

Green Growth and Mediation

The Republic of Korea's strategy in climate change negotiations

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to study the strategy employed by the government of the Republic of Korea in the negotiations of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

For this purpose, I begin with a brief history of the global governance of climate change, beginning with the construction of the above-mentioned institutional architecture. This paper seeks to analyze the position of the government of the Republic of Korea regarding this issue.

In this context, South Korea's diplomatic discourse in this global forum is conditioned by the position the country occupies with respect to the geopolitical implications of climate change. My working hypothesis is that the Korean government's discursive strategy is aimed at boosting its national interests by positioning itself as a mediator between the global North and South. *Prima facie*, this positioning is supported by the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. However, it is also possible to consider the historical role of this nation, located between two major powers, Japan and China, as part of the productive conditions of the diplomatic strategy.

This research is inscribed, then, within a socio-semiotic perspective, which examines the social production of meaning in ideological struggles for power. For Michel Pecheux, one of the characteristics of ideological formation is to situate different discursive formations in relations of hierarchy and subordination. Drawing on other work, I will also analyze the specific discursive field of debate about environment and development.

For all this, I have taken two texts from current President Lee Myung-bak. Both speeches can be interpreted as productive conditions in our analysis of Korea's performance during the Copenhagen Summit (2009). Here, the concept of "Korea as a bridge" (mediation) is present within the field of climate negotiations. In more general terms though, and particularly within the national sphere, the idea of "green growth" is the main discursive formation.

The Republic of Korea in climate negotiations 1991-2011

The industrial revolution, as a sociological phenomenon, entailed a great change in the history of humanity. It became the driver of “progress” and of the development of nations through the process of their modernization. Nonetheless, behind its most obvious achievements there are a series of problems that are not easy to see, due to the very ideology of development itself. Most of these problems are part of what is termed the global environmental crisis. It is, thus, a civilizational crisis, tied to the concept of Western modernity.

In this context, climate change has more recently become a symbol of environmental crisis. Though explaining this exceeds the objectives of the current article, we may say that the first important landmark occurred in 1992. That was when, as one of the outcomes of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the decision was made to create the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

This institution became a key element in global environmental governance, bringing together all the national states, both the “culprits” and the “victims” of climate change. In reality, as the Political Ecology perspective charges, it focused the legal burden of resolving the problem on these national states, diverting attention that might have been directed at different private corporations. Nonetheless, the adoption of the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) Principle was important.

By that time, the government of the Republic of Korea had already defined its position in the negotiations. In 1991, during the prior negotiations, the country’s representatives had presented a position contrary to those of countries like the Netherlands and Germany, which emphasized that climate change was a problem shared by all of humanity. On the contrary, for the Republic of Korea:

“The classification of countries simply as either developed or developing can overlook the unique situation of countries that are in various stages of development. In this regards, newly industrialized countries which have continued to expand greatly their energy consumption to achieve industrialization should be given special consideration as should Easter European countries whose economies are in transition” (Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1991: 51)

This discursive line was central in the first decade of negotiations. With these key elements of governance—the UNFCC and CBDR—the 1997 negotiations gave rise to the Kyoto Protocol. This legal instrument for climate change mitigation consolidated the global divide into two well distinguished groups. Starting then, the “industrialized” countries in Annex I had to meet legally binding and quantitative greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction targets. The rest of the countries, called “non-Annex I”, also committed to carry out mitigation plans, but only on a voluntary basis.

What criterion was used to establish this division? It was rather arbitrary, in the sense that an *ad hoc* list was prepared that included the OECD countries along with the former members of the USSR. From a geopolitical standpoint, the global North-South divide had thus already been constructed in the 1990s, replacing the East-West confrontation that was characteristic of the Cold War.

The case of the Republic of Korea sheds light on the arbitrariness of that geopolitical decision. Korea was included in the groups of “non-Annex I” countries, even though it had already been part of the OECD since 1996. Its recent incorporation was no doubt the explanation given by Korean negotiators at the time. However, as a result, the country ended up with the same obligations as

other “less developed” countries, along with all the Asian countries except Japan. In fact, in 1997, additional countries from Eastern Europe were incorporated into the OECD, that is, the countries Korea was compared to in the 1991 document. One example is the Czech Republic, which joined the OECD in 1995. Slovenia and Slovakia also joined, the latter joining the “club for rich countries” only in 2000.

In this sense, we can say that it was the representatives of the Republic of Korea that negotiated the non-inclusion of their country in this group. That decision, which has not been modified to date, makes South Korea more similar to two other OECD countries that are not part of Annex I. Both are from Latin America: Mexico, which joined the OECD at a similar time, in 1994, and Chile, which just joined in 2010. This unusual situation is also discussed by Professor Wonhyuk Lim, who states:

“South Korea is one of a few countries that straddle developing and developed status in the world of climate change. As non-Annex I country under the Kyoto Protocol, Korea has no obligations to make mandatory emission cuts, but as larger emitter of greenhouse gases and a member of the OECD, it is likely to face increasing international pressure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and make financial and technological contributions to climate change mitigation around the globe” (Lim, 2010:21).

The Kyoto Protocol did not enter into effect until 2005, after Russia agreed to ratify the agreement, thus securing support from Annex I countries accounting for 50 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. Today, the only country that has not ratified the KP, which remains in effect for the 2008-2012 period, is the United States.

For all these reasons, toward the end of the second decade of negotiations, the way in which the CBDR Principle was made operational became a source of geopolitical debate, especially since 2007, when the “Bali Road Map” was adopted, establishing two negotiation tracks. On one hand, it was to lead to a new climate agreement, preferably in 2009, in order to lay the foundations for the “post-Kyoto” world, beginning in 2012. This was, at least, the plan the Annex I developed countries had established, with the creation of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action under the Convention.

On the other hand, efforts were also made to secure the continuity of the Kyoto Protocol for a second period of commitments by Annex I countries. This was requested by the “developing countries”, especially the so-called “emerging giants”, grouped together as the influential BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China). Also with a strong interest in this position are the “newly rich” countries—those countries that are part of the OECD but are not included in Annex I. Of course, this includes Korea.

At the Copenhagen Summit, the then president of the COP-3 in Kyoto said: “South Korea has published an emissions reduction target. Mexico, which has not yet done so, will probably be in charge of leading negotiations in 2010. Both are currently OECD members, which is the club for developed countries” (Estrada Oyuela, 2009). Korea does not intend to change its legal standing within the Convention, thus its voluntary commitment is similar to that proposed by China. The target represents a 4 percent reduction in GHG emissions compared to 2005 levels, as Oyuela explains:

“The Republic of Korea, one of the non-Annex I Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, decided on its mid-term greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction goal by 2020 at the Cabinet meeting presided by President

Lee Myung-bak on November 17, 2009. According to the Korean government's announcement, Korea will cut GHG emissions by 30% from its business-as-usual (BAU) emissions.” (Republic of Korea, 2009).

Thus far I have reviewed the Republic of Korea's position in climate negotiations. A more complete explanation may be sought in the history of the last century. Following the Japanese occupation up to 1945 and the period of the civil war, South Korea carried out its own modernization, taking this to mean rapid economic growth, and, especially since the 1970s, pursued a development model based on technological innovation. I shall pursue more leads in this regard in the analysis of the corpus.

Discursive strategy: The ecological positioning of the Korean government

To examine the discursive strategy, I will turn to the focus of my presentation: the discourse of the government of the Republic of Korea in climate negotiations. For this, I use two text from the current president, Lee Myung bak. The purpose is not to study his personal discourse, but rather to consider him purely as an institutional enunciator. The working hypothesis holds that the productive grammar of his discourses can be situated in Green Growth and mediation. That is, I consider that the idea of “Korea as a bridge” (between North and South) synthesizes the Korean government's strategy to serve its national interests in climate negotiations. However, how this is articulated with the idea of “green growth”—which is more present in the national sphere—should be studied.

The methodological strategy based on social discourse analysis, mainly on Eliseo Verón's (1980) work, is concerned with identifying a text's productive conditions. That is, what are its linkages, as a discourse, within the network of social semiosis (production of meaning). On one hand, a study *in production* deals with objectifying a text's ideological affiliations, as well as the positions with which it disputes meaning. On the other hand, a study *in reception* traces how a discourse was interpreted, as the effects of meaning that constitute its power of influence.

To this end, I also rely on research that has already shown that speaking about the environment does not in itself mean taking on an environmentalist position. For example, Martin Häjér identify “ecological modernization” as constituting the main storyline in “sustainable development”, beginning with the '92 Eco Summit in Rio. Arturo Escobar also differentiates between different discursive formations on biodiversity, which can be applied to the discursive field of the environmental.

1. “Resource management: A global-centric perspective” is comparable to the idea of “ecological modernization” and is present in the principal institutions of so-called “global environmental governance”, including the World Bank and the OECD.
2. “Sovereignty: The Third World's national perspective” can be related to the claim of ecological debt and the positioning adopted by the “national-popular” movement in Latin America and the countries of the “emerging giants”.
3. “Biodemocracy: The perspective of the progressive NGOs” refers to the voices of civil society, mainly identifying as “environmentalists” or “ecologists” *sensu stricto*, such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth.
4. “Cultural autonomy: The perspective of the social movements” has a certain continuity with Martínez Allier's “ecologism of the poor” (2005), with assemblies, and also with the perspective of indigenous peoples.

Without this turning into an unproductive ideological taxonomy, it constitutes a conceptual map of productive grammars or ideological formations that can feed into the discourses of a political figure. In the case of the Korean president, we must also take into account “national” ideological formations or those specific to the sphere of Korean meaning, at times related to its cultural traditions, such as Confucianism. The following analysis will guide us in this sense.

Speech I: Green Growth as a national vision. (August 2008)

The first text to address is President Lee’s speech on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Korea, on August 15, 2008. Its title is “A Great People with New Dreams”, with a length of more than four thousand words (Lee, 2008).¹

With respect to its theme, while it is a “general” speech, the environmental topic is a central element, which intersects with the country’s economic merits. Ultimately, the presentation addresses *development*, a concept that has emerged as hegemonic ever since the Truman Doctrine declared it a strategic objective of the United States government during the Cold War (Sachs, 1992). This refers to the ideological sphere in the Republic of Korea, which emerges as such after the war that divided the country into the socialist north and the capitalist south.

Throughout the text, the discussion about development is always present, moving between the merely economic celebration of “growth” and other aspects that correspond to a more comprehensive “development”. Thus, on one hand it says: “The size of the economy has grown 750 times since that time.” Yet it goes on to clarify: “The development of Korea was not limited to economic growth alone.” (Lee, 2008: 1). This first part, which carries out a historical review of the 60 years of the Republic of Korea, seeks a balanced view, whereas the current government proposes a certain continuity with the leading elites of the postwar, at the same time that the discourse puts forward a refounding of the national vision.

It is on this point that Lee presents such diverse elements as the struggles for democracy, the holding of the Olympics, the fourth place in the soccer World Cup and the designation of a Korean as Secretary General of the UN. This enunciation of largely unrelated facts only holds together with the “empty signifier” of national pride, in this case of South Korea. The objective of development, then, has a clear, active, leading Subject: The Korean nation. Hence: “Hardships as well as twists and turns notwithstanding, Korea has continued to march forward”. (Lee, 2008: 1). The forward march, ever “forward”, is a very defined temporal notion in the modernity upon which the development perspective is founded.

Ambivalence is apparent when it comes to judging this recent history: Is it a miracle? This is how the president interprets it in principle: “I want to make it absolutely clear today. The 60 years since the founding of the Republic of Korea was a history of success. It was a history of progress. It was a history of miracles.” (2008: 2). Here the speech weaves together concepts like success and progress, which once again relate to the modern ideology of development, and ties it to the miracle of development. However, Lee takes up this point again to emphasize the efforts of the Korean people: “Had it not been for their endeavors, the miracle on the Han River would have never been

¹ The official English version of the speech is used here. The subtitles are: “A Great People”, “a History of Miracles”, “Journey Toward Freedom”, “Forging Another 60 Years”, “Vision for Another 60 Years: Low Carbon, Green Growth”, “All-out Investment to Shift the Energy Paradigm”, “Enhancement of the Quality of Life and Welfare for the Underprivileged”, “Dream of a Unified Korea Advancing into the World” and “A Great People with New Dreams”.

possible.” Once again, there is a subject behind the objective of development and behind the miracle: the Korean nation.

Another important sign along the same lines can be found in another passage of the text: “People often call a history of miracles a legend, but we all know well that those achievements are the actual products of our blood, sweat and tears.” (2008: 3). Of course “blood, sweat and tears” refers to the phrase made popular by Winston Churchill, in his first speech as the prime minister of Great Britain, in the middle of World War II. Similarly, boosting a people’s national pride works in the same way. Moreover, the use of the inclusive we (“we all know”), is used to strengthen the bond between the president and the nation.

The mention of Korea’s liberation is important, because in this case it is inscribed in a discourse that emphasizes the value of freedom as a political ideology: “Freedom is the air we breathe.” But in the same way, Lee uses it to introduce the concept of the new national vision that, once again, has to do with development. Hence:

“If the last six decades since the nation’s founding have been spent achieving fundamental freedoms, the next 60 years should be dedicated to realizing freedom with responsibility. Only then will the founding of the Republic of Korea be completed.” (2008: 4).

On one hand, the discourse of “freedom and responsibility” constitutes an ethical discourse. On the other hand, the president focuses here on Korea’s responsibility before the world. That is: “Such a nation will serve as a paragon for humankind and will be respected by other countries in the international community.” (2008: 5). To this “external” point, he adds another “internal” matter: “Currently, the Korean economy is undergoing difficulties stemming from the energy crisis.” Thus, mentioning that we are in a time of “changes in civilization” that takes the shape of an “environmental revolution”, and that “the Republic has exhibited great capacities in turning crises into opportunities” (2008: 6), which refers to the meaning of a Chinese ideogram, he presents the central point of his speech:

“Today, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Korea, I want to put forward ‘Low Carbon, Green Growth’ as the core of the Republic’s new vision. Green growth refers to sustainable growth, which helps reduce greenhouse gas emission and environmental pollution. It is also a new national development paradigm that creates new growth engines and jobs with green technology and clean energy.” (Lee, 2008: 7).

The association between national vision and development paradigm is thereby re-established. A refoundation according to which: “Green growth will enable a Miracle on the Korean Peninsula to succeed the Miracle on the Han River.” (2008: 7). This final sentence is without a doubt significant, and may be related to another passage in the speech that speaks of reunification. Starting with the strategic position of the Korean peninsula for linking two parts of the world, Lee mentions: “Opening the age of the Pacific and the age of Eurasia simultaneously, a unified Korea will leap toward the center of the global community.” (2008: 12).

Korea’s place in the world is another of the key aspects of the text. These aspects are related to the mission of development as national pride. In this sense, we may find among the conditions for production of the discourse examined the different voices that demand a greater commitment from the Republic of Korea in the struggle against climate change, as I have already shown. This is a pressure that was in full force in 2008, as the new agreement to be signed one year later at the Copenhagen summit was being negotiated. This is also how converting crisis into an opportunity is

to be understood. Foreign affairs policy, which is not the main topic, nonetheless has an important place:

To this end, I will establish a national brand committee under the Office of the President. During the remainder of my term in office, I will upgrade the value of the Korea's national brand so that it will be on a par with that of advanced countries. Now it is necessary for the nation to make friends with as many countries as possible in the global community. As part of these efforts, Korea will increase the amount of Official Development Assistance by a large margin and actively participate in U.N. peacekeeping operations. Based on valuable experiences we garnered in the course of development, Korea will work out a Global Korea Model to share with the world. (Lee, 2008: 11)

Having made it to here and looking at the working hypothesis, we may note that the idea of "Korea as bridge" was not made explicit in this speech. Nonetheless, in both the image of "Korea as center" and the notion of a "model to be shared", the vision of Korea as a mediator in the global community is present. This has its logic, as well, if we know that the concept of "green growth" first appeared with force in 2005 during the 5th Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific. There, when Roh Moo-hyun was president, the government launched the "Seoul Initiative Network on Green Growth." Already then, "green growth" had been inscribed as a revamping of "sustainable development", a debate that continued until this year, at the Rio+20 Summit. Below we shall see how the topic was an object of discourse following the Copenhagen Summit.

Speech II: A bridge for a global problem (January 2010)

In January 2009, the Republic of Korea launched the "Green Growth Deal", a plan that included a large budget aimed at creating "green jobs" as a way to alleviate the economic crisis. Though I do not analyze the speech delivered at its launch, the plan's name itself refers to the grammar of the "New Deal", which again is in line with the Truman Plan discourse of US developmentalist capitalism.

Yet, if we move forward to January 2010, it is a different matter. In the context of the failure of the Copenhagen Summit one month earlier, Lee wrote an article titled "Shifting Paradigms: The Road to Global Green Growth" (Lee, 2010). The main explicit reference as a productive condition is precisely the speech of August 2008. From there, we must observe the differences. First, the discursive genre changes from a public presentation to an opinion article. Similarly, the thematic dimension is also modified, from a "general" discourse to one focused on climate change. And, fundamentally, the enunciate changes: from the Korean nation to the international community. Logically, then, the issue of Korea's place in the world is also the main topic:

Arguably, Korea has achieved more in the last 60 years than any other nation. Despite its arduous beginnings after the Korean War, it has grown to become the world's 13th largest economy. Many Korean companies are global champions in their industries, and their brands are becoming household names everywhere. Except for the interruption of the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 and the global crisis of 2008, Korea has maintained steady, high levels of growth for decades—although, like all economies that reach a certain level of maturity, growth rates have eased in recent years. (Lee, 2010).

As is evident, the achievements of recent Korean development are its cover letter to the world. As we know, though, this issue is precisely the point of controversy in climate negotiations: if Korea is one of the countries with the greatest economic growth, then it should take on greater commitments. This is why the emphasis is placed on the last 60 years. And, as a way to face this ambiguity, the statement about Korea's role as "bridge" appears:

As for Korea's role in this global collaboration, I envision three key pillars of involvement where we can exercise leadership. The first is through the creation of the "Global Green Growth Institute," which I announced in Copenhagen. Through this institute, we can serve as a global "hub" of ideas, new technologies and policies for the green growth initiative. Second, by drawing on our unique experience of having moved from being a beneficiary of international aid to becoming a major contributor of aid, I believe Korea can play a vital role in helping the institute bridge the divide between developed and developing countries on climate change. We can play a leading role in helping to share new technologies and institutional designs with developing countries. Many governments will join this global partnership to bridge the climate change divide and ensure a prosperous future for all. (Lee, 2010).

To explain this, it is important to identify the discourses that circulated around the Copenhagen Summit as a productive condition. The debate and the controversy that became evident between the positions of the Norths and the Souths, which culminated in the failure to reach an agreement on a consensus document, can be interpreted as a discourse that is a productive condition for the South Korean government's discourse. In this sense, at the end of the article, which according to classic rhetoric should aim to touch / convince the reader, a particular strategy is employed:

I believe it is time for Korea to act first. In doing so, we recall the Confucian saying, "If one undertakes right things voluntarily, how can others not follow?" We must all work together to forge the path to green growth. And I truly believe that those who take the first actions will reap the fruits of the new green world. (Lee, 2010).

The reference to Confucius may be striking. That is, it is a *marca (mark)* according to the theory of social discourses, in that it is an operation of meaning that can not yet be assigned an accurate explanation. The citation by itself says nothing. But its inclusion in the final paragraph of the article by Lee, the president of Korea, where Confucianism is a strong cultural tradition, takes on a *range of possible effects of meaning*. On one hand, if one inscribes it in Korea's diplomatic strategy, then the key word is "voluntarily", which describes the way in which the country makes its commitments not legally binding.

But on the other hand, the citation is a *huella (footprint)* that refers to an ideological formation based on Confucian thought, and in this sense it is enunciated in order to emphasize that Korea has a different cosmivision. This is the kind of contribution that a country from East Asia could make, for which we look to an article by Kim Yongdeok, member of the Northeast Asian History Foundation. After suggesting that Confucian thought is the basis for "East Asia's core values", he considers the role of the state as mediator in order to bring about a "harmonious world". And then he writes:

"The modern capitalist order uses human desire as the source of development. Namely, the development of capitalism arises from the human desire to consume, which in turn leads to more production. However, such logic has ultimately led to a

larger income gap between the rich and poor, as well as environmental destruction. To break this vicious link, human desire must be restrained. In this regard, I believe that the East Asian concepts of self-restraint and self-cultivation demonstrate the appropriate path toward ameliorating today's world" (Kim, 2007:6).

Thus, our analysis of this mark must be tied to the issue of *Korea as bridge* for it to become a *footprint* of other discourses, both with respect to the strategic point of view in the geopolitics of climate change and the Korean cultural vision. Furthermore: Is it possible that this idea is also present in traditional thought? Considering historical sources is one way to address this question. Thus we find:

"[Korea] has for centuries served to bridge the thought between the two great powers that were China and Japan, which is not at all well known in the West. (...) In this sense, Korea has managed to always play a transformative role for all the currents arriving from different places by injecting them with a new color, a new form. As a result, Korea has constituted a place for different cultures to gather and co-exist, as it 'Koreanized' them and lent them a new character" (Domenech del R  , 2007:3).

But in addition, we can ask if other contemporary discourses mention the idea of Korea as bridge, as part of its national identity. On this point, we can point out that this enunciation continued, especially at the G-20 meeting held in Seoul one year later. And it is possible to think about how, no longer referring to them as traditional cultural references but as two actors in the current geopolitical map, Korea also presents itself as a "bridge" between the "developed countries" (Japan) and the "developing countries" (China). Such a historical reinterpretation is of interest and can be addressed in future research.

Conclusions

Among the conclusions, we can confirm the working hypothesis. The idea of "Korea as bridge" is present as a productive grammar in the sphere of climate negotiations, but inscribed in the more general discourse of "green growth".

From this analysis, we can point out an apparent "contra-diction" between the concept of "green growth" and the idea of "Korea as bridge". This is because the former is tied to the country's leadership in a national refounding, and the latter is a strategy for not taking on international commitments. Of course, the contradiction is not irrational, rather it shows us that both discursive formations are articulated at the ideological level, in that they imply a dispute over power, both in the national and international spheres.

In this sense, it is interesting that from Escobar's perspective, Green Growth is clearly in the "global-centric perspective" of ecological modernization, while the mediation discourse expressed in "Korea as bridge" is closer to the "national Third World perspective". It is, then, a mediation, then, between these two grammars.

On this point, it is important to determine how these two discourses are positioned within the hierarchy of ideological formation in the Korean government. The former ranks higher in the hierarchy and in itself constitutes the central point of a productive grammar. In the words of Ver  n, it may be called a "foundational" discourse, in that it influences subsequent discourses that legitimate the power of the former. It is also interesting to point out that we can study the discursive event at the Copenhagen Summit through both texts, as the first one can be analyzed as a productive

condition and the second as a recognition condition. The change of meaning tells us about what happened at the level of ideological confrontation.

Ultimately, “Green Growth” and “mediation” in climate negotiations need each other, because the Korean government makes a shift from the environmental to climate change. And to evaluate its performance on climate change, it is necessary to demonstrate it has performed well on the international stage.

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