of relations: for a time in July 1950 it appeared that the Republic of Korea might be swept out of existence. As its forces fell back southwards, along with US units that had been hastily deployed from Japan, the fate of the republic hung in the balance. In the event, the North Korean advance was halted and held on the Naktong River. The defence of the Pusan Perimeter provided the leeway for the preparation of the amphibious left hook at Inchon (Inch’ŏn) that eventually transformed the situation, and ensured the survival of the republic. The further threat presented by the intervention of Chinese forces was also successfully defeated.

As Holyoake’s statement indicated, New Zealand played a part in these operations. Its intervention had several bases. Once the United States and Britain had indicated their intention to act with force to preserve the republic, it is likely that New Zealand would have acted. The traditional approach of supporting Britain in war was reinforced by aspirations to secure some form of long-term security commitment from the United States. The Korean situation offered an opportunity to advance this latter cause.

But these considerations were powerfully reinforced by the context in which the United States chose to operate in Korea --- through the United Nations. This became possible only because of the absence of the Soviet Union from its seat on the Security Council. This absence had begun the previous January 1950 in protest over the failure to seat the People’s Republic of China in the council but a Soviet diplomat could have returned at any time to veto any Security Council resolution on Korea. Whether because of miscalculation or deliberate choice, Moscow failed to respond to the situation and its seat remained empty when the United States brought the matter before the council. In a diplomatic coup the United States secured resolutions in the council first calling on North Korea to desist and withdraw and then requesting members to assist in preserving the republic. It later obtained a resolution setting up a UN Command.

This provided the framework for New Zealand intervention. For New Zealand, a founder member of the UN organization, these developments were bound to be influential. New Zealand had long decried the veto enjoyed by the five permanent members of the Security Council as stultifying the organization’s security apparatus. It had also supported the UN involvement in the Korean peninsula before the war and the establishment of the Republic of Korea under its auspices. On 20 June 1949 New

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3 Note for file ‘Korea’, 7 Jul 1962, Taylor to McIntosh, 28 Sep 1962, Speech Notes for Credential Ceremony, n.d., Tokyo to Wellington, 12 Jun 1962, No. 116, ABHS, TKY27/2/2.

Zealand recognized the Republic of Korea as “an independent sovereign state whose territory is that part of the Korean Peninsula in which free elections were held under the observation of the United Nations Temporary Commission”; it resisted subsequent informal requests from Seoul (through its embassy in Washington) that the recognition acknowledge that the republic encompassed the whole of Korea.<sup>4</sup> North Korea’s invasion was seen as a challenge to the new organization --- akin to that presented by Japan’s invasion of Manchuria for the League of Nations in 1931. A failure to respond would doom the United Nations as a security organization.

New Zealand was one of the first countries to answer the UN call.<sup>5</sup> Four days after the North Korean invasion began Prime Minister Sidney Holland agreed to the dispatch of two RNZN frigates to join the Anglo-American forces operating in Korean waters; they left on 3 July and were in action from early August. New Zealand would retain two frigates in the UN Command until 1954. Even while the frigates were heading north, the New Zealand government increased its commitment, offering a field artillery regiment. This 1100-strong force, which had to be recruited and trained, left New Zealand on 10 December 1950. It would later be augmented by a transport company and signalers, which brought New Zealand’s force to a maximum strength of 1498. After the Republic of Korea and the United States, this was the third largest contribution per rata in the UN effort.<sup>6</sup>

Although New Zealand made a very respectable contribution to the UN effort in Korea, and New Zealand troops remained on Korean soil until 1957, it did not immediately bring the two countries closer together. There was no push to establish diplomatic relations in the 1950s. Old influences reasserted themselves. There were a number reasons.

First, traditionally there had been little contact between the two countries. This was partly because of Japan’s domination of Korea from 1905. People-to-people ties were virtually non-existent. Few New Zealanders had been to the country and little was known about it. Koreans, of course, were in no position to travel. There had been few contacts at an official level before the war, apart from a goodwill mission led by Korea’s ambassador to the United States, John Chang (Chang Myŏn), in April 1950. While New Zealand troops were present in the republic for seven years, they never established close links with the locals. They formed part of a Commonwealth force, and their bases were largely segregated from the civilian population. Non-military visitors were rare. In June 1962, there were only nineteen New Zealanders residing in Seoul.<sup>7</sup> Nor was there much in the way of trade. In the five years after 1956 New

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4 NZ Ambassador, Washington, to Minister of External Affairs, 20 Jun 1949, F. Corner to McIntosh, 22 Jun 1949, and reply dated 12 Jul, ABHS, EA, PM58/324/1, ANZ.

5 On New Zealand’s effort see Ian McGibbon, *New Zealand and the Korean War*, 2 vols (Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1992, 1996).

6 McGibbon, I, p. 222.

7 Taylor to McIntosh, 28 Sep 1962, ABHS, TKY27/2/2.

Zealand imported nothing from South Korea; its exports to that country were valued at a mere £16,000, most for paper pulp in 1957.<sup>8</sup>

Second, New Zealand's focus remained firmly on Europe. New Zealand's ties with Britain were the dominating feature of its approach to the world. During the Second World War events had forced it to expand its horizons, especially in the Pacific. By the end of the war New Zealand had a rudimentary diplomatic service with posts in five countries and a small department charged with overseeing New Zealand's external affairs. In such a limited organization, Korea hardly counted as a potential diplomatic partner even after recognition in 1949. "Following the ending of the Korean War..." a briefing paper for the prime minister noted in 1968, "New Zealand tended to ignore Korea as a country outside its immediate sphere of interest."<sup>9</sup>

Third, New Zealand had little emotional investment in Korea. To be sure, it had played a creditable role in the war effort, but in overall terms the war had little impact on New Zealand. Indeed even before it ended the conflict was being referred to as the "forgotten war" and Kayforce as the "forgotten force." New Zealand did not shed significant blood in defence of Korea. In contrast to the world wars' toll, the casualty rate was minimal. The decision to send an artillery regiment had in fact been predicated on the expectation that it would suffer fewer casualties than an infantry battalion. In all, 33 men died during the war, and only 21 of them were battle casualties. One in 106 of those who served in Korea lost their lives, compared with one in five in the First World War.<sup>10</sup> The number of New Zealanders who served in Korea, about 6000, was not sufficient to create any constituency in society, and for most it was Japan rather than Korea that appealed as a result of their war service. In Japan, where they had their main bases and where they went on leave, there was much more contact and favourable impression—and 70 Japanese war brides.

Fourth, a further inhibition upon Wellington seeking any closer relationship lay in distaste for the political situation in South Korea. Syngman Rhee was seen as an authoritarian ruler whose actions had been unhelpful. In particular, he had defiantly acted to try to undermine movement towards an armistice, which would leave the peninsula divided, by releasing South Korean nationals being held as prisoners of war (after being impressed in the Korean People's Army and captured by UN forces in 1950). His post-Armistice intransigence on reunification and rabid anti-communism were also influential in New Zealand's negative perception. There was greater sympathy for the regime led by John Chang that took over when Rhee was ousted in 1960 after "flagrantly rigged elections" sparked an uprising.<sup>11</sup> John Chang had impressed when he visited New Zealand in 1950 and it had been through him, as South Korea's ambassador

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8 Secretary of External Affairs to Prime Minister, 13 Jul 1961, ABHS, EA, 59/324/1.

9 'Extract from: Prime Minister's Visit to United States and Asia (Oct '68) New Zealand Brief', 30 Sep 1968, ABHS, EA, 58/324/1.

10 McGibbon, II, p. 363.

11 Secretary of External Affairs to Prime Minister, 13 Jul 1961, ABHS, EA, 59/324/1.

in Washington, that New Zealand had conveyed its recognition in the previous year; he was seen in Wellington as leading Korea's first really democratic government. His overthrow in a military coup on 16 May 1961 and later arrest on "flimsy and unconvincing charges of pro-Communist activities" aroused concern.<sup>12</sup> Although recognizing that the new situation would ultimately have to be accepted, Wellington preferred to keep its distance from the new regime initially, Holyoake stating that the lack of diplomatic relations removed the need to consider the question of recognizing the new regime and expressing the hope that "the advances made in establishing a more democratic form of government will not have received a permanent setback."<sup>13</sup>

Fifth, until 1961 the Republic of Korea showed little interest in seeking closer ties with New Zealand. Unlike Rhee's regime, Chang's government seemed to indicate that it wanted to broaden Korea's range of diplomatic partners, then numbering thirteen, with an initial focus on the eight Korean War allies (of sixteen) that had not yet established diplomatic relations.<sup>14</sup> But it was the coup that finally brought the issue to the fore. In what would be a recurring feature of the development of diplomatic ties between the two countries, Korea took the initiative. The newly installed military regime led by General Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏnghŭi) embarked on a campaign to enhance its legitimacy. As part of this effort, it decided to send goodwill missions to a range of states, including one to Australia and New Zealand, to 'explain the policies and attitudes' of the new government.<sup>15</sup>

New Zealand's response to this news was far from enthusiastic. In the days preceding the coup it had been resisting proposals that John Chang visit New Zealand en route to Australia in July. Citing a heavy parliamentary workload, Holyoake had at first refused to issue an invitation. Just as he softened his stance slightly, by suggesting that New Zealand might invite Chang if a refusal was likely to cause embarrassment, Chang had fallen from power.<sup>16</sup> A month later, the immediate response to the proposed goodwill mission was also negative. Nothing of value was seen likely to emanate from such a visit.<sup>17</sup> Nor was New Zealand keen on showing any endorsement of a regime that had overthrown a democratic government. But when Australia decided to receive the mission, mainly because of the difficulty of finding grounds to put it off,

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12 *Ibid.*

13 *External Affairs Review*, Vol. XI, No. 6 (1961), pp. 36-7.

14 'New Zealand's Representation in Korea', 6 Jul 1961, ABHS, EA, 324/3/3.

15 Counsellor, New Zealand High Commission, Canberra, to Secretary of External Affairs, 15 Jun 1961, enclosing note from the Korean consul-general in Sydney dated 13 June; *External Affairs Review*, Vol. XI, No. 7 (1961), pp. 33-4.

16 Minister of External Affairs to New Zealand High Commissioner, Canberra, No. 252, 12 May 1961, Confidential Annex to Airmail Bulletin, 18 May 1961, ABHS, EA, 59/324/1.

17 *Ibid.*, Minister of External Affairs to New Zealand High Commissioner, Canberra, No. 301, 16 Jun 1961.

Holyoake agreed to do so as well.<sup>18</sup> Among officials, there was not only a hope that wider international contact would be “of benefit to a country where extreme poverty is so great” but also an apparent willingness to condone an undemocratic solution to Korea’s problems, given that it had parallels among some of New Zealand’s Cold War allies, even within the Commonwealth. “It is probably true,” it was noted in early July, “that there are few honest capable politicians in Korea, and that the military leaders if they can moderate their anti-Communist zeal and concentrate on social and economic reform may prove far more efficient and honest in government.”<sup>19</sup>

Led by Choi Duk Shin, a ROK Army divisional commander in the Korean War and now ambassador in South Vietnam, the four-person mission arrived in Wellington on 16 July 1961, bearing a scroll commemorating New Zealand’s Korean War dead for presentation to the appropriate authorities.<sup>20</sup> The government having decided “not to pay too great deference to the mission,” they were not accorded the status of guests of government. The only hospitality provided was a luncheon that Holyoake hosted at the Waterloo Hotel.<sup>21</sup>

At a meeting on the 17th, Secretary of External Affairs Alister McIntosh listened as Choi, who would shortly become the regime’s foreign minister (and, in later life, would defect to North Korea),<sup>22</sup> explained that the coup had become necessary because of the corruption of the Chang regime and its weakness in opposing communism. With a communist takeover looming, he asserted, the army had been compelled to take over. Choi stressed the friendship between the two countries, “which had its origin in the Korean War,” and suggested that it be further developed by “closer cultural trades and diplomatic contacts.” For his part, McIntosh noted New Zealand’s sympathy for Korea arising from the war but expressed disappointment at the delay in restoring democracy. The raising of the question of establishing diplomatic relations had not come as a surprise. Three weeks earlier, anticipating that the mission might raise the issue, Wellington had asked the embassy in Tokyo to comment on the practicality of cross-accrediting the ambassador in Tokyo to Seoul; the reply had been to the effect that, from later in the year, it would be possible, assuming that the ambassador would only need

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18 *Ibid.*, Secretary of External Affairs to Prime Minister, 19 Jun 1961, Minute by Holyoake, 19 Jun 1961.

19 ‘New Zealand’s Representation in Korea’, 6 Jul 1961, ABHS, EA, 324/3/3.

20 New Zealand High Commission, Canberra, to Minister of External Affairs, No. 414, 14 Jul 1961, ABHS, EA, 59/324/1.

21 *Ibid.*, Secretary of External Affairs to Secretary to the Treasury, 19 Jul 1961. The dinner cost a mere £23.

22 Born in Uiju in what later became North Korea, Choi served as South Korea’s foreign minister from 1961 to 1963 and later as ambassador to West Germany. After his retirement he was a board member of the Korea chapter and later chairman of the extreme right-wing World Anti-Communist League; even so, he would end his life in North Korea in 1989, having defected five years earlier after becoming affiliated with a dissident group that supported Kim Il Sung’s regime. *Taiwan Today*, 12 Jul 1969; *New York Times*, 19 Nov 1989.

to make two visits to Korea each year.<sup>23</sup> Armed with this advice, McIntosh indicated some conditional support for possible relations after pointing out that New Zealand's ability in this field was severely constrained by lack of resources. "Perhaps...", he asserted, "when the Korean Government achieved greater stability, it might be possible to arrange for the New Zealand Ambassador in Tokyo to be duly accredited to Seoul," with the Korean government doing the same in Wellington from Canberra. Choi, it was later noted, "seemed satisfied with this qualified undertaking."<sup>24</sup> Choi was no doubt even more satisfied by Holyoake's comments when the prime minister met with the mission. After referring to the "formidable obstacles" that lack of resources presented, Holyoake indicated that there would be no objection if and when a Korean embassy was established in Canberra to the ambassador being accredited to New Zealand. Like McIntosh, he linked the possibility of New Zealand reciprocating to the regime's ability to demonstrate its stability.<sup>25</sup>

In light of these proceedings, it is not surprising that the Korean government wasted no time in taking up the matter of cross-accreditation when it established a post in Canberra in February 1962. They pressed for reciprocal undertakings.<sup>26</sup> The response in Wellington was positive. The new regime now seemed firmly in control. Holyoake was amenable to McIntosh's advice that reciprocation would be to New Zealand's benefit, reflecting its long interest in the Korean problem. There would be advantages, McIntosh pointed out, in having firsthand information about developments on the peninsula.<sup>27</sup>

With agreement in principle, Wellington set about arranging for New Zealand's representation in Seoul. Edward Taylor, the prominent Christchurch lawyer who had become New Zealand's ambassador in Tokyo late the previous year, would be cross-accredited as New Zealand's first ambassador to Korea. Although Japan had no diplomatic ties with Korea, it had no objections to such an arrangement. Once the formality of securing the Queen's approval to Taylor's appointment had been completed, Taylor's name was put before the Korean government.<sup>28</sup> New Zealand intended to await the completion of these arrangements so that both the establishment of ties and the names of the two envoys could be announced together. But, once again, the Koreans impelled Wellington to take earlier action than it would have preferred. They insisted not only on announcing the agreement to exchange representatives but also which representatives, though not their names, would be cross-accredited.<sup>29</sup>

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23 Minister of External Affairs to New Zealand Ambassador, Tokyo, No. 67, 29 Jun 1961, and reply No. 69, 1 Jul 1961, ABHS, EA, 59/324/1.

24 'Note of a Meeting held at 12 noon on Monday, 17 July 1961, with Korean Goodwill Mission', 17 Jul 1961, ABHS, EA, 58/324/1.

25 'Notes of Discussion... 18 July 1961', ABHS, EA, 59/324/1.

26 Wellington to Tokyo, 5 Feb 1962, No. 51, ABHS, TKY27/2/2.

27 *Ibid.*, 'Extract from Airmail Bulletin 1962/6 Confidential Annex dated 8 February 1962'.

28 *Ibid.*, Minister of External Affairs to NZ High Commission, Canberra, 22 Feb 1962.

29 *Ibid.*, Wellington to Tokyo, 23 Mar 1962, No. 80.

Despite the establishment of diplomatic ties, relations tended to meander along in the 1960s, during which both became involved in the Vietnam War. New Zealand's hesitation no doubt owed much to a negative perception of political developments in Korea, despite Park's election as president in 1963 (a post he would hold until his assassination in 1979). Holyoake's brief for his visit to the United States and Asia in 1968 spoke of "a fairly static connection."<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, as the end of the decade neared and economic development in Korea began to burgeon, the need for an office in Seoul was recognized in Wellington. McIntosh's successor, George Laking, urged consideration because Korea, in his view, was on the verge of take off economically, a far-sighted perspective given that Korea, by the 1990s, would be New Zealand's fifth largest trading partner. Although there were some in the External Affairs hierarchy who saw Manila as having a prior claim, the consensus was in favour of action and as soon as possible.<sup>31</sup> It would not be until early 1971, however, that Richard Nottage (a future MFAT CEO) was given the task, as *chargé d'affaires*, of establishing the office, arriving in Korea in late May. Faced with this prospect the Korean government quickly sought permission to do the same in Wellington, with the result that Lee Byoung Rok (Yi Pyöngnok) arrived in Wellington from Saigon, where he had been consul, in June.<sup>32</sup> When the New Zealand office was opened in Seoul on 6 August, the Korean War was to the fore. Nottage presided over a "Raising of the New Zealand Ensign" ceremony, using a flag that had once belonged to Kayforce. Preserved by Graham Watts, a former soldier and resident in Seoul since the war, it had been presented to the embassy a week before. In his speech, Nottage noted New Zealand's "substantial contribution" to the UN effort in Korea. "It was during the time of strife and adversity that the bases of today's close and friendly ties between New Zealand and the ROK were forged."<sup>33</sup> Three years later, Korea dispatched a resident ambassador, Choon Hee Kang (Kang Ch'unhŭi) to Wellington. New Zealand followed suit two years later by appointing Ted Farnon as ambassador in Seoul.

The Korean War, then, was a key element in the development of diplomatic relations between New Zealand and the Republic of Korea, though it tended to be largely rhetorical. In the period up to the establishment of offices relations tended to be, as noted in 1967, "at best casual, backward looking and reluctant." There was "very little trade" and activities were largely confined to the visits made by the respective ambassadors once or twice a year.<sup>34</sup> But as Edward Taylor noted at the completion of his term as ambassador in 1963, his appointment has been "a good step" because of its impact on the Korean psyche. In his opinion, it helped "in rebuilding the country's

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30 'Extract from: Prime Minister's Visit to United States and Asia (Oct '68) New Zealand Brief', 30 Sep 1968, ABHS, EA, 58/324/1.

31 *Ibid.*, Extract from Minutes of Division Heads Meeting, 21 Feb 1969.

32 Tokyo to Wellington, 24 May 1971, No. 344, 4 Jun 1971, No. 366, ABHS, TKY27/2/1.

33 *Ibid.*, Speech Notes; *Korean Herald*, 7 Aug 1971.

34 Extract from: Memo from Tokyo 'Korea', 7 Jul 1967, ABHS, EA, 58/324/1.



self-respect which is so necessary for the people in their herculean task of rehabilitating themselves” and reflected the fact that South Korea, as “the last bulwark on the East Asian Continent against Communism,” was important to the “Free World.”<sup>35</sup> Memory of the Korean War lay at the heart of his assessment.

### **Biographical note**

Dr Ian McGibbon, ONZM, is the General Editor (War History) in the New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage. His numerous publications include the two-volume official history *New Zealand and the Korean War*, published in 1992 and 1996 respectively. He edited the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History* and also wrote the official history of New Zealand’s combat operations in the Vietnam War. Since 1981 he has been managing editor of *New Zealand International Review*, the journal of the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs. He was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to historical research in 1997.

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35 *Ibid.*, Taylor to Holyoake, 5 Feb 1963, personal, copy.